Cycle of Fear in Learning: The Case for Three Language Skills

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ABSTRACT

Fear or anxiety in learning is a vicious cycle. A reaction at one stage may lead to consequences at another stage. The fear of learning sometimes gives negative impact on a learner's future learning encounters. The feeling of fear may hinder further learning experience possibilities. Studies on language learning have revealed that the fear of learning language skills influences learners' perception of language skills. This paper presents the cycle of fear in language learning from the perspectives of speaking, reading and writing skills. Past studies in fear of readings reveal that learners' choice of language strategies and their perception of reading difficulties influence their reading skill. Past research on writing found that fear of writing stems from the learners' perception, the writing task and also the environment. Fear of oral presentation is caused by trait and state apprehension. The concept of fear of language learning can be summarized from common fears found in all the three past studies on language skills.

Keywords: Language learning, Writing skill, Reading skill, Oral presentation skill..

> **Highlights of this paper**
> - Fear or anxiety in learning is a vicious cycle.
> - The fear of learning sometimes gives negative impact on a learner's future learning encounters.
> - This paper presents the cycle of fear in language learning from the perspectives of speaking, reading and writing skills.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of Study

There is an important distinction between language (a) acquisition and (b)language learning. Firstly, as far as acquisition is concerned, children acquire their mother tongue not through language rules. They were not explicitly taught rule of the language-the language is acquired. Next, language learning is the result of direct instruction. Learners may learn another language as their second, third or other language. There have been many studies on language learning. Numerous studies have shown that there are many contributing factors that influence language learning. Sometimes, one factor may be dominant than others when it comes to learning a language. In order to make classroom teaching and learning effective, the teacher/researcher needs to understand (a) the learner, (b) the learning process to be used in the classroom and also (c) the learning situations and strategies used.

However, exposure to new situations often bring fear and anxiety to individuals. According to many language learners display their anxiety when learning a new language. Fear of language learning can originate from many factors. Some learners' fear originates from themselves. They have low self-esteem and they are afraid they may not be good enough to speak the target language. Others may fear that the target culture may not be the same as their culture. However, there are other learners who fear language learning because the environment they are in does not provide positive support. Fear of language can become a cycle when fear of related factors can hinder further learning to take place. A learner may have low self-esteem and is therefore not confident to practice the target language. A non- supportive environment may further enhance the fear and the learner chooses not to practice the target language. The choice to not practice may also be due to the fact that the learners fear negative evaluation from the people around them. This fear caused the learner to be lacking in the use of target language. The whole fear to practice process becomes a cycle of fear for the learner. Measures must be taken to identify the fear in order to plan intervening actions to stop the cycle of fear.

This paper presents the concept of fear in language learning. This is done through summarising the representation of fear among learners in the learning of language skills such as reading, writing and oral presentation. The summary answers three questions;

    (a)   How far is there fear of reading in language learning?

    (b)   How far is there fear in writing in language learning?

    (c)   How far is there fear in oral presentation in language learning?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Causes of Language Learning Fear

Fear of language learning is caused by many factors. There have been several studies to explore the causes of anxiety in language learning. The study by Hashemi (2011) used qualitative semi-structured interview and focus-group discussion technique to this investigate the factors behind language anxiety among the Iranian language learners both within the classroom and in the social context. The researcher in the study found that learners are restricted by their "own sense of self", and also their self-related cognition. They felt restricted by their self- related cognitions, language learning difficulties, differences in learners", and target language cultures. They may also feel

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threatened by the differences in social status of the speakers and interlocutors. Some fear learning because they are afraid of losing their self-identity.

Another study was conducted by Ab Latif (2015) looked at English (second) language anxiety among adult learners and also the factors influencing the level of language anxiety. The variables used in the study were gender, age and years of learning English. Three more contributing factors were also investigated and the factors were negative evaluation and general feeling of anxiety. 132 respondents responded to a survey adapted from Horwitz *et al.* (1986). This Foreign Language Classroom Scale (FLCAS) was changed to English Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (ELCAS) since the focus of this research is on English language. A number of statistical analyses were employed in order to analyze the data including descriptive statistics, Pearson Correlation and Multiple Regressions. The results obtained indicated that there is a significant relationship between language anxiety and years of learning English, while no significant relationship was obtained regarding gender and age.

