Experiences of the Kurdish students on Hungarian scholarship in terms of language anxiety

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Abstract

After years of providing study-abroad programs by both the Kurdistan regional government and other countries to citizens of Iraqi Kurdistan, there is no literature studying the problems Kurdish international students experience while studying in a foreign country. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore the experiences of Kurdish students studying at Hungarian universities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain in-depth understanding of the experiences of three international Kurdish students in terms of English language anxiety on a Hungarian scholarship program. The results show that foreign language anxiety has a negative effect on the academic performance of the students. At the same time, the interviewees believe that the Hungarian scholarship is an opportunity to improve their English language use and decrease the level of their language anxiety. The findings may be useful for the organizers of the scholarship program to better manage the program as well as for the future candidates who wish to pursue their studies in Hungary.

Keywords: language anxiety; English language; Hungarian scholarship

1. Introduction

In order to strengthen its political, economic and cultural relationships with other countries, and to increase the number of top international students pursuing their education in Hungarian universities, the Hungarian government offers Stipendium

Hungarian scholarship programs that are managed by The Tempus Public Foundation (TPF) to citizens of 41 countries (Stipendium Hungaricum – Tempus Közalapítvány, 2016). Since 2014, the Hungarian government has offered 30 scholarships for the citizens of Iraqi Kurdistan in order to enable them to pursue full-time BA/BSc, MA/MSc or PhD studies. Iraqi Kurds can apply for the scholarship according to the eligibility of the program. Every year successful candidates enter undergraduate and graduate programs in different fields odf study in Hungarian universities (Stipendium Hungaricum – Tempus Közalapítvány, 2016).

The language of the programs offered by Hungarian universities is English and, therefore, foreign students who plan to apply and get a scholarship should have a certain level of English proficiency. This is required by the host university and the applicants need to prove that their proficiency is sufficient by submitting language certificate, such as, for instance TOEFL, IELTS, etc. (Stipendium Hungaricum – Tempus Közalapítvány, 2016). Thus far no study has been carried out in order to evaluate the strengths or weaknesses of the scholarship program offered to Kurdish students. This qualitative case study can thus be regarded as the first one of this kind. The aim of the research project was to explore whether Kurdish students benefiting from a Hungarian scholarship experience language anxiety related to English language use.

2. Literature review

The issue of anxiety in language learning and communication has been discussed by many specialists in many different contexts but there are many conflicting claims. This is because language anxiety is a complex multifaceted construct, and seems to affect students in different ways (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996).

Broadly speaking, second or foreign language (L2) theorists and researchers see language anxiety as a negative psychological factor which makes learners feel apprehensive and negatively influences their L2 learning and performance (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) defined language anxiety as "the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning" (p. 284). Horwitz et al. (1986) described foreign language anxiety as "a distinct complex of self-perception, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 31). Spielberger (1983), in turn, defined the construct as a "subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system" (p. 1).

Due to the different purposes of research projects, anxiety may have be defined in a variety of ways. In recent years, it is widely recognized and accepted

by language researchers that anxiety has a close relationship with L2 learning. Ample evidence from research studies shows that a high level of anxiety has a negative correlation with language achievement, and it has a critical role in the success or failure of L2 learning. According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), foreign language anxiety has a negative impact on the different stages of the L2 learning process, that is input, processing, and output.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) classified anxiety into three types, namely *trait anxiety*, *state anxiety*, and *situation-specific anxiety*. Spielberger (1983, as cited in MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991) defines trait anxiety as "an individual's likelihood of becoming anxious in any situation" (p. 87). He believes that trait anxiety is a reaction towards a perceived threat in the environment in general. Levitt (1980) describes trait anxiety as "a constant condition without a time limitation" (p. 11). A person with a high level of trait anxiety easily becomes apprehensive in a wide range of circumstances. By contrast, an individual with a low trait anxiety level is emotionally stable, calm and relaxed. According to Spielberger (1983), state anxiety is "an apprehension expected at a particular moment in time as a response to a definite situation" (p. 12). Spielberger (1976) contends that the intensity and duration of this type of anxiety are different depending on the amount of stress which might be caused by a particular situation. A good example of state anxiety is the experience of students before they deliver a presentation in a seminar or take an important test. The third type of anxiety is called situation-specific anxiety. According to MacIntyre, and Gardner (1991), situation-specific anxiety is experienced by an individual in a specific and well-defined situation. Delivering a talk, taking a test or talking with a native speaker are typical examples of this type of anxiety.

