LANGUAGE EGO AS A BARRIER IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AMONG ARAB UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT: *To eliminate barriers created by language ego and other restraints in Arab learners of English, tutors should understand the mechanism of these restrains. This study explored the concept of language ego and the extent to which it acts as a barrier to second language learning among Arab learners of English. Data was collected using a questionnaire and analyzed quantitatively using data analysis tool of Microsoft Excel. Results confirmed that language ego is a barrier to the learning of English among Arab learners of the second language. Results confirmed that Arab learners of English have thick language ego that acts as a barrier to second language learning. The pedagogical implications of the results of this study are that teachers are supposed to be patient with second language learners and be supportive of them.*

KEYWORDS: Arab Learners of Second Language, Language Ego, Ego Boundaries, Affective Factors

INTRODUCTION

Ehrman, M. (1993). Ego boundaries revisited: Toward a model of personality and learning. Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics (3), 330-362.

Guiora, A.Z. (1994). "The two faces of language ego." Psychologica Belgica34, 83-97

The difficulty experienced by Arab learners of English has been attributed to several factors, including the influence of the first language (Arabic influence); mode of teaching; teaching methods used. In other contexts, language ego has been widely acknowledged one of the key barriers to second language acquisition. For example, Guiora (1994) and others (Ehrman, 1993; Dornyei, 2005) associated language ego with the second language and identified it as one of the key factors accounting for the difficulties experienced by second language learners in acquiring the second language. In view of Guiora (1992) language ego makes learners of the second language to develop an identity related to their first language. This ego makes these learners develop a sense of fragility and defensiveness against the second language and raises inhibitions against it. Supporting Guiora's view, Dornyei (2005) indicated that self-identity of monolingual individuals is inextricably bound up with their language and that for these individuals language ego encompasses the interaction of ego development and their native language. Dornyei (2005) further added that for these individuals such identified are shaped, reshaped and confirmed when during the communication process messages that are sent are "bounded back." Illustrating further, Dornyei (2005) noted that the ego of a child is growing, flexible and dynamic through the puberty age. For this reason, an attempt to acquire a second language at this puberty stage may not pose a substantial "inhibition or threat" to the ego. This makes adaptation at this age to be relatively easy as long as confounding sociocultural factors do not interfere to pose the hindrance. However, Berzonsky (1990) acknowledged that the simultaneous cognitive, emotional, and physical changes that accompany this puberty stage of

development create the defensive mechanism with language ego emerging to create the defence to protect against loss of identity of the first language. This ego clings to the native language speaker's security to protect the young adult's fragile ego. This language ego, which now constitutes part and parcel of the individual's self-identity is threatened when learning the second language. As a consequence, a context is created in which the native speaker must demonstrate the wiliness to make a fool of himself or herself in the trial-and-error attempt of speaking and understanding the second language. According to (Berzonsky, 1990), younger children are less informed of language forms and less sensitive to making mistakes when speaking the second language because they are thus less frightened. They are less concerned about the forms-mistakes that they must make while attempting to communicate spontaneously in the second language. According to Ehrman (1999), this explains why language ego is an enormous challenge for young adolescents and adults who have grown securely and comfortably in their own identity and those possessing inhibitions that act as a defensive wall of protection around the ego. For these individuals, leaping to second or new identity is an enormous task. It can only be possible when they build the necessary language ego strength to overcome these barriers. As indicated by Spielmann, and Radnofsky (2001), successful adult language learners are those who can build successfully bridge this affective gap. For these individuals, seeds of success may have been sown early in life. For example, a child raised in a bilingual setting may have learned the first language and second language in childhood. For this child, acquiring the third language during adulthood might be easy. Seeds of success in acquiring second language may also be independent of the bilingual setting in that they may have arisen out of a combination of nurture and nature making the child develop a string ego. Scientifically, it has been confirmed that a child learning two languages simultaneously (also referred to as coordinate bilinguals) possess two meaning systems used to acquire the two languages. According to Brown (1999), the success of acquiring two languages simultaneously largely depends on their ability to distinguish separate contexts for these languages. For the most part, studies suggest that cognitive and linguistic processes of acquiring second language in children are similar to processes for acquiring the first language. On the contrary, adults learners of the second language appear more cognitively secure and manifest more interference than children because they link with the foundation of their first language. This makes adults manifest errors when speaking the second language the result of attempting to discover its new rules that differ from the first language and the creative perception of these new language resulting in strong language ego. This argument and others demonstrated herein confirm that language ego may be contributing to the difficulties experienced by adult Arab learners of English. Surpassingly, there is hardly studies that have acknowledged and linked difficulties experienced by Arab learners of English to language ego. On this account, this study investigated language ego as a possible contributor to difficulties experienced by Arab learners of English in Arab institutions of higher learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language Ego

Linked to terms such as identity or self, the concept of language ego has been widely applied and analysed in various fields: traditional psychoanalytic school, educational studies, and social psychology (Ehrman, 1998). The concept has been applied as a blanket term to characterize human socialization and individuality. As noted by Berzonsky (1990) identity development has three dimensions: the environmental dimension, personality dimension, and cognitive

dimension. The combination of these variables determines the approach taken by people towards external events (Berzonsky, 1990).

Language ego was first conceptualized by Alexander Guiora as referring to a state where the learner of the foreign language acts very differently and feels like another person when using the second language (Guira, & Action 1990). Other researchers (e.g., Spielmann, & Radnofsky; 2001; Peirce, 1995) supported the idea of second language learners developing a second identity. Pierce (1995) held the view that individuals assume multiple language identities when confronted with individuals from the cultural group. Philips (1991) supported others and noted that since second language learning is stressful and that well-developed language ego enables learners to overcome anxiety and inhibition, get used to making mistakes, and accept it as normal when they get criticism or badinage.

Ehrman (1999) also emphasized that language ego is associated with increased fear of committing mistakes when talking a new language. According to Ehrman (1999), these mistakes serve as external and internal threats to the learner's ego. Ehrman (1999) held the view that learners with language ego have ego boundaries that make them compartmentalize their experience. These ego boundaries affect learners' receptivity to external influences such as cultures and the new language. Ehrman (1999) revealed that learners often attempt to protect the ego by building sets of defences. According to Ehrman (1996) in classrooms, the learning preferences of learners depend on the level of thickness or thinness of their ego boundaries. Those with thin ego boundaries tend to enjoy unexpected learning events and content-based learning and prefer non-learning approaches to language learning. On the contrary, learners with thick ego boundaries show discomfort with role-playing and prefer a clear structure curriculum (Ehrman, 1999). Supporting the view by Ehrman (1999), Brown (1991) presented a complimentary perspective on language ego identifying it as a measure of interlink between language and self-concept. He argued that language ego is connected with first language abilities and identity and that the individuals with developed primal first language abilities and identities are likely to have strong and mature second language ego. As revealed by Brown (1991) second language learners experience difficulty learning the language and using it in communication. According to Brown (1991), this happens because these learners lack the necessary resource to communicate freely. Brown (1994) further emphasized that language ego might interfere with language learning noting that at puberty the trauma of undergoing emotional, cognitive and physical changes heighten these inhibitions. The egos of those undergoing this critical developmental stage are affected by how they reach beyond self, how they relate socially with others, and how they make use of communication process to achieve affective equilibrium. This reflects Guiora's view that affording language is an important place in the sense of self of a person (Guiora, 1990). Guiora (1992) held that pronunciation but not syntax, grammar and vocabulary determine group members and that for many language learners, native pronunciation is the litmus test of language membership. Guiora (1992) further hinted that for language learners, pronunciation is the marker or hallmark of group language identity and that it is the marker of membership to non-native speakers. Guiora (1992) advances the physiological theory by indicating that individuals are hindered by something from speaking the second language with the native-like accent. Guiora (1992) further argues that "operation of psychologically significant inhibiting factors" makes most adults unable to learn a new language with the native-like accent. According to Guiora (1992) pronunciation constitutes part of the boundaries of the language ego as most people are not able to tolerate a double identity. Guiora et al. (1990) also emphasized that one can fail in second language

learning by having a weak language ego. Linked to language ego is ego boundaries. This way, Guiora (1992) sees native language as the embodiment of group and personal identities.