Finally, Cagatay (2015) examined English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA). He also looked into the reasons for the anxiety as well as some solutions to overcome the anxiety. The participants were 147 Turkish students at the English preparatory program of a state university. The findings revealed that EFL students experience a moderate level of FLSA. Furthermore, the study also reported that female students seem to be highly anxious while speaking. Another striking point is that students' FLSA increased when communicating with a native speaker compared to with class members.

2.2. How Learners Learn a Language

Before discussing the isolated fear in different language skills, one must understand the factors that influence learners to learn (or not learn) a certain language.
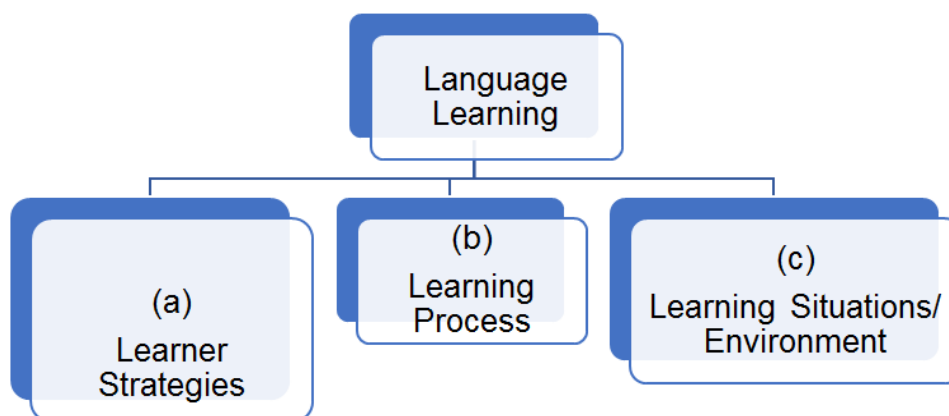

Figure-1. Factors for Language learning.

Source: Rahmat (2018).

Figure 1 presents factors for language learning. In general, language learning can be influenced by (a) learner strategies. How learners learn make a huge difference in how much of language they acquire at any given time. Some learners strategise their learning by communicating with the people in their target language. Others learn by learning the rules of the language while some learn by having role models.

Next, language learning is also influenced by (b)learning process. The skills used by the instructor have a great impact on the learners' learning process. There are learners who learn from theories, and there are some learners who learn from interaction. However, there are also some learners who learn through the "silent-period" -they

watch and listen. Finally, language learning is also influenced by (c) learning situations/environment. The activities used in the teaching-learning process can provide impact on learners' ability to learn a language.

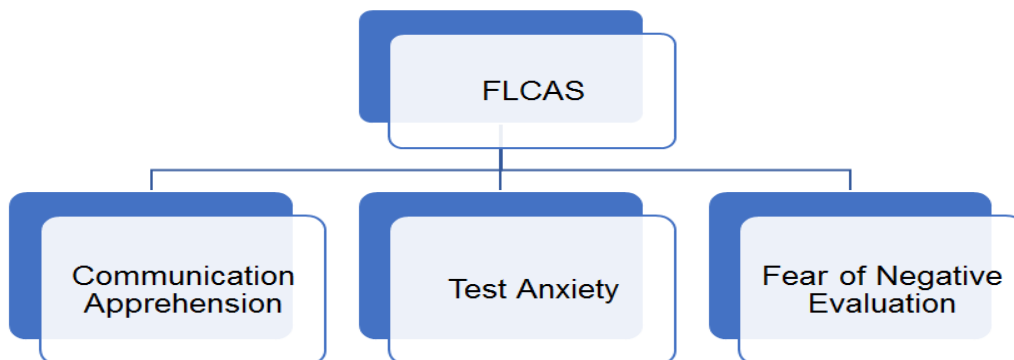### 2.3. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCAS)

Figure-2. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety.

Source: Horwitz *et al.* (1986).

Although factors such as learner strategies, learning process, and learning environment can encourage learning, these factors can also become demotivating factors if learners are more affected by their own negative perceptions. The study by Ab Latif (2015) reported three main factors that trigger foreign language classroom anxiety. The factors are communication apprehension, text anxiety and also learners' fear of negative evaluation. Leaners who do not have the confidence fear communication because they feel inadequate. Next, learners who are not confident of their foreign language abilities would fear taking a test. Finally, learners also fear negative evaluation that the people around then would give when they cannot communicate in the foreign language.

