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Peer Pressure on Female Adult English Language Learners' Academic Performance: Application of Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Model



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Abstract: Peer pressure is one of the major elements influencing an adult's academic performance. This study identifies the nature and extent of peer pressure on female adult language learners and their academic performance. It is qualitative research in which van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework is used as an analytical framework. The researchers have injected the feminist theory to limit the scope of pertinent data in elaborating the data gathered. The study highlights the significance of awareness of negative peer influence among teachers, parents and students. Also, the study finds out the measures to avoid and control negative peer pressure.

Key Words: Peer Pressure, Female Adult Language Learners, Academic Performance, Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Framework, Feminist Theory

Introduction

Peer pressure is a social phenomenon with cognitive implications. It occurs when a peer group influences an individual to change his actions or attitudes and ends in mind control. A peer group is not just friends but people who are similar in age, ability, and social status. Usually, the individuals are put into an uncomfortable situation where they feel they will not fit in. Peer pressure is defined as the influence of peers (people of the same age or social group) on an individual's behaviour, attitudes, beliefs, and decisions. Peer pressure can significantly impact social interaction, decision-making, and personal development. This influence can be positive (as one can become more assertive, creative and involved) or negative (as one can become hopeless, less motivated, and egoistic). This corresponds to van Dijk's concept of positive and negative manipulation

(Dijk, 2006). Positive peer pressure can inspire individuals to engage in healthy and constructive behaviours, such as studying, exercising, or community service. Negative peer pressure, on the other hand, can lead to unhealthy behaviours such as drug use, underage drinking, and skipping school.

Peer pressure can be difficult at any age, but it can be even more difficult as an adult. Peer pressure can be particularly powerful during adolescence, a time when individuals are developing their identities and seeking social acceptance. Peers can exert pressure through direct persuasion, teasing, or exclusion, and individuals may feel compelled to conform to social norms or engage in activities that they would not otherwise choose. Young people have a harder time declining or refusing requests in front of a group than during childhood and adolescence. Peer groups may provide a positive

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context for adults to be a part of a beneficial relationship. They can also greatly influence their behaviours, beliefs and attitudes.

Peer groups also play an important role in students' social, emotional and academic development. Academic activities are aimed at ensuring that students master the educational objectives. Therefore, understanding peer group perspectives and issues is essential for the efficiency of educational institutions' educational process and organizational structure to improve academic performance. Peer pressure often sabotages the goals set by parents and teachers when learning a second language. For many students, foreign language classes, especially English language classes, due to their high and dominant social status, can be more stress-provoking than the other courses they take. This stress can have many causes, such as visibility, lack of knowledge, self-doubt, shyness, or high expectations from others. However, the beliefs and actions of peers can also be direct sources of student anxiety. This anxiety is more common in females as they are more conscious of their image in front of their peers. The effects of peer pressure on gender are consistent with current research showing that girls are more vulnerable to peer pressure. Thus, peer pressure impedes successful language learning among women and can create negative attitudes. This is often due to performance factors related to language learning and can lead to feelings of embarrassment and anxiety.

No matter who you are, everyone wants to feel a sense of belonging. So, peer pressure has always been there among individuals of the same social group as they interact. Peer influence is reciprocal, thus raising questions, factors, mechanisms, and relationships between peer pressure and relationships with different aspects of adult personality. All these aspects play a role in social change and contextual factors in the period and space in which people live.

From peer groups, students receive feedback on their performance. Knowing if what you are doing is better, as good or bad feedback from other students, leads to a different perception and worldview. This

experience has a significant impact on academic development. This impact depends on how peer experiences are measured, outcomes determined, and progress made. Colleges and universities bring new environments, new situations, and different expectations. This leads to a new wave of peer pressure, sometimes in forms, students are not used to dealing with. It is important for individuals to be aware of peer pressure and to develop the skills and confidence to make independent decisions that align with their values and goals. Building strong relationships with supportive peers and adults can help individuals resist negative peer pressure and develop healthy behaviours and attitudes.

The following objectives are taken into consideration for this research:

- To inspect the relationship between peer pressure and academic achievement of adult English language learning females.
- To create awareness among teachers and parents, i.e., to which extent peers are responsible for adult students' good or poor academic performance.