Ego Boundaries

Ego boundaries determine an individual's failure and success in the second language. It can be approached from two perspectives: a cognitive style and a personality variable. As a personality trait, ego boundaries enable people to compartmentalize different emotions and experiences and strive to preserve a balance between different conceptual divisions in an attempt to protect their own identities against what they perceive as miscellaneous influences (Ehraman, 1999). Supporting this view, Hartmann (1991) hinted that the extent to which ego boundaries influence the perception have about the world around them, and themselves largely depends on the flexibility and permeability of boundaries. When approached from the learning style perspective, it is argued that thick or thin ego boundary structure determine the preferences, qualities, cognitive flexibility and rigidity of learners (Ehrman, 1999). Ehraman (1999) argued that second language learning which in many cases is considered the source of stress and ambiguity it thus a threat to the positive self-concept of the learner. On a similar note, Ehraman (1999) held the view that one's ego boundaries appear to influence second language learning. Suffice is to suggest that learners who find it difficult to master a new language faces complex cognitive tasks and engages in social interactions for which they are not prepared due to their lacking second language resources (Brown, 1999). Brown (1991) argued that in the attempt to learn and master the new language, learners of the second language often create language identities.

As a learning style, ego boundaries were found to influence language learning. Ehrman (1993) noted that the importance of ego boundaries is directly proportional to lack of structure and the complexity of the learning task. Ehraman (1993) further hinted that when confronted with new language, learner's ego boundaries were related to four learning abilities: (1) the ability to absorb new information; (2) the ability to reorganize the existing emotional social and intellectual schemata; (3) the ability to sustain critical inquiry and interest into incomplete information; and (4) the ability to store contradictory information without rejecting or censoring any.

According to Ahrman (1993), these abilities depend on the structure of the boundary, its flexibility, and permeability. Supporting this view, Hartmann (1991) asserted that learners with thin ego boundaries are emotionally and cognitively flexible, adapt easily to circumstances, open to new stimuli, are creative, intuitive, but down-to-earth, guarded, perfectionist and less organized than individual with thick ego boundaries. Similarly, Peirce (1995) indicated that the motivation to learn a second language and flexibility of the self greatly depends on the circumstances. Peirce (1995) further observed that when it comes to learning language, individuals with thicker ego boundaries tend to outperform those with thick ego boundaries and that these individuals tend to rely on intuition, higher language aptitude, approach learning without being analytical, but show higher anxiety. On the contrary, individuals with thick ego boundaries tend to find it difficult adapting to new cultural or linguistic data (Ehrman & Oxford, 1995). In this particular study, Ehrman and Oxford (1995) investigate the relationship between ego boundaries and language learner preference towards certain strategies among adult learners of the language. The study focused on the learners' using strategies such as memory, affective, compensation, and metacognitive strategies compared to points scored by subjects on the Hartmann Boundary Questionnaire (HBQ) subscale. Affective and compensation strategies positively correlated with many points score on the thin end of the ego

boundaries continuum. Contrariwise, memory and metacognitive strategies positively correlated with many high points scored on the thick end of the ego boundary continuum. This finding suggested that learners with thin boundaries can compensate due to their flexibility, ability to adapt with ease to new circumstances, are emotional, creative and find it easy to deal with confusing and contradictory data. When faced with failure or obstacle, such learners try to identify the appropriate strategy to solve the problem rather than give up. Ehrman and Oxford (1995) also noted that the ability of learners with thin ego boundaries to use feelings and emotions effectively was a positive prognostic for success. On the contrary, learners with thick-boundary are found to like memory and metacognitive strategies and that these learners tend to compartmentalize the learning process, as well as evaluate the usefulness of input.

METHODOLOGY

Subjects

The study included 98 Arab learners studying English in three universities in three different Arab countries. These participants were selected conveniently using a convenient sampling technique. These participants based on the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) elementary cut-off score. This score served as a pre-test tool to ensure participants were homogenously proficient. All participants were Arab learners of English whose first language was Arabic. They were all aged above 18 (>18 years), and therefore met the criteria for adult learners of English.

Language Ego Permeability Scale

Language Ego Permeability Scale was used to measure the ego boundaries (permeable language-related ego boundaries) of Arab learners of English. The higher score of Language Ego Permeability is linked to one's increased likelihood to succeed in learning the second (foreign) language. It is believed that learners with higher scores in Language Ego Permeability tend to be comfortable in developing new language and cultural identities. These learners also tend to be emphatic learners with the ability and willingness to mimic the target language native speakers. They also sufficiently confident in their abilities to learn the new language.

Accordingly, a questionnaire was designed containing questions rated on the 5-point Likert Scale with 1 denoting strongly disagree and 5 denoting strongly agree.

Procedure

The learners' entry-level proficiency and a homogenous sample of students were arrived at by administering the OPT among the 98 test-takers. A total of 62 female and male students were identified based on the score as elementary language learners from the score of 60. Following the identification of a homogenous sample of participants, the questionnaire measuring their level of language ego permeability was administered.

Data Analysis

Data was analysis done using the Excel data analysis tool. Accordingly, quantitative data obtained using the questionnaire was analyzed into percentages and tables and figures drawn to present it.