2.4. Fear of Oral Presentation

One of the most feared language skills has to be that of oral presentation. Oral presentation skills require so much more from the presenter than just language abilities. Learners need to show their confidence in speaking as well as confidence in responding to questions by the audience.
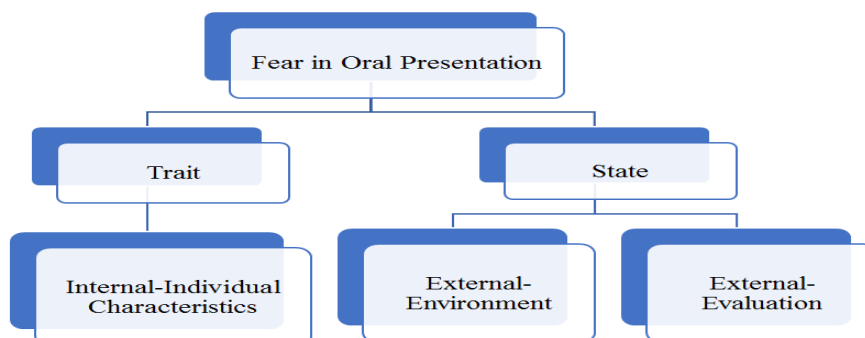

Figure-3. Fear of Oral Presentation.

Source: Rahmat *et al.* (2018).

A study on fear of oral presentation was done by Rahmat *et al.* (2018) to investigate the causes of fear of oral presentation among learners. The study revealed that fear in oral presentation is caused by trait and state apprehension Figure 3.

2.4.1. Trait Apprehension

The first type of apprehension is state apprehension. According to Harmer (2007) this category of anxiety develops in response to a perceived threat. A person who has this type of apprehension is unable to perform well in oral presentations because of his/her personal characteristics. One sign of trait apprehension is allowing nervousness to take over their presentation. Next, a presenter may worry too much about his/her insufficient preparation, or compare himself/herself with others or even fear they may forget his/her speech. He/she could also not be confident of his/her own ability, physical appearance. The speaker may also fear the audience.

2.4.2. State Apprehension

The next type of apprehension is state apprehension. According to Harmer (2007) this type of anxiety describes the experience of unpleasant feelings when confronted with specific situations, demands or a particular object or event. State anxiety occurs when the presenter makes a mental assessment of some type of threat. Presenters may fear either their own physical portrayal, the environment or even the evaluation process. Students may fear the marks they will get for their presentation. They may also fear the size and composition of the audience, or even the venue or time of the presentation. They may also find their previous marks a threat (either lower or higher). Next, students may fear the perceived negative evaluation they think they will get form the presentation. They worry about the impression the evaluators have on them. They also fear the opinions of the evaluators. They are afraid they would say the wrong things when they present. Hence, the findings of this study reveal that both trait and state apprehension can influence students' oral presentation. Trait characteristics such as worry over own personal appearance, worry about inadequate preparation as well as worry about forgetting words are found to be major factors. State characteristics such as venue, time as well as audience influence the presenter. While both male and female students are equally anxious over their oral presentation, gender difference does influence both trait and state apprehension among students from different faculties.