Shortages of time and summer vacations are significant impediments to the study. As the area of the research selected is diverse and multi-dimensional, face-to-face communication would have been much better for the data collection. However, it is managed to achieve the main aims and objectives of the study through online interviews keeping the comfort and ease of the interviewees in mind. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive Approach is applied to the participants' answers, thus making the study purely qualitative.

The following research questions steered the study:

- Does peer pressure exist in the case of adults? To what extent does it affect female language students' academic performance? If yes.
- What measures can teachers, parents and students take to avoid negative peer influence?

Literature Review

Peer pressure has been defined in various ways. It refers to the influence of dominant people in the

same social, institutional or political group. It is also used to describe how this mounting influence affects individuals who are submissive and show an acceptance mindset in the group. Peers are friends, but they can be anyone of the same age, ability, or social status. Peer pressure refers only to direct persuasion, inducement, or force to exhibit a particular behaviour, and peer influence refers to indirect forms (McIntosh et al. [2003](#); Urberg et al. [2003](#)). In addition, peer influence encompasses various aspects of peer relationships, thus simply describing the complicatedness of peer influence on adolescent behaviour (Savin-Williams & Berndt, [1990](#)). Thus, peer pressure as a socio-cognitive construct cannot be captured by one definition only.

Simply put, peer pressure comes under peer influence which is an umbrella term—a manifestation of manipulation and mind control. Operational definitions of peer pressure have been put forth quite widely by various researchers according to the nature of their studies. Authors differ in their opinions about what constitutes peer pressure. They emphasize various key features required for their small-scale studies. For example, Lashbrook ([2000](#)) highlights a process concerning peer pressure viz., compliance. To him, peer pressure is a specific case of social influence, generally resulting in submission to certain behaviours, ideas, attitudes and agendas. However, one of the main limitations of conceptualization is that it ignores positivity hidden in peer pressure that may serve regulatory social functions. Berndt and Ladd ([1989](#)) define sensitivity to peer pressure as the influence exerted by peers by rewarding those who comply with expected norms or punishing those who violate them. Our peers influence us in many ways. Peer pressure can be direct (eg through direct attempts by peers to encourage or discourage behaviour) or more subtle (e.g., peer pressure to comply with group norms).

When we grow up, we often think that the pain of childhood has passed. However, worrying about how we look, the desire to be accepted, and sometimes even the willingness to do things just to fit in, whether we are teenagers or older, continue to influence us. For individual traits, several factors were

associated with peer susceptibility. For example, students with higher anxiety levels reported lower social approval, overall self-esteem, and more negative peer interactions (Ginsburg, La Greca, & Silverman, [1998](#)). Additionally, highly anxious people focus on threats, dangers, and potentially negative consequences. Adults with high-stress levels may focus on the possibility of peer rejection. In such circumstances, compliance can be viewed as a way to avoid potentially ominous situations.

There is a big body of existing research that highlights the harms and negative aspects of peer pressure. The influence of peer groups among students can increase education anxiety (Kadir, Atmowasdoyo, Salija, [2018](#)). The intragroup relationships with peers are always interconnected. The direction of those relationships should be tracked, considering all possible contextual factors that correlate with group outcomes. Boechneke, (2018) argue that when students are influenced and boosted by their peers, they perform better in school and mathematics. In the same vein, Olalekan, ([2016](#)) states that with the support they need from their peers, students tend to perform better and excel, focus more on their studies, and perform better academically in school.

Despite various studies conducted to understand the influence of peer groups on student performance, no one yet understands the essence of peer influence on students (Zhang, [2010](#)). Knowing how adolescents interact with their peers and with each other and how the presence of peer groups affects students' academic performance in school can be applied to various categories, and also for the education system as a whole (Leka, [2015](#)). Peer pressure is commonly described as peer pressure for other adults to do something (Santor, Messervey, & Kusumakar, [2000](#)). Various factors can affect a student's performance in school. This is regardless of whether families provide children with relevant guidance, motivation, and healthy and balanced interactions with their environment (Ezzarooki, [2016](#)). Interacting with peers helps students enhance their abilities and academic performance. Because you can ask your friends for help, this can be more

motivating than working isolated (Sotinis, Mirco & Michael, 2013). Student-peer interactions are likely to influence students, are important in student decision-making, and affect student performance (De Giorgi, 2010).