Results

Majority of participants (61%) strongly disagreed (46%) and disagreed (15%) that they were poor at learning language (figure 1).
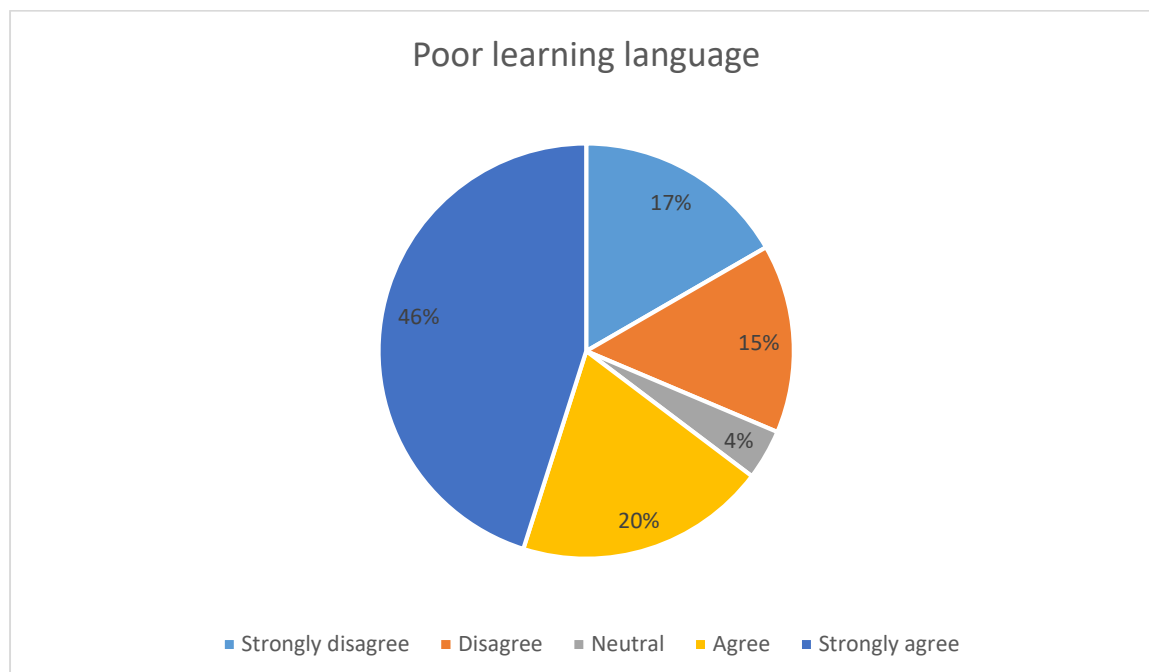
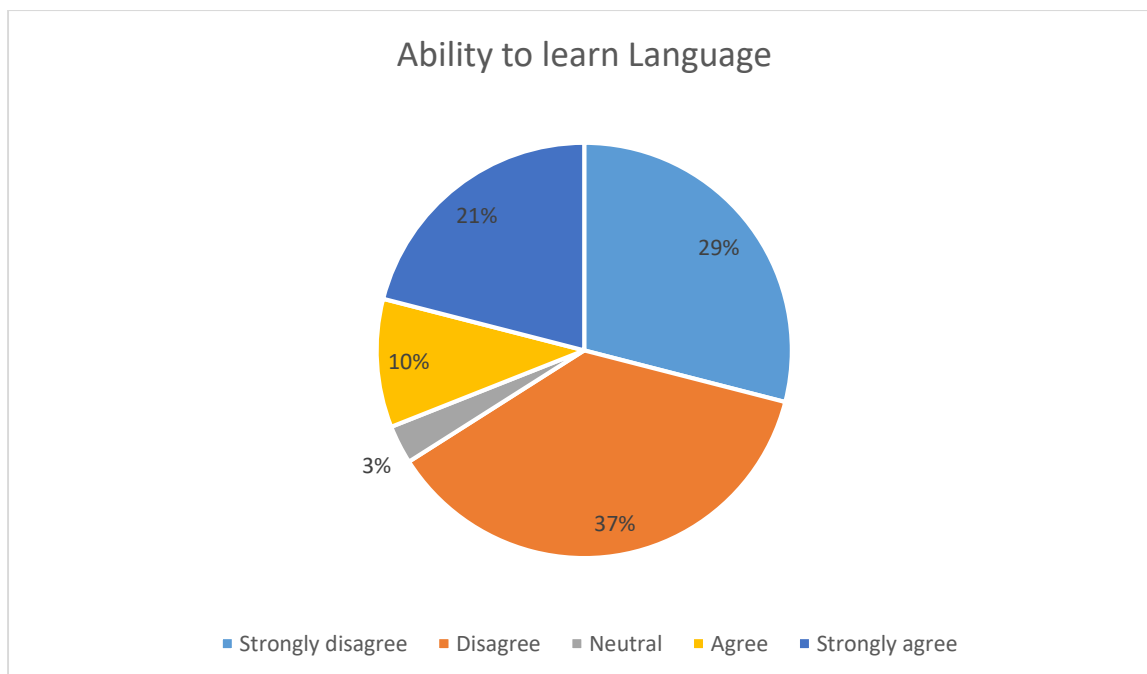**Figure 1: responses to the statement "I think I am pretty poor at learning language"**

Participants overwhelmingly (68%) approved the statement their language learning aptitude was pretty low with 33% strongly agreeing and 35% agreeing to the statement (figure 2).
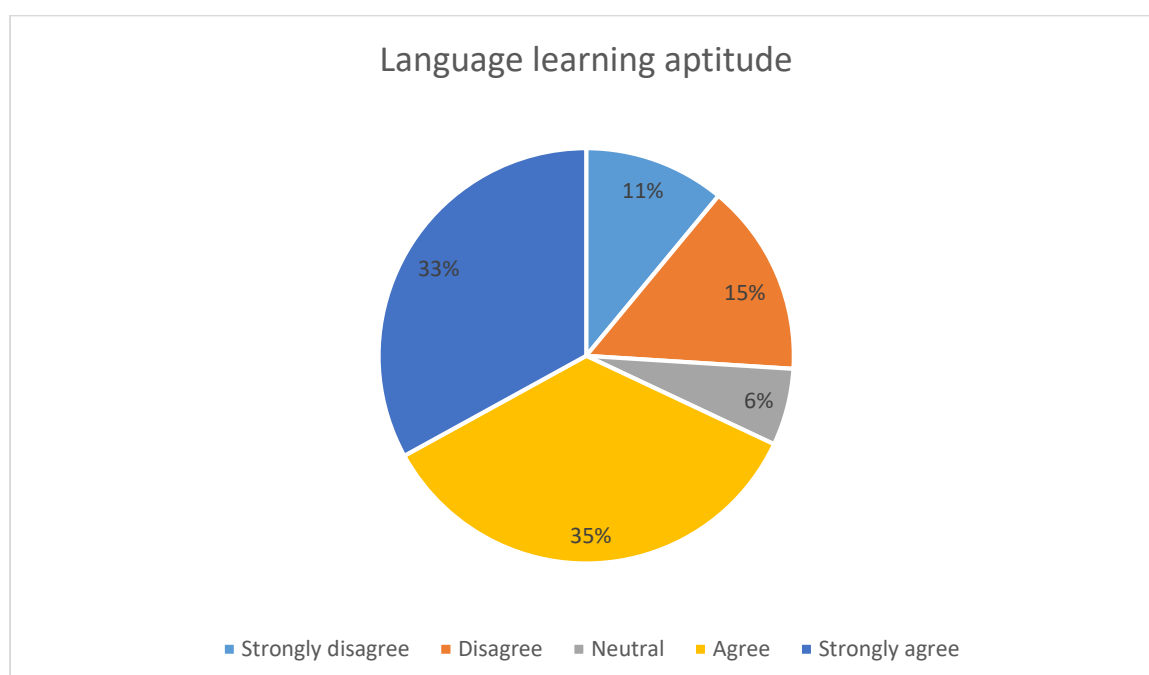
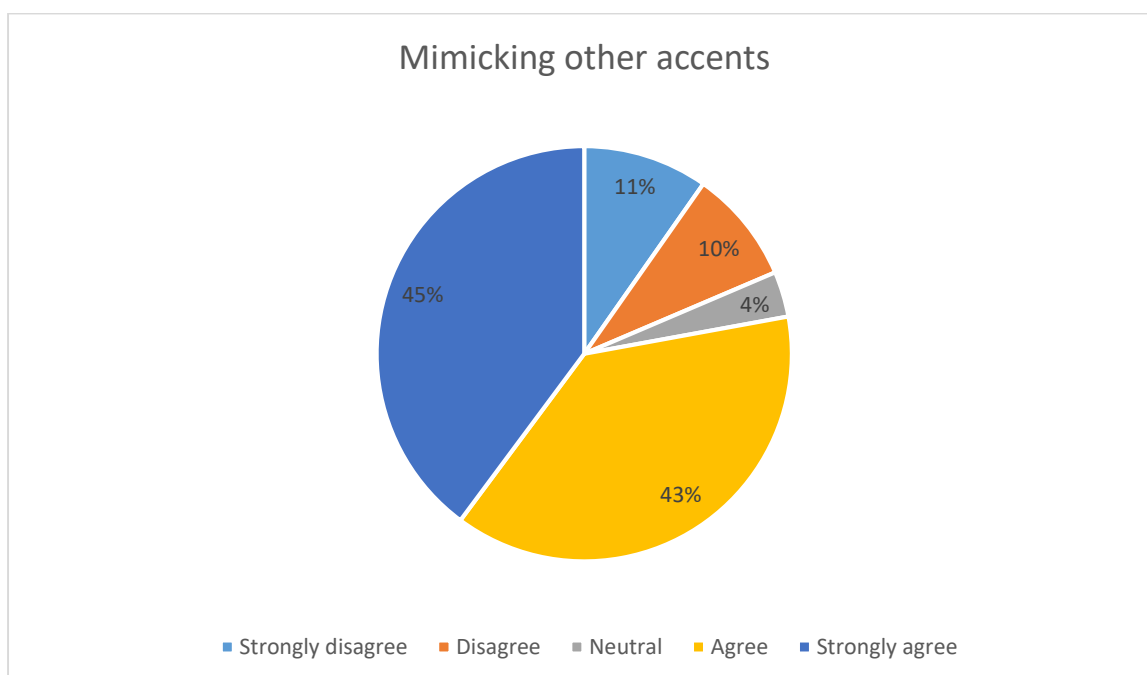**Figure 2: responses to the statement "my language learning aptitude is probably pretty low"**