2.5. Reading Anxiety

Foreign language learners fear of reading is usually rooted from other related anxieties. Fear of reading may not be caused by one factor.
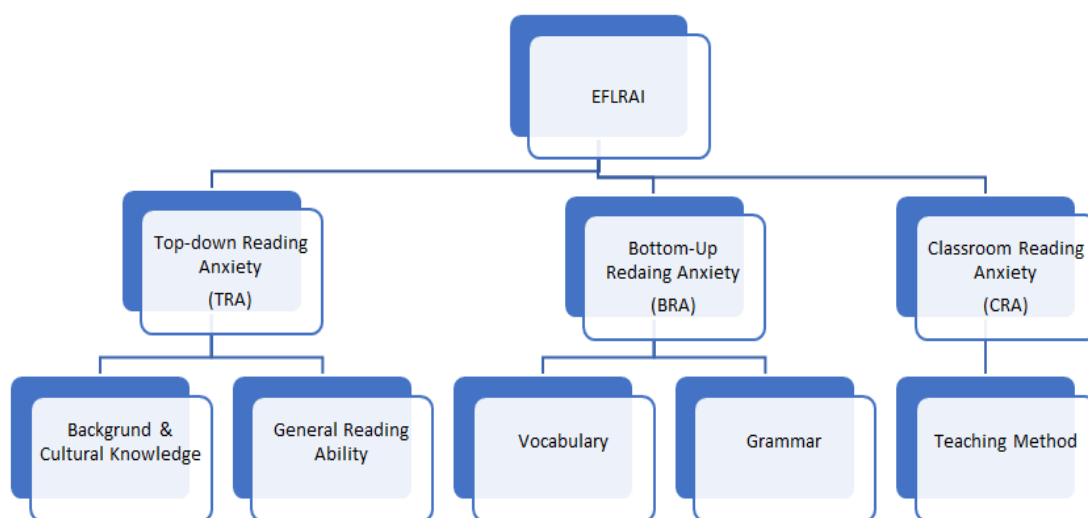

Figure-4. Reading Anxiety.

Source: Zoghi (2012).

Figure 4 shows factors that caused reading anxiety among learners presented in English as a foreign language reading anxiety inventory (EFLRAI). These fear may be caused by top-down reading anxiety (TRA), bottom-up reading anxiety (BRA) and also classroom reading anxiety (CRA). (TRA), is mainly reader-specific and relevant to the reader. TRA may result from lack of background and cultural knowledge of the text. TRA can also be caused by the reader's general reading ability. The second factor, (BRA), is text-specific in nature; and refers to the reader's problems in vocabulary and grammar. The third factor, (CRA), is associated with the variables that has nothing to do with the text and the reader. CRA factors are context-relevant and arise from the classroom settings where the teacher, reader, and text interact.

2.6. Fear in ESL Reading

Further anxiety in reading may further make the learner feel that reading comprehension is challenging. Challenges faced in reading comprehension can be caused by the perception of reading difficulties that the learners have made their mind to believe.
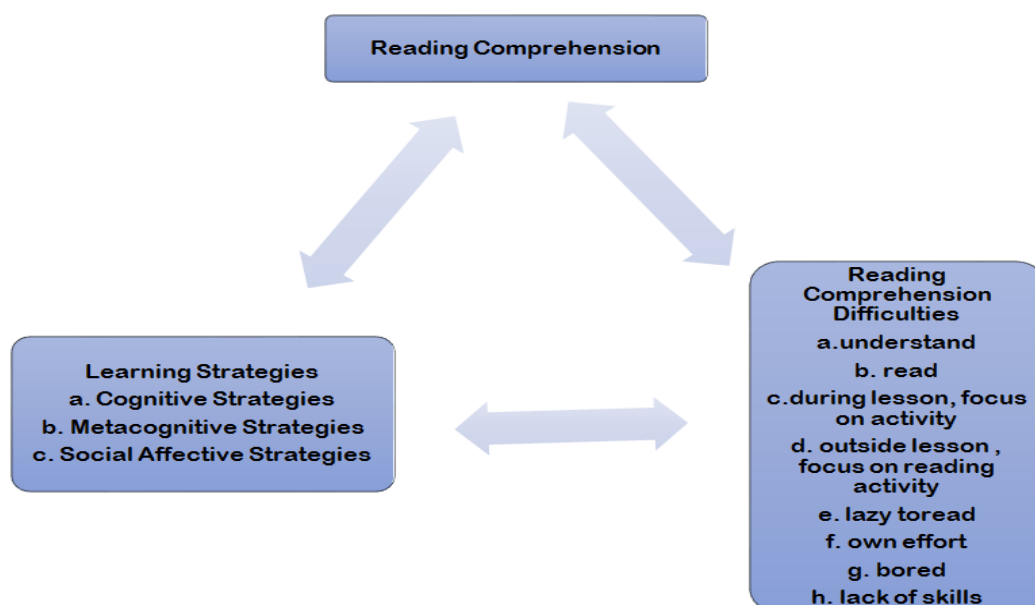

Figure-5. Fear in Reading.
Source: Rahman *et al.* (2015).

Figure 5 reported that the ability of the learners to comprehend reading is influenced by (a) the learning strategies that they used, and (b) their perception on reading comprehension difficulties.