There are several possible factors that may contribute to the occurrence of foreign language anxiety. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), the main sources of language anxiety include *communication apprehension*, *test anxiety*, and *fear of negative evaluation*. Communication apprehension plays a negative role by causing foreign language anxiety. Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) explain that communication apprehension happens when learners are required to speak, discuss, argue, and criticize in the classroom and they are "fully not proficient" (p. 5) in an L2. Students who experience a high level of communication apprehension "withdraw from and seek to avoid communication when possible" (p. 79). Gordon and Sarason (1955) described test anxiety as a type of anxiety which stems from the fear of failing tests. It is a psychological condition where students experience distress before and during a test. It is perhaps because of this that the most prepared and brightest students can sometimes make serious mistakes. When it comes to fear of negative evaluation, Watson and Friend (1969) defined it as an "apprehension about other's evaluations, distress over their negative evaluations, and the

expectation that others would evaluate themselves negatively" (p. 449). It is for this reason that the most talkative students tend to sit passively in the classroom. Fear of negative evaluation simply makes students refrain from participating in classroom discussion unless they are called on (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002).

After years of providing study-abroad programs by both the Kurdistan regional government and other countries to the citizens of Iraqi Kurdistan, there is no literature studying the problems Kurdish international students experience when studying in a foreign country. Thanks to his own experiences of taking a course on individual differences in L2 learning as a PhD student at a university in Hungary and weekly meetings with many Kurdish students on Hungarian scholarship, the author became aware that these students have many difficulties with their academic studies. One of these difficulties is related to the presence of foreign language anxiety. This study is the first contribution to the literature investigating the foreign language anxiety that is experienced by Kurdish students studying at Hungarian universities. The following two research questions were addressed:

1. Do the Kurdish students on Hungarian scholarship experience language anxiety while reading, writing, listening and speaking in English? If they do, what are the sources of their language anxiety?
2. What do they do to reduce their language anxiety?

3. Research design and methodology

The present study is a multiple qualitative case study. The rationale for choosing this research methodology is obtaining an "in-depth" and insightful understanding of the experiences of Kurdish students on a Hungarian scholarship program with respect to language anxiety. Dörnyei (2007) describes a case study as one of the most commonly used and highly recommended approaches in applied linguistics and English language teaching. In fact, this seemed to be the most appropriate approach in the case of this research for both methodological and pragmatic reasons. Yin (2003) defines a case study as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 13). Dörnyei (2007) describes case studies as the ultimate qualitative method, focusing on the "particular one" and providing the opportunity to gather data in order to maximize our understanding of the unitary features of the object studied. The core value of case studies lies in their potential for offering thorough explanation (Yin, 2003) with "a thick description of a complex social issue embedded within a cultural context", offering "rich and in-depth insights that no other method can yield" (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 155). The most common criticism of qualitative research, especially case studies, is the risk of obtaining subjective data while collecting information "especially

through personal interviews which may not accurately reflect the situation" (Barkley, 2008, p. 136). Other critiques of this research approach include difficulties with replication, generalization problems, and a lack of transparency (Bryman, 2012). These challenges were taken into consideration in the present study both at the stage of data collection and their subsequent analysis.