Majority (58%) of students (disagree-37% and strongly disagree-29%) did not support the statement that they lacked the ability to learn any language they put their mind to, even the right circumstances (figure 3).
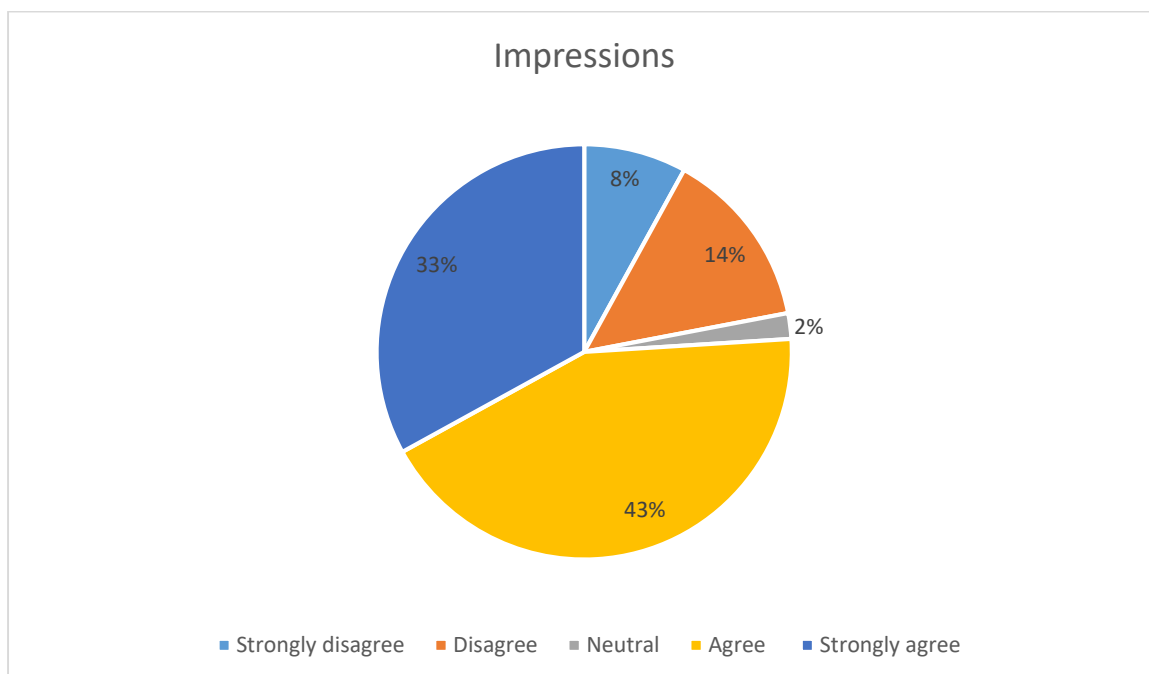

Figure 3: responses to the statement I think that I lack the ability to learn any language I put my mind to, even given the right circumstances

Participants overwhelmingly (88%) (agree-43% and strongly agree-45%) consented to the statement that they don't like mimicking other accents, and when they try people say they don't do it well (figure 4).

Figure 4: responses to the statement I don't like mimicking other accents, and when I try people say I don't do it well

Participants overwhelmingly (76%) (agree-43% and strongly agree-33%) approved the statement that they can never do impressions for famous people (figure 5).

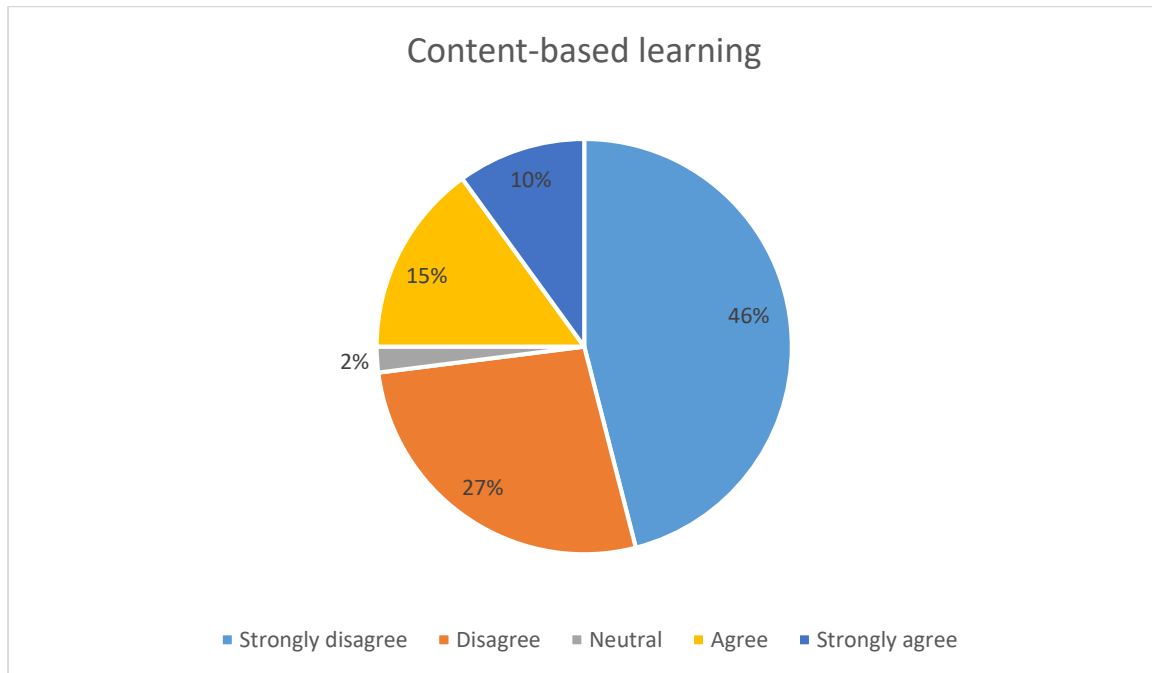**Figure 5: responses to the statement I can never do impressions for famous people**