2.6.1. Learning Strategies

According to Serri *et al.* (2012) when it comes to reading comprehension, cognitive strategies are activities that are used by learners in order to understand the linguistic input and get knowledge. Meta cognitive strategies, on the other hand, deals with knowing about learning. Finally, social affective strategies refer to strategies that learners use to learn by interaction with their classmates and questions are asked from the teacher to understand the subject.

2.6.2. Reading Comprehension Difficulties

According to Garcia *et al.* (2014) some ESL learners find difficulties in understanding during reading comprehension. Some may lack focus when they read passages. Some learners are also found to be lazy when it comes to reading passages, while some found it difficult to read without aids and some may have problems with their vocabulary. In addition to that, some ESL learners may find reading boring.

Hence, it is encouraged that reading comprehension classes focus on the teaching of separate strategies as part of the reading comprehension activities. Past research has proven that successful use of the strategies will improve the learners" reading comprehension abilities.

2.7. Fear of Writing

Fear of reading may snowball into other related language skill. This is because in academic setting, learners need reading skills to help in their academic writing process. Writers use reading skills to decide on their content of their writing. Writing is considered the most difficult of the four language skills; more so if writing is to be done in non-native settings.
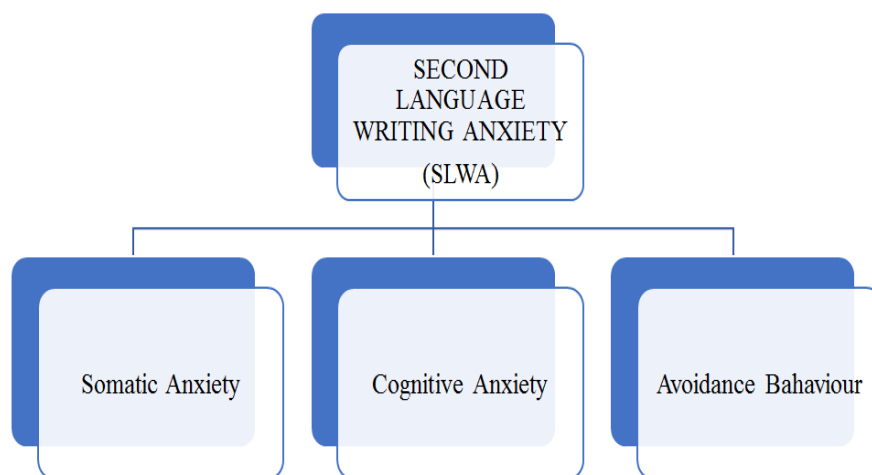

Figure-6. Second Language Writing Anxiety.

Source: Cheng (2004).

Cheng (2004) presented a three-dimensional conceptualization of anxiety in second language writing. Second language writing anxiety (SLWA) includes somatic anxiety (emotionality factor), cognitive anxiety (worry factor), and also avoidance behaviour . These three types of anxiety refer to the physiological, cognitive, and effects of writing anxiety on writing processes and behaviours based on the SLWAI Figure 6. Negative relationship between test anxiety and L2 writing performance is primarily due to the cognitive components rather than somatic components or avoidance behaviour.

2.8. Fear in ESL Writing

Figure 7 below represents the factors that explained the reasons why learners fear writing. Learners fear of writing could stem from their perception. They perceived that writing is difficult. This perception will then influence how they treat writing-based activities.
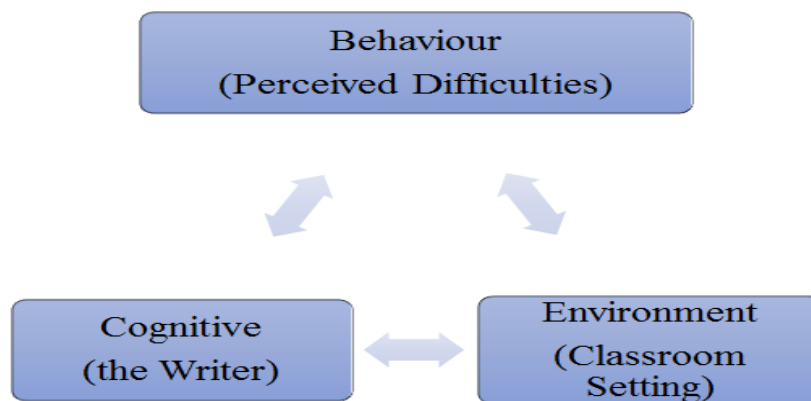
Figure-7. Fear in ESL Writing.
Source: Rahmat *et al.* (2017).