3.1. Research participants

One of the first decisions to be made in qualitative research is "defining the population on which the research will focus" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 100). Dörnyei (2007) states the following:

> Qualitative inquiry is not concerned with how representative the respondent sample is or how the experience is distributed in the population. Instead, the main goal of sampling is to find individuals who can provide rich and varied insights into the phenomenon under investigation so as to maximize what we can learn. The goal is best achieved by means of some sort of "purposeful" or "purposive" sampling" (p. 126)

The participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure sample quality (Patton, 2002). This involved identifying and selecting three Kurdish students who had received Hungarian scholarship and were studying in Hungary. In addition to the Hungarian scholarship, their availability and willingness to participate, and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner were relevant as well (Bernard, 2002, Spradley, 1979). In this way, it can be ensured that the evaluations of the participants can be more comprehensive and credible.

In order to ensure their privacy, the interviewees were given pseudonyms. For the convenience of handling the data, they received pseudonyms beginning with the same letter as their real names. Before coming to Hungary, Kardo had studied networking for two years in an institute in Iraqi Kurdistan and had received a diploma. Later he was employed at the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Iraqi Kurdistan and worked there for 10 years. At the time of the research, Kardo was doing his fourth semester of his BA study in communication and media sciences at a university in Dunaújváros, Hungary. Bawan was the youngest participant. He received his BSc degree in engineering at a major university in Sulaimania in Iraqi Kurdistan. Because he was the second best graduate, he was employed at his university as an assistant researcher. At the time of the research, he was doing his second semester of his master's study in engineering at a university in Budapest. Finally, Adil received his bachelor degree in archeology at a major university in Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan. Because he was one of the top graduates, his university employed him in the Department

of Archeology as an assistant researcher. Later he got a scholarship and went to France to study for a master's degree. After successfully graduating, he returned to his university and started teaching in the Department of Archeology. At the time of the research, he was doing his second semester of his PhD in archeology at a major university in Budapest, Hungary.

Table 1 Characteristics of the research participants

Name	Kardo	Bawan	Adil
Age	36	24	33
Gender	Male	Male	Male
Major	Media	Engineering	Archeology
Level of study	Bachelor	Master	PhD
Year of study in Hungary	Second	First	First
Native language	Kurdish	Kurdish	Kurdish
Years of English language learning	10 years	10 years	10 years
English language proficiency test	IELTS 5	IELTS 6	IELTS 5
Other languages studied	Arabic	Arabic	Arabic & French

Based on the data gathered from the semi-structured interviews it was possible to draw up the profiles of the participants that are included in Table 1. As can be seen, the mean age of the participants was 31. Kurdish was the native language for all them. According to the Iraqi constitution, both Kurdish and Arabic are the official languages of the country; therefore, all of the interviewees had studied the Arabic language at school and they spoke that language. Adil also spoke French as he had done his master's in France. All the interviewees had been studying English for ten years in school and as a requirement for the scholarship they had taken the IELTS exam. All of them were employed in the public sector (i.e., Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Iraqi Kurdistan).

3.2. Instrument

Recorded semi-structured interviews with three participants were the primary means of data collection. Based on the brainstorming about the study, the researcher created an interview protocol in order to elicit information to answer the research questions. The interview questions aimed at discovering the feeling of the interviewees regarding English language anxiety and determining whether they benefited from the Hungarian scholarship with improving the main four target language skills.

In order to enhance the quality of the study, the first draft of the interview questions was sent for review to a university professor who is an expert on anxiety. The professor helped the researcher restructure the interview protocol pointed out some language issues. The protocol was modified accordingly and

the final version consisted of three parts: introduction, demographic information, and questions about anxiety as such (see Appendix).

To estimate the approximate interview time, to diagnose potential problems with the questions and to increase the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the instrument was piloted with a PhD student who was representative of the target group of the participants for "whom it has been designed" (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2012, p. 79). The pilot helped the present researcher refine the interview schedule and prepare for the actual interviews. For example, specific suggestions were added to use verbal or nonverbal probes for the interview to help the respondent give more elaborative answers and avoid leading questions.

The main reason for using a semi-structured interview was to gain detailed information and seek possible explanations, an aim that might not have been fully achieved through other methods such as observation (Hinds, 2000). Semi-structured interviews enable participants to elaborate on the issues raised in depth and breadth (Dörnyei, 2007). Furthermore, the instrument allowed a "(…) deeper understanding of experience from the perspectives of the participants" (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 44).