Participants fear making mistakes when speaking English as majority (85%) agreed (45%) and strongly agreed-40%) that they fear making mistakes when speaking English (figure 6)
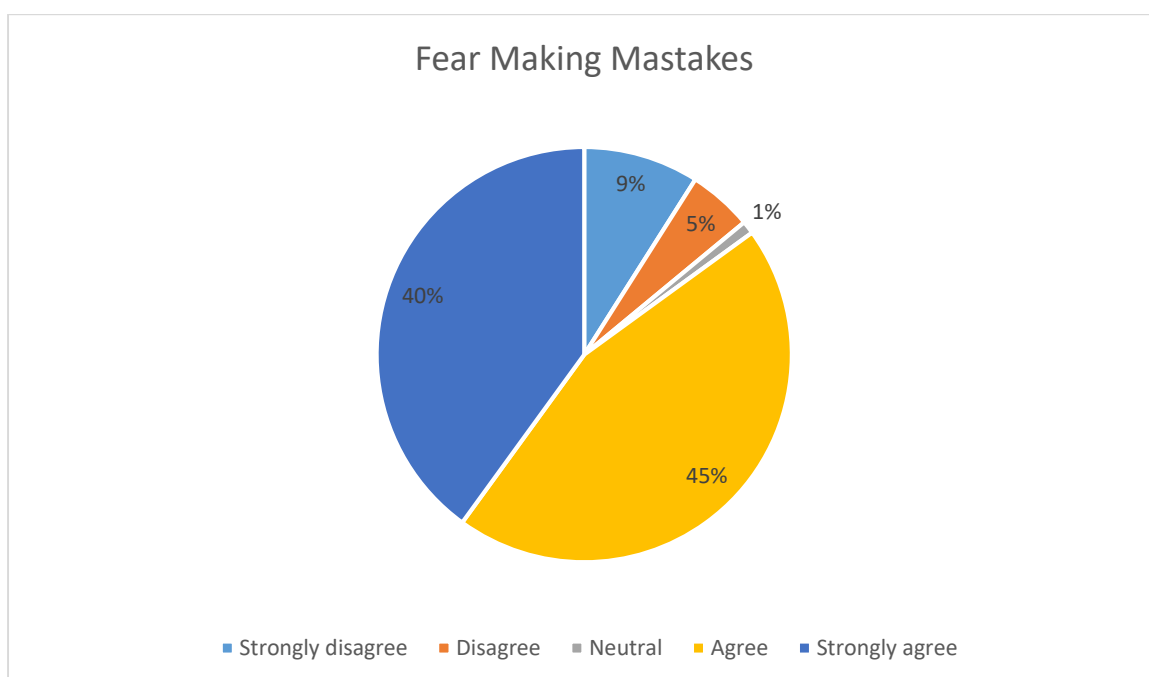
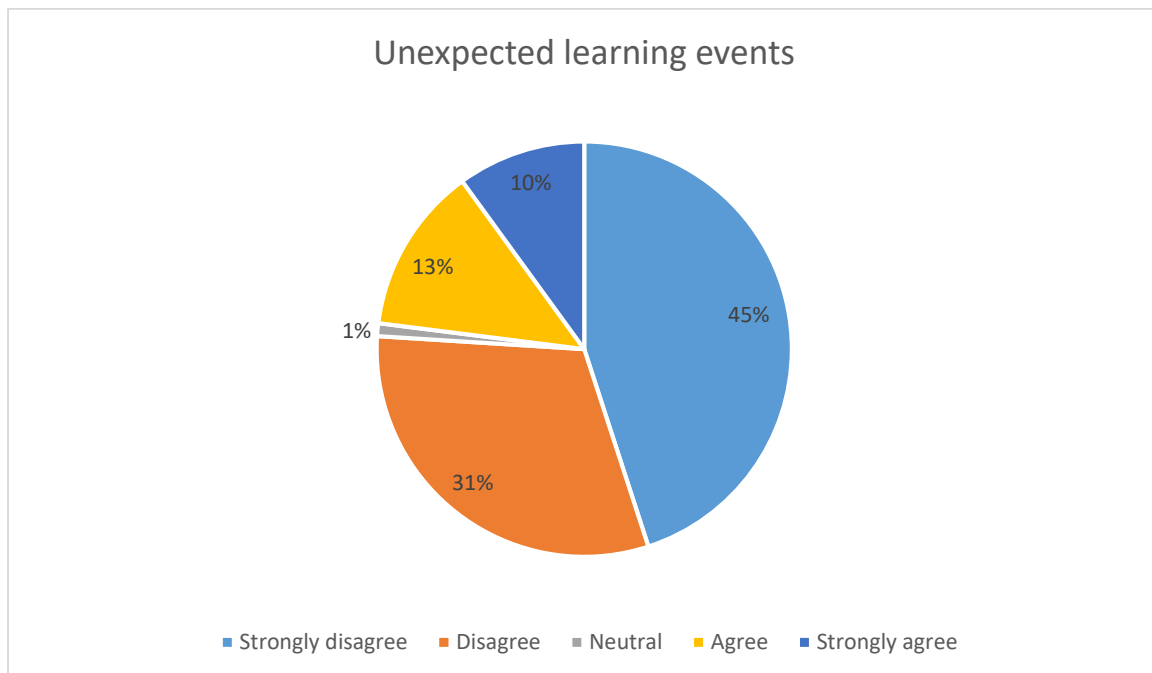**Figure 6: responses to the statement I fear making mistakes when speaking English**

Participants do not like content-based learning as majority (73%) (strongly disagree-46% and disagree-27%) disapproved of the statement that they enjoy content based learning (figure 7).
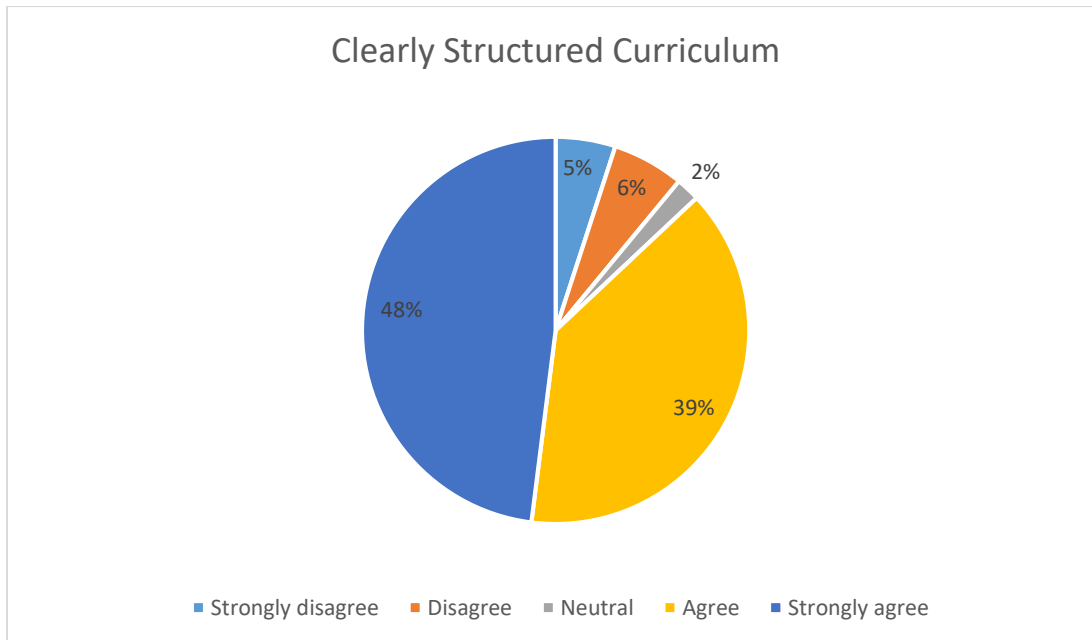