With reference to Figure 7, the fear of writing snowballs from their perceived difficulties. The term "perceived" refer to the students' recognition of the difficulties in writing. This perception of difficulties may or may not be the same as the perception of difficulties others face in writing. This is because learners' perception of writing difficulty is influenced by the environment and also the cognitive abilities of the writer Figure 7.

2.8.1. Behaviour (Perceived Difficulties)

According to Rahmat *et al.* (2017) perceived difficulties can stem from difficulties in perceived difficulties in punctuation, language use and also writing skills. Problems in punctuation include problems in using full-stops, question marks, exclamation marks, comma, colon, semi-colons and many more. Problems in language use include problems in using appropriate type and style of language in writing, use of synonyms/antonyms, use of tense, word order and many more. Finally, problems in writing skills include problems in spelling, summarizing, paraphrasing, using in-text citation, and many more.

2.8.2. Environment (Classroom Teaching)

Often, the learners' like or dislike towards a learning process in the classroom would depend on factors like teachers' language proficiency, and methods of teaching, medium of instruction. Learners are also affected by teachers lack of interest (or vice versa) towards the subject.

2.8.3. Cognitive (The Writer)

During the process of writing, the writer is constantly suing his/her cognitive skills to make decisions. The decisions are related to the writing and they include the choice of the target language, as well as choice of what to write or not write. This study thus revealed that different writers from different disciplines focus on different aspects of the composing process. What is the pedagogical implication of this research? Traditional writing teachers design their writing activities as if they were extensions of grammar lessons. Doing so may lead two negative repercussions. Firstly, the learners who had good grammar skills may be disappointed when they struggle with writing skills because the two skills are not entirely related. On the other end of the continuum, learners who already are have low self-esteem because of their low proficiency in grammar can be left demotivated to practice writing skills. Alhammad (2017) also reported that language learners with anxiety over learning the language may perceive the language skills as more difficult than it actually is. Writing teachers need to be exposed to many different approaches of teaching ESL learners see writing as a skill to be learnt regardless of their language proficiency.

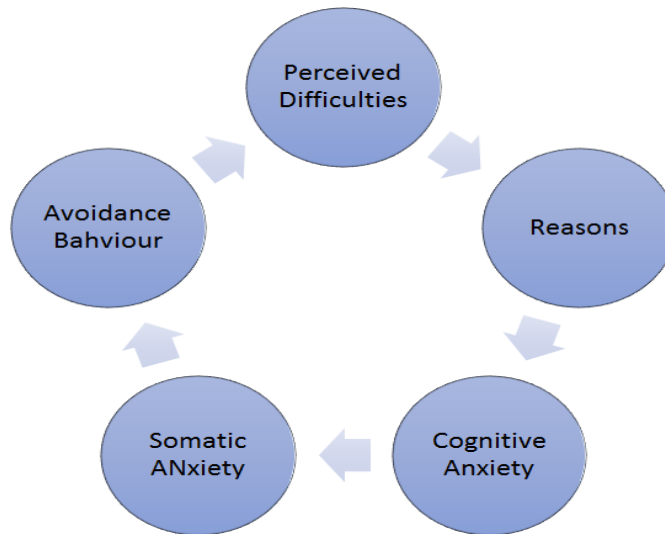*2.9. The Cycle of Self-Fulfilling Prophecy in Writing*

Figure-8. The Cycle of Self-Fulfilling Prophecy in Writing.
Source: Rahmat *et al.* (2019).

Another interesting concept of writing difficulty is that of "cycle of self- fulfilling prophecy" Figure 8. Writers began by having a perception that writing is difficulty. This difficulty will be backed up by the writers with their reasons. This results in cognitive anxiety towards writing. Their mind influences how they react and this leads to the prevalence of somatic anxiety. Finally, the writer displays avoidance behaviour towards writing. This avoidance is further enhanced by their perception of how difficult writing is. The whole process becomes a cycle. More often than not, this is one of the reasons why writing teachers find it difficult teaching ;students find learning writing difficult and writing teachers find teaching writing difficult.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK-THE CYCLE OF FEAR IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

The theoretical frame work of cycle of fear in language learning is a culmination of the concept of (a) cycle of self-fulfilling prophecy and (b) the common concept of fear from the study of three language skills.