Girls have two options. If they choose the first one, they risk betraying their values and identity. If they choose the latter, they may be on the side. Girls adapt to all the changes and pressures and may run away and react depressed and angrily. Courses are often designed to allow girls to respond to all four methods, choosing social cognition first and dividing themselves into the authentic self and the culturally scripted self. According to Pipher, for a normal girl who becomes a public figure, it is a picture of who she should be.

In a 1990 study, Young examined students' opinions of anxiety and speech. His research shows that in language classes, students feel more anxious when speaking in front of their peers. Horwitz et al. (1986) found that language classes are intimidating because students often have to express themselves in front of peers in an unfamiliar language. While doing so, it suggests that it is because it is continually evaluated. Thus the peer pressure gets intense due to Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) and Test Anxiety (TA).

Social Network Analysis (SNA) has been increasingly used in behavioural and social science research to examine peer relations. In education, SNA has been used for understanding how actors or nodes (e.g., students, teachers, and schools) form relationships, what kinds of relationships are formed, and how particular types of networks or network positions that actors hold may influence outcomes such as learning (Grunspan, Wiggins, & Goodreau, 2014). Research has primarily analyzed the role of classroom instruction in traditional language classes in the home country (e.g. Huebner, 1995a) and language classes outside the homeland (e.g. Pellegrino Aveni, V. 2005). Concerning extracurricular activities, studies based on study abroad – studies investigating language attainment in the context of study abroad (Freed, 1995) – have

concentrated specifically on second language acquisition through conversational dealing with international students and their families. (Tan & Kinginger, 2013) and through indirect classroom interactions between international students and teachers (Gibbons, 2003). In contrast, we investigated how conversational interactions with peers in the classroom contribute to second language development, even though this atmosphere may support the development of complex academic language. As such, few studies examine what kinds of language development (e.g., idioms, socio-cultural, phonology) are experienced by international students when interacting with their peers and how this interaction affects a second language.

Possible influencing factors include emotional and environmental influences when learning a language. A student who is uncomfortable, nervous or frightened cannot study. This may be the influence of the mother tongue. Students always follow the grammatical rules of their native language, which may differ from the foreign language they wish to learn. Fear of a foreign language can affect student performance and reduce their willingness to participate in learning activities. According to Cowden (2010), anxious students are afraid to speak. It is normal for students with social anxiety to feel anxious in social situations, but they tend to avoid social situations.

In short, as shown in the studies above, peer groups can influence students' anxiety in learning English as a language. This study gears toward determining adult female students' peer groups on their anxiety levels when learning English as a second language and how teachers and parents might work on the students and make them out of this poor social thing.

Research Methodology

Van Dijk's socio-cognitive Approach aims to shed light on the ideologies hidden in social practice. The socio-Cognitive Approach is a theoretical framework. The Approach combines insights from linguistic and social psychology. It explains how language use is shaped by social context and cognitive processes. Discourse, thus viewed, is a social practice that reflects and

reproduces social structures and relationships. It is not just a matter of transmitting information and carrying on communication and interaction. Rather, it is a means of constructing and negotiating social meaning. Discourse is shaped by the cognitive processes involved in producing and interpreting language and the social norms, values, and power relations that operate within a given context (Dijk, 2006). Van Dijk's Approach emphasizes the importance of context in understanding discourse. Context includes the social identities and relationships of the participants, as well as the broader cultural, historical, and institutional factors that shape their interactions. Van Dijk also emphasizes the role of mental models, or cognitive representations of social structures and relationships, in shaping discourse. Hence, the Socio-Cognitive Approach provides a useful framework for analyzing the complex interplay between language, culture, and social structure in everyday communication. Social cognition, including social and personal context, mediates the convergence of society and discourse (Gyollai, 2022). The study used semi-structured interviews based on this social cognitive Approach.