Figure 7: responses to the statement I enjoy content-based learning

Participants do not like unexpected learning events as majority (76%) (Strongly disagree-45% and disagree-31%) disapproved of the statement that they tend to enjoy unexpected learning events (figure 8).
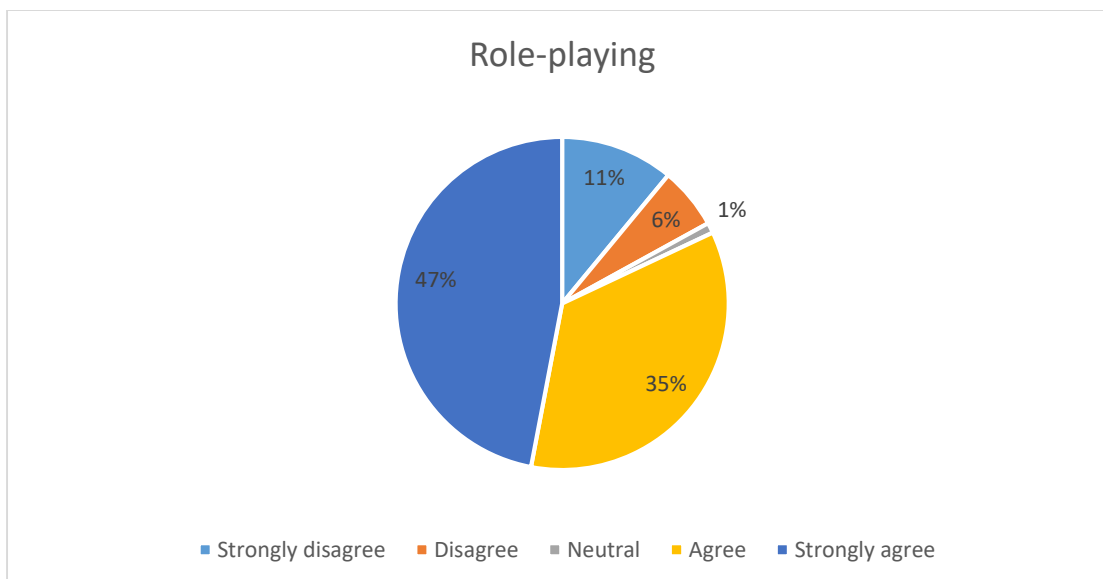

Figure 8: responses to the statement I tend to enjoy unexpected learning events (thin)

On the contrary, participants prefer clearly structured curriculum as majority (87%) (strongly agree-48% and agree-39%) approved the statement that they prefer a clearly structured curriculum (figure 9).
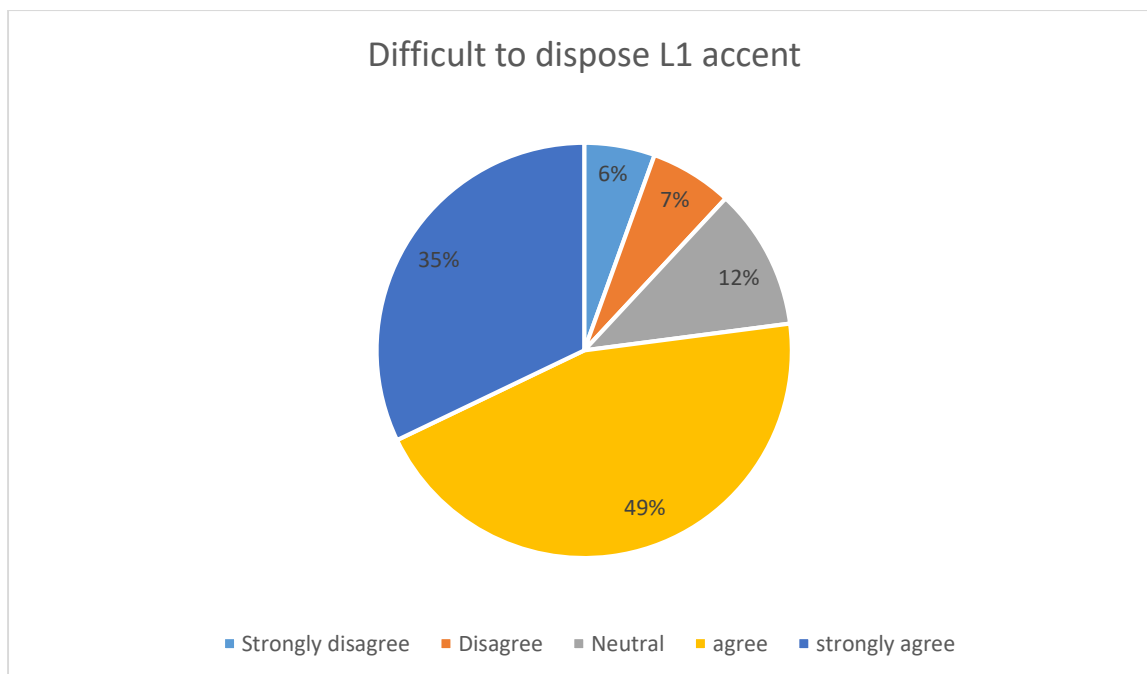

Figure 9: responses to the statement I prefer a clearly structured curriculum (thick)

Similarly, participants are uncomfortable with role-playing since majority (87%) (Strongly agree-45% and agree-35%) approved the statement that they feel uncomfortable with role-playing and other similar suspensions of everyday identity (figure 10).
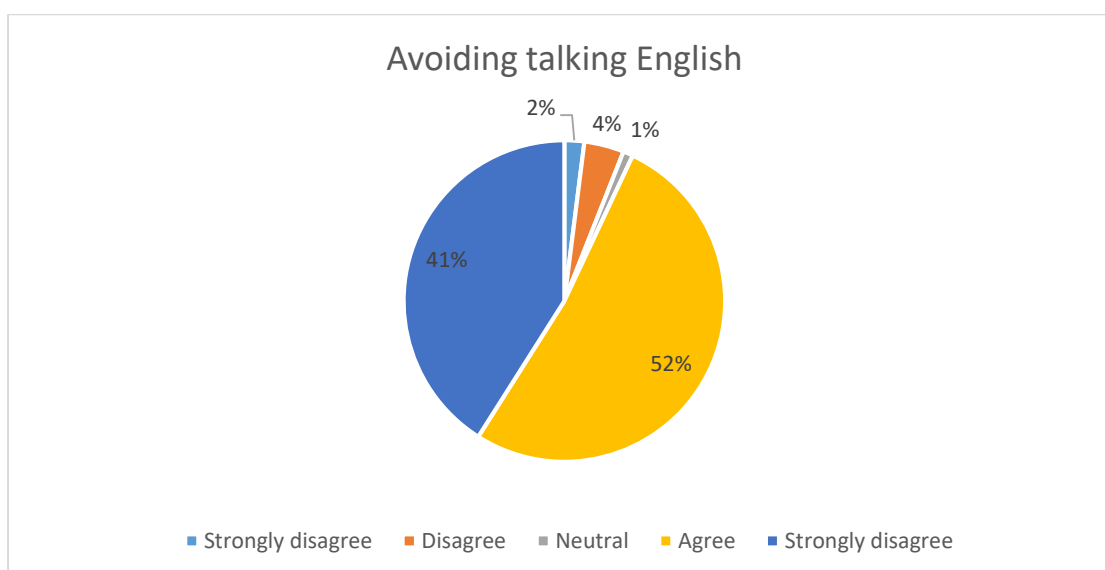