3.3. Data collection

The data were collected in the spring semester of 2016. Based on the schedules and availability of the participants, the researcher interviewed them one-by-one for approximately thirty-five minutes each on a separate day in May 2016. In order to reduce the potential influence of L2 proficiency levels, the participants were offered the choice of using their L1 (Kurdish) or L2 (English) (Gass & Mackey 2000). They chose to use the Kurdish language in order to express thought properly but sometimes they switched to English due to lack of specific terms in their mother tongue.

The interviews took place in a room at a university campus in Budapest. Before the interviews were conducted, the interviewees were given an explanation about the aim of the research and they provided permission for the interviews to be recorded. The participants were assured that the data would be kept confidential and that their privacy would not be compromised.

Although the interviews were conducted in Kurdish, the mother tongue of the interviewees, they asked the researcher to send them the interview questions two days prior to the sessions so as to have some time to prepare. At the beginning of the interviews, the participants were asked very general questions about their learning of English and their academic experience. Then the focus was shifted to questions about their feeling of anxiety when they use English inside the classroom and the reaction of teachers and students when they made mistakes. Questions

were also asked about strategies the participants used in order to overcome their anxiety. At the end of each interview, the respondents were asked to add any further information they had not been asked about but considered relevant.

3.4. Data analysis

Dörnyei (2007) states that "the first step in data analysis is to transfer the recording into a textual form" (p. 246). Therefore, immediately after the interviews were conducted, the researcher transcribed them and follow-up interviews were arranged online via Messenger in order to employ member checks strategy (Creswell, 2009). Respondent checking strategy was necessary to provide the interviewees with an opportunity to check the details, clarify any possible misinterpretation and make sure that they had expressed their ideas and views accurately in the previous interviews.

In analyzing the interview transcripts, the constant comparative method was followed in order to "identify chunks or units of meaning in the data" (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 128). As the first step, the transcripts were read line-by-line in order to gain a global understanding (Patton, 2002) and this was followed by manual categorizing and coding. In order to develop a coding system, the three interviews were coded separately. As a result of the constant checking of the data during the coding process, 135 relevant statements were coded from the interview transcript of Kardo, 122 from that of Bawan's and 115 from that of Adil's. 33 recurring themes emerged from the data, which were divided into three major categories: (1) sources of language anxiety, (2) effects of language anxiety, and (3) potential strategies to reduce language anxiety (see Table 2).

Table 2 Major categories and emerging themes

Sources of language anxiety	Effects of language anxiety	Potential strategies to reduce language anxiety
Fear of making mistakes	Avoiding mistakes instead of focusing on learning	Ignoring making mistakes
Fear of negative evaluation	Feeling disappointed and never initiating to talk or participate	Preparation in advance
Culture difference in terms of teaching styles	Keeping silent	Asking questions and critiquing
Communication apprehension	Pretending to understand	Allocating more time to study English
Lack of vocabularies	Fear of speaking to native speakers	Memorizing vocabularies
Mispronunciation	Lack of confidence to read and speak	Listening to songs, watching movies

4. Findings and discussion

The results of data analysis are presented and discussed in this section in accordance with the two research questions. It should be explained that the answers provided by the interviewees were translated from Kurdish into English by the researcher.

Research question 1:
Do the Kurdish students on Hungarian scholarship experience language anxiety while reading, writing, listening and speaking in English? If they do, what are the sources of their language anxiety?

The purpose of this research question was to examine the feeling of the participants about their language use inside the classroom in terms of the four skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing) and to explore the sources of their language anxiety in this respect.

The interviews revealed that the participants felt anxious about their use of English in the classroom for different reasons and that this anxiety had an impact on their studies. The main sources of their anxiety included limited vocabulary, problems with the use of grammar, imperfect pronunciation, fear of making mistakes, as well as fear of being evaluated by teachers on the basis of their performance and differences in teaching styles related to cultural issues.