Figure-9. The Cycle of Self-Fulfilling Prophecy.
Source: Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968).

The concept of cycle in prophecy by a person stems from the "cycle of self-fulfilling prophecy" proposed by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968). The beliefs of the individual influences his/her expectations of any learning situations. This then influences the behaviour of the learners. This behaviour then influences the results of learning. In the end, the result of learning reinforces future beliefs towards learning.

This concept can be further extended in teaching and learning psychology. Self-fulfilling prophecy is a prediction that what a person sees/ feels as true will directly or indirectly become true eventually. Based on Figure 9, the person's beliefs about himself/herself will influence his/her actions towards others. This action then impacts the beliefs of others about that person. This belief then causes the action of others towards the person. Without realizing it, the action of others would reinforce the person's beliefs and the influence back his/her actions. The whole fear now becomes a cycle.

Figure-10. The Concept of Fear in Language Learning.
Source: Rahmat *et al*. (2018).

Figure 10 presents the combination of concept of fear in several studies on language learning. Past studies revealed that fear of reading is rooted from the learner, the text and also the environment where the reading activity took place. Next, learners feared writing because of their own past writing experience (or inexperience), the given writing task and also the environment where the writing task took place. Past studies have shown that the fear of oral presentation is rooted from trait and state apprehension. This means, learners are afraid of oral presentation because of their own characteristics and also the environment they were put in.
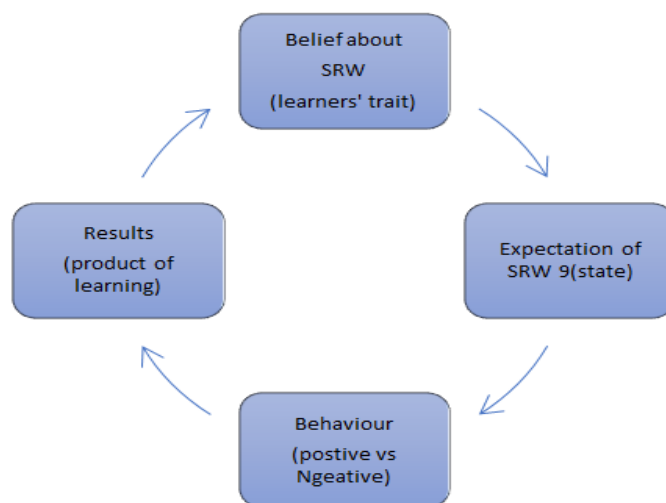

Figure-11. Conceptual Framework of Language Learning Cycle of Fear in SRW (Speaking, Reading and Writing).
Source: Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968).

Figure 11 above presents the writer's conceptual framework of the cycle of fear in the learning of speaking, reading and writing skills. This conceptual framework is obtained from combining the theory of cycle of self-fulfilling prophecy (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968) and also past studies in the fear of learning speaking, reading and writing (SRW). The cycle begins with the learner's beliefs about learning SRW. Past studies have revealed this beliefs can also stem from the learner's trait. The learner may have some characteristics that encourage or hinder learning of language skills. The characteristics often becomes catalyst to learning experience or inhibit learning. Next, these trait influences the learner's expectation of learning. This expectation can begin in the learning environment; the state of the learning experience. Some teachers provide conducive learning environment for learning; some non-conducive. The learning environment then influences the behaviour of the learner in the learning environment. The behaviour can either be positive or negative depending on how the learner respond to the learning expectation. Finally, the learner' behaviour determines his/her result of learning. The product of learning is shown in the way the learner portray his/her performance in the particular language skill.

4. CONCLUSION

To sum up, three main factors are seen as the common, overlapping fear. The factors are (a) the learners themselves, (b) the task and also (c) the teaching-learning environment. The concept of language learning cycle of fear in SRW explains how the overlapping fear in language learning influence the learning of SRW in learners.

Instructors need to take into consideration these three factors when planning classroom activities to maximise learning while minimizing fear of learning any language skill.

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