Figure 10: responses to the statement I feel uncomfortable with role-playing and other similar suspensions of everyday identity

Participants find it difficult to dispose of their first language accent. Majority of participants (84%) (Strongly agree-35% and agree-49%) associated with the statement that they find it quite difficult to dispose of their first language accent (figure 11).
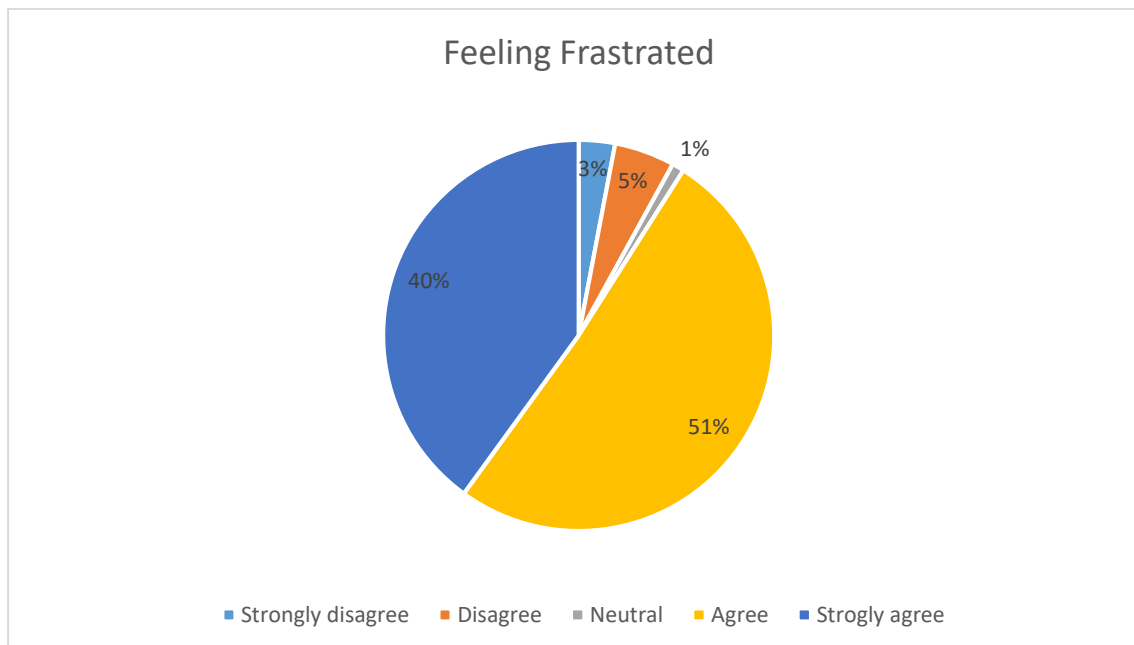

Figure 11: responses to the statement I find it quite difficult to dispose of my first language accent.

Participants tend to avoid talking English where possible because they fear being misinterpreted by they peers. Majority of participants (84%) (Strongly agree-41% and agree-52%) associated with the statement that they tend to avoid talking English where possible because I fear being misinterpreted by my peers (figure 12).
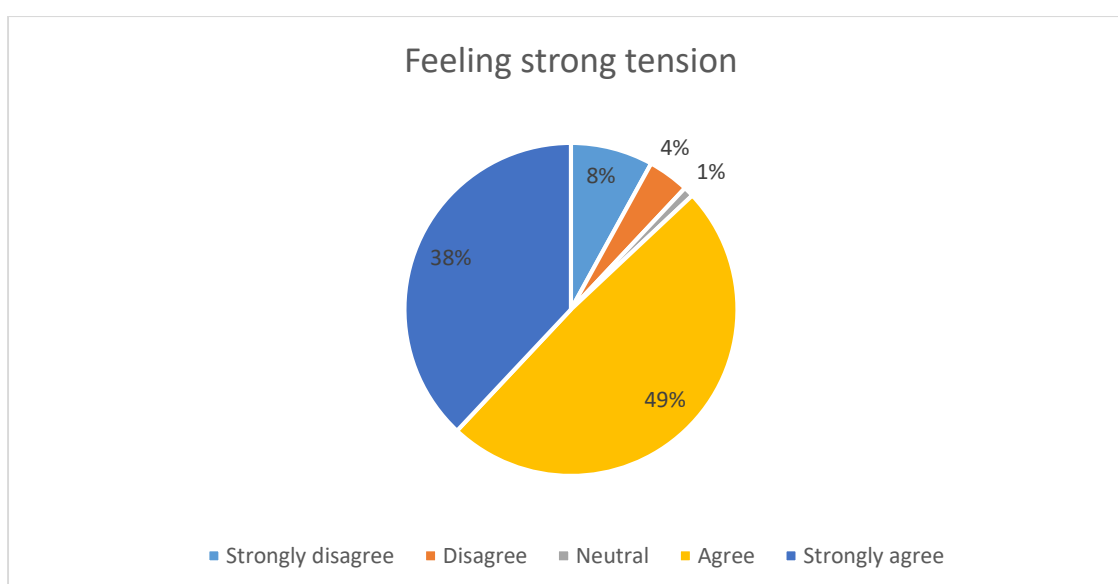

Figure 12: responses to the statement I tend to avoid talking English where possible because I fear being misinterpreted by my peers.

Participants avoid talking in English because they feel frustrated and ridiculed when attempting to speak English in English classrooms. As shown in figure 13, participants overwhelmingly (91%) (Strongly agree-40% and agree-51%) approved the statement that they often feel frustrated and ridiculed when attempting to speak English in English classroom.
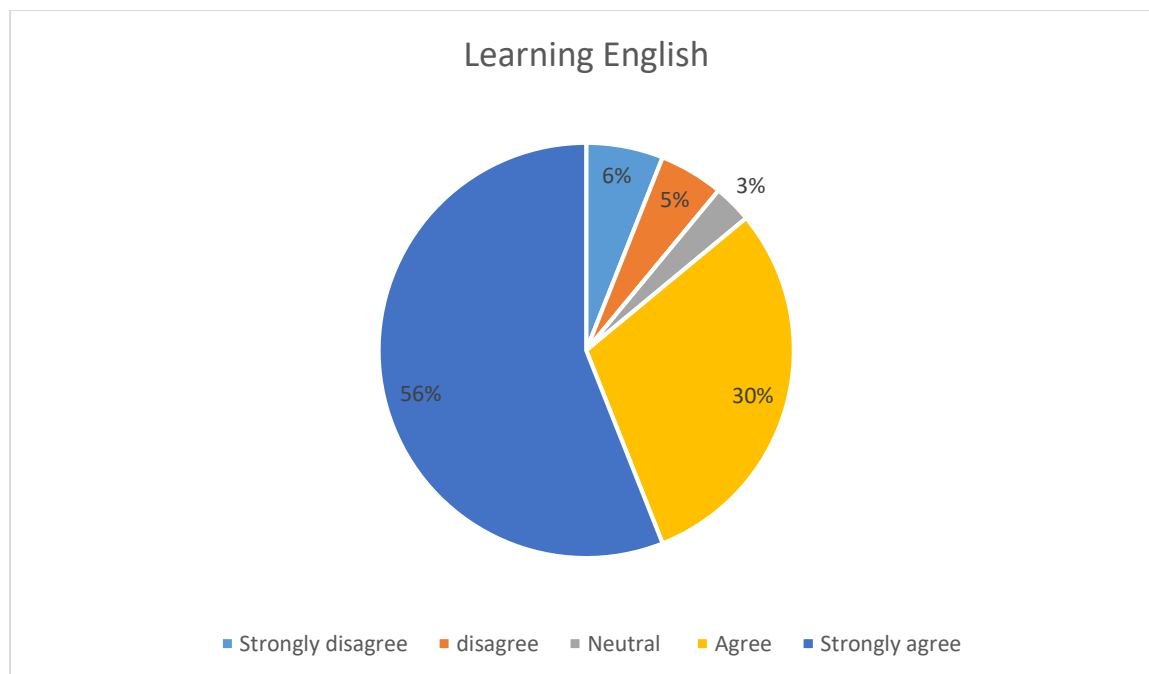