Kardo, for example, felt anxious about his pronunciation when participatin in classroom discussions. He commented:

> *I do not feel good with using the English language in the classroom because I am not good at English pronunciation due to the big spelling differences between the English language and my mother tongue which is Kurdish. I have difficulties with pronouncing many words in English while I am reading or speaking in the classroom and this makes my communication difficult and sometimes impossible to understand. There is a one-to-one letter-sound correspondence in Kurdish orthographic system which is different in English and this results in inappropriate English pronunciation* (Kardo).

The comment supports the Fraser's (2001) claim that pronunciation is one of the most important aspects of speaking since poor pronunciation may make comprehension really difficult. Similarly, Derwing and Rossiter (2002) found that over 50% of their research participants had difficulties when using the English language as the result of poor pronunciation. The analysis showed that perceptions of poor pronunciation had a negative influence on the participants' willingness to use English in the classroom.

Although the participants were not so happy about their English language use in class, they still found it motivating, as is evident from the following comment:

As an international student, the only medium of instruction and communication in the class for me is English. I study in a class where no one speaks or understands my mother tongue. In order not to be left out in classroom discussions and writing up the assignments, I have to spend more time on improving my English; for instance, I listen to songs, read newspapers, watch films, and memorize new vocabulary. Therefore, after two semesters of my study I feel that my English in writing, reading, listening and speaking is enhanced and this is what I am so proud of now but I still need to work harder! (Bawan)

The interviewees explained that the fear of negative evaluation was among the main sources of anxiety. They were convinced that success in their academic study mainly depended on their command of the target language skills. Adil, for example, admitted that he was more anxious about writing because it might influence his final grades:

As I mentioned earlier, I need to write a paper for each course I will take in the semester. It is time-consuming, I need to revise my papers many times in order to correct the mistake I have made. Spelling is a big problem for me as the English language does not have one-to-one letter-sound orthographic system. I am not very good at grammar, in particular "tenses". It may take me several hours to write a good paragraph because of spelling, grammar and of course lack of vocabulary (Adil).

Adil's comment supports the research finding of Raisman (1982), Raimes (1991) and Al-Ahmad (2003), according to which writing is an extremely challenging activity for learners. This is because the target language is systematically different from their mother tongue and the fear of being evaluated by others based on writing tasks causes writing anxiety and to some extent makes writing even more difficult.

With respect to the speaking skill, the interviewees expressed very different opinions, which is not surprising as they were enrolled in different programs and attended different universities. Kardo reported not having much chance to talk in class because there were 18 other students studying with him and the teacher did most of the talking. By contrast, Adil had opportunities to talk more. As he explained:

We are two PhD students in the program. The teachers give us a lot of materials to read and later discuss them in the classroom. I need to ask questions or critique and argue. At the beginning of the program I was more anxious because I was afraid of making grammatical mistakes or mispronouncing words, but I then realized that I would not get good grades or even pass the courses. Therefore, I decided to ignore the mistakes I might make. I had to speak and later correct those mistakes (Adil).

Bawan felt more comfortable with speaking outside the classroom than during the lessons. He commented:

Due to the fact that I do not speak Hungarian, I need to deal with my daily needs with the help of English. I talk with my flat owner in English, with some neighbors, when I go to a restaurant, in a hospital, and in a shopping mall. I know Hungarians like me are not native speakers [of English] and therefore I do not need to be afraid of making mistakes (Bawan).

All the three interviewees perceived the listening skill to be as important as reading, speaking and writing since it is through listening that they could understand what was said by their teachers or other classmates. This is evident in the following comment:

I feel much better in listening skill than writing; however, I have some problems with the voice, intonation and pronunciation of English speakers; atill I can comprehend the core meaning of the conversation and sometimes the gestures and body language of the speakers help me to understand better (Kardo).

Bawan explains that the degree of his listening comprehension is greatly influenced by the speaker and in particular whether he or she is native or non-native. He points out:

I have some difficulties with my English listening skills while listening to a native speaker. The speed rate and pronunciations make it quite difficult for me to understand. But with non-native speakers I do not experience these problems (Bawan).