Figure 13: responses to the statement I often feel frustrated and ridiculed when attempting to speak English in English classrooms

Participants tend to avoid talking English because they feel strong tension when attempting to speak English in English classrooms. As shown in figure 14, participants overwhelmingly (87%) (Strongly agree-38% and agree-49%) approved the statement that they often feel strong tension when attempting to speak English in English classrooms

Figure 14: responses to the statement I often feel strong tension when attempting to speak English in English classrooms.

Participants feel quite reluctant learning English. As shown in figure 14, participants overwhelmingly (86%) (Strongly agree-56% and agree-30%) approved the statement that they feel quite reluctant learning English.

Figure 15: responses to the statement I feel quite reluctant learning English.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the concept of language ego and the extent to which it acts as a barrier to second language learning among Arab learners of English. Results confirmed that Arab learners of English have thick language ego that acts as a barrier to second language learning. It was revealed that Arab learners of English in Arab universities have very low language learning aptitude. These learners do not try mimicking other accents, and when they try people say they don't do it well. They fear making mistakes when speaking English. They do not enjoy unexpected leaning events, and are uncomfortable with role-playing. They do not enjoy content-based learning. They prefer a clearly structure curriculum. They find it difficult to dispose of their first language accent. They tend to avoid talking English because they fear being misinterpreted; feel frustrated and ridiculed and feel strong tension when they make an attempt to speak English. They feel reluctant to learn English. This is line with the view by Ehrman (1999) that in second language classrooms, the learning preferences of learners depend on the level of thickness or thinness of their ego boundaries. Those with thin ego boundaries tend to enjoy unexpected learning events and content-based learning, and prefer non-learning approaches to language learning. On the contrary, learners with thick ego boundaries show discomfort with role-playing, and prefer a clearly structure curriculum (Ehrman, 1999). Brown (1994) also indicated that language ego may interfere with language learning noting that at puberty the trauma of undergoing emotional, cognitive and physical changes heighten these inhibitions.

Results of this study reflect views of other researchers on language ego and second language acquisition (Brown, 1991; Horwitz, & Young, 1991; Ornstein, & Ehrlich, 1989; Guiora, 1990; Gass, & Selinker, 2008; Pellegrino-Aveni, 2005). According to Brown (1991) second language learners tend to encounter difficulty in communicating due to language ego and ego boundaries. Brown (1991) argued that this occurs because second language learners lack resources that are necessary to communicate effectively and freely. This is reflected in the Horwitz and Young's (1991) comment that learners require complex and non-spontaneous operations to communicate, and that their performance in the foreign language challenges their self-concept as competent communicators. Horwitz and Young (1991) further argued that the limited vocabulary and range of meaning tent to threaten the self-perceptions of adult language learners making them to feel uncomfortable when presenting their ideas to others. In line with this view, Ornstein and Ehrlich (1989) emphasized that people tend to present themselves in social interactions in such a way to make others to perceive them in a desired way. According Ornstein and Ehrlich (1989) learners use language in these peculiar social interaction manipulation because as learners of second language, they are deprived of basic social strategies and are far from proficient.

Supporting this line of argument, Pellegrino-Aveni (2005) opined that learners tend to fear being misinterpreted by others and their social intercourse is restricted to basics. According to Pellegrion-Aveni (2005) the lack of the very basics makes others to accuse them of socio-linguistic incompetence. Vulnerable and defenceless these second language learners succumb to their inhibitions due to feeling discouraged (Guiora, 1990). Gass and Selinker (2008) supported others that adults tend to be reluctant in learning a new language arguing that individuals' eagerness to relax their well-established identities to allow a new language self to develop tend to diminish with age. Price (1991) hinted that this reluctance to acquire a new language among adults makes them feel ridiculed, frustrated, or infantilized. For Spielmann and Radnofsky (2001) this reluctance to acquire a new language makes second language learners to experience strong dysphoric tension while in the naturalistic and second language classroom environment. These observations are reflected in theories on foreign language talk by Hatch (1983) and Ferguson and Debose (1977) cited in Ellis (2008). Harder (1980) also observed that avoidance is one of the techniques employed by threatened learners of second language, and that it leads to communication problems and insufficient practice.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Pedagogical Implications

The pedagogical implications of the results of this study is that teachers are supposed to be patient with second language learners and be supportive to them. They should always praise learners by either non-verbally or verbally assuring them. They should strive to make students to believe in themselves and to them as teachers. Teachers are required to start teaching second language at an early age when learners' language ego is still undeveloped. Learners are supposed to be taught not be afraid of interpreting and producing the language. They should take the following into account: when learners should be corrected; how to plan and structure the activity; and how much they should explain to students and how they should treat students. They should always enable learners of second language to tackle challenges and identify techniques that helps simply difficult learning process.

Conclusion

Language ego is a barrier to the acquisition of second language among Arab students. These learners have low language aptitude and with thick language ego. They fear making mistakes when speaking English. They tend to be uncomfortable with role-playing, and never enjoy unexpected leaning events nor content-based learning. They tend to find it difficult to dispose of their first language accent, and avoid expressing themselves in English because of the fear of being misinterpreted. They also feel reluctant to learn English.

Educators should understand that adults are more cognitively secure than children and that they have a strong foundation of their mother tongue. It is also important for educators to note that children do not have developed language egos rather they are used to sounding or being treated as children by adults. On the contrary, adults tend to have well developed language ego because of having spent most of their lives defining their personality and selves. For this reason, they tend to dislike appearing stupid in front of others. This makes them to manifest more interference than children. For this reason, they should be patient with adult students and show a supportive attitude. They must understand that students are capable and ambitious, and they can helped to overcome language ego.

Appendix

Questionnaire questions

I think I am pretty poor at learning language

My language learning aptitude is probably pretty low

I think that I lack the ability to learn any language I really put my mind to, even given the right circumstances

I don't like mimicking other accents, and when I try people say I don't do it well

I can never do impressions for famous people

I really fear making mistakes when speaking English

I enjoy content-based learning

I tend to enjoy unexpected learning events (thin)

I prefer a clearly structured curriculum (thick)

I feel uncomfortable with role-playing and other similar suspensions of everyday identity

I find it quite difficult to dispose of my first language accent

I tend to avoid talking English where possible because I fear being misinterpreted by my peers

I often feel frustrated and ridiculed and feel strong tension when attempting to speak English in English classrooms

I feel quite reluctant learning English

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