Cultural differences regarding teaching styles were among the factors intensifying the feelings of anxiety. Adil commented:

I came from a teaching context where I was not expected to ask or answer questions during classroom discussions. I had to listen respectfully to the teachers and keep silent unless I am called upon (Adil).

Tierney (1992) believes that university reflects the culture of the mainstream society. Therefore, the anxiety manifested by the Kurdish students may reflect their collectivist culture of teaching in which they were required to memorize what the teacher taught them. Asking questions or speaking in class was either not allowed or was regarded as disrespectful. The way of teaching in a Hungarian university where participation in the classroom is important to develop different skills seems to be unclear or unknown to the Kurdish students who have more experience memorizing the learning material than criticizing arguments. This may lead to feelings of anxiety when using English in the classroom.

The first research question concerned whether Kurdish students on Hungarian scholarship experience language anxiety and the sources of this anxiety. The results indicate that the participants did suffer from foreign language anxiety. Its primary sources were negative thoughts, fear of making pronunciation, lexical, grammatical

or spelling mistakes, awareness of the shortcomings noticed, error correction and fear of being disapproved by others. The analysis also revealed that cultural differences in terms of teaching styles contributed to enhancing the participants' anxiety.

Research question 2:
What do students do to reduce their language anxiety?

The second research question concerned the potential strategies that the participants used in order to decrease their anxiety and the role of the Stipendium Hungarian scholarship programs in helping them do so. The students agreed that the occurrence of foreign language anxiety is not a favorable phenomenon and they need to overcome it so that they can take full advantage of their study programs. This aim can be achieved by using several strategies including capitalizing on the positive attitude of teachers, carefully preparing for class, avoiding eye contact, studying hard as well as allocating more time to learning English.

When it comes to the positive role of the teacher, the interviewees indicated that encouragement from their instructors was very important. This is evident in the following comment:

> *When I started my bachelor degree here in Hungary, for the first time I used English for academic purposes like participating in class and writing up assignments. In the first semester, I was much more anxious about the four skills. For instance, I made many simple grammatical mistakes, mispronounced many words and I lacked the right vocabulary. But I don't remember being embarrassed by any teachers. Some of them even called me to their offices and gave me feedback and explanation of some errors I made. All of them encouraged me to be brave enough to speak in English in class* (Kardo).

The above comment supports Beltrán's claim (1995) that displaying a positive attitude and creating a secure setting by the teacher can considerably foster foreign language use in the classroom.

In order to meet the guidelines set for writing assignments, students need to be personally involved in order to improve their writing skills through reading a lot and reviewing their writing to meet the requirements of their teacher. Improving writing skills helps students publish their work in conference proceedings or scientific journals in order to get credits and complete their studies.

Kardo believes that the positive attitude of his teachers regarding his language use in the classroom enhanced his motivation to improve the four language skills. This is visible in the following comment:

> *I remember that when I started my first semester I tried to avoid discussing the class assignments simply by saying "I don't know!" or " I cannot do it". My teachers did not*

accept my avoidance and they asked me to think about proper answers or arguments. As a result, I feel I made a lot of progress especially in writing. When I submit a paper, my teacher sends me back detailed feedback which helps me make my arguments more clearly. Now I am more encouraged to think, guess or speculate to the answer of a question rather than saying "I don't know" (Kardo).

On the whole, the interviewees' comments show that the role of the teacher in encouraging their use of English in the classroom is significant and it helps students gain confidence in developing their own strategies of reducing language anxiety.

With respect to awareness, Kardo reported using it as an effective strategy for reducing his anxiety. In particular, he kept reminding himself that he was not the only international student in class who was trying to speak English:

I try to make myself sure that I am not the only non-native speaker who is afraid to speak in English in the classroom because of making mistakes. Therefore, I do my best to ignore the mistakes and go on speaking. For example, when the class discussion has finished, I ask my classmates and teachers to let me know my mistakes in order to correct them and not repeat them in the future. This is a good strategy for me and it works well (Kardo).

The strategy Kardo mentions in the above comment was very useful as it helped him move away from the mistakes he might have made and focus on the consent of what he was trying to say.

Being prepared in advance was a strategy that Adil used it in order to reduce his language anxiety. He offered the following comment:

As I mentioned before, my biggest challenge in the PhD program is writing papers. I have many shortcomings in writing skills but in order to overcome this issue, I prepare in advance in order to meet the deadlines. For example, before writing a paper, the first step is to ask my teacher to help me find a proper topic to write about and then I will read a lot in order to get many ideas. After getting to know the structure, I start writing each part of the paper (Adil).

In order to overcome problems with his limited vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, Kardo reported memorizing new words and expressions as well as reading a lot about grammar:

When I speak I get nervous easily, it is because of lack of vocabulary and grammatical errors. I know that if I continue getting nervous, I will not be able to keep up with the class. In order not to lag behind, I decided to memorize 10 words every day for one year. And to reduce the number of grammar errors, I have a grammar pocket-book and whenever I have spare time, I try to read it. This helps me a lot (Kardo).

Adil reported avoiding eye contact with the teacher or other students as a way of reducing his anxiety when presenting in a seminar. He commented:

I need to deliver presentations as requirement to get a credit for some coures. I easily become anxious when I see my teacher and students looking directly at me. In order to avoid this, I try not to look at them. I know it is not a good method but it helps me relax and finish what I should talk about (Adil)*.*

Bawan reported spending several hours a week improving his listening skills. He provided the following comment:

I have difficulties with listening comprehension. In order to overcome this problem, I do different things such as, for example, listening to English songs, watching five movies a week and watching only English channels on TV. This technique is helpful to reduce my anxiety and become a better listener.

The second research question concerned the strategies that Kurdish students employed in order to reduce language anxiety. The results indicate that the students relied on different strategies depending on their needs and the level of their language anxiety.

5. Conclusion

This study constitutes the first attempt to determine whether Kurdish students on Hungarian scholarship experience foreign language anxiety and the strategies they fall back on to overcome the difficulties they run into during their academic study. The difficulties these students need to confront vary depending on the program level (i.e., whether they are undergraduates or graduates) as well as the subject area. Foreign language anxiety is one of the challenges that such students on suffer from. The in-depth interviews showed that the participants experienced a high level of anxiety which mainly stemmed from limited lexis, inaccurate grammar, poor pronunciation, the fear of making mistakes, the fear of being evaluated by teachers based on their performance and cultural differences in terms of teaching styles. In order to overcome language anxiety, the participants employed numerous strategies such as awareness, preparation, avoiding eye contact and allocating more time to learning English. The interviewees believe that the Hungarian scholarship represented a good opportunity for them to improve their English language proficiency because the only medium of communication and learning is English. In order to complete their studies successfully, Kurdish students believe that they need to improve their English language in order to be competent, have academic command of reading, writing, listening and speaking skills, and reduce their anxiety.

Although the study has shed some light on the causes of language anxiety that Kurdish students experience while studying on Hungarian scholarship and investigated the strategies the participants use to minimize such negative feelings, it is limited in a number of ways. One key constraint is the sample size. The number of participants is small in comparison to the entire target population, with the effect that the results are not generalizable. As a further step, a large-scale study could be carried out in order to obtain a more comprehensive picture of difficulties experienced by Kurdish student on Hungarian scholarship.

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APPENDIX

Interview protocol

1. How do you feel about your English language in general?

2. What is your feeling about your English language use when you participate in classroom discussions?

3. Can you tell me the role of your teachers about your English language use in the classroom either good or bad?

4. How do the students in your classroom will react if you make mistakes?

5. Can you tell me how anxious you are about your English language? When you are:
    A. Reading
    B. Writing
    C. Listening
    D. Speaking

6. What are the sources of your anxiety? when you are:
    A. Reading
    B. Writing
    C. Listening
    D. Speaking

7. What strategies do you use in order to reduce your anxiety?

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