The interviewees were thirty in total. Twenty adult female language learners were approached from GC University, Sialkot. Ten other adult female students were added from other institutions. The interview sessions were conducted online via WhatsApp. Each interviewee was asked five fixed questions, thematically connected with the study's objectives, followed by some follow-up and probing ones. Data was gathered through primary and secondary methods. Primary data was collected through online interviews, and secondary data was collected through articles, references and the Internet.

Data Analysis

Discourse analysis is performed related to function rather than formal discourse features. Our observations show that most speech acts used in respondents' responses are representative. A representative statement is based on the speaker's or writer's perception of their beliefs.

The study has captured diverse discourse responses and themes. As per the interviewees' answers, few said they had not experienced peer pressure. Some were unaware of this term and were counter-asking about it. So, if they are unaware of the term, how would they know whether they have experienced it or not? The remaining of these few was confused about whether the thing they had gone through was peer pressure. Some of them said that they have seen others undergoing negative peer influence. They have even witnessed the severe negative effects of peer influence, like smoking. This ensures that negative peer influence can cause severe anxiety and stress leading to major health and social issues like smoking and drugs. A very small number of females said they had experienced the positive one. According to them, it plays an important role in getting attached to academic work and increasing motivation or enthusiasm. One of them said it allows students to do better in a competitive environment.

Most of the girls claimed that they experienced negative peer pressure, which was very hectic. Some of them have overcome this, but some are still trying to find a way out. When they were asked about the role of parents and teachers, they replied that parents scolded and said come on, you are not a child now, and teachers do not care about adult students. Nevertheless, there are exceptions, of course.

In the case of English language learning, most of the girls said that peer pressure is a cause of stress. According to them, this has a lot to do with social identities. Female students from the elite or high social class are usually very confident, and middle or poor-class students feel very nervous around them. They fear losing their image in the classroom. Ultimately, this fear conquers their abilities and academic performance. Also, it is seen that the students who come from private schools have strong basic skills like grammar and pronunciation. However, the students from government schools usually suffer because they need to be taught basic skills at college and university levels, but they are just polished.

Findings

Peer groups have a great impact on students. This is apparent from peer groups' role in individual life and learning, and there is ample proof that students feel more comfortable and flexible with peers. A good student surrounded by boring friends loses interest in learning and becomes unmotivated. On the other hand, a group of study-prone peers positively impacts those members who are taciturn about learning, stimulating their interest in learning. The peer group's nature determines its motivation and impact on the success of its members. One group can have a negative effect on its fellows, while another group can positively affect its fellows. The parents, teachers, and students are unaware of this negative impact. These students fall into stress and anxiety, ultimately resulting in a lack of motivation and poor academic performance. The following findings were pulled from the data from the above analysis:

- Peer pressure among adults is not a myth. It can play the same role among adults as children and teenagers.
- Negative peer pressure can ruin one's academic career. It can cause depression, loss of motivation and decisive power. It can cause feelings of inferiority among students. They start doubting their capabilities and talents.
- Positive peer influence can increase motivation among students to work hard. It makes students confident and encourages them to improve their skills.
- The rate of peer pressure is high in countries like Pakistan, where everyone gets an education just for the sake of grades. The students choose their peer group by looking out at their grade status. Furthermore, they suffer from their negative influence.

Teachers and parents can play a very significant role in helping students avoid peer pressure. At the school or college level, the teachers and parents care for the students' matters closely, but as they enter the university, the students feel very shy around their teachers, and their parents think they have grown up. They can do their stuff themselves. This sudden lack of care and communication with teachers and parents makes adult students vulnerable to negative peer pressure.

Discussion

The teachers and parents may help students get out of negative influence by guiding them on what is good and wrong for them. Counselling can end this social evil. They can make them aware of the bad company. They may appreciate their struggle and hard work. If they notice the lack of motivation in the students, they can ask them directly about the reason behind it. Most importantly, teachers can schedule activities where students cannot pressurize each other. Also, the teachers can encourage students to work with peers and teach them how to behave according to the calibre and cognition of other students. They can also teach students to say "no" and walk away.

The students themselves can take the following measures to avoid negative peer pressure. They should trust their abilities and have confidence in themselves. If they come across any weak point, they should not take it as a negative point but try to get rid of that weak point. It is not necessary to be friends with only the students with good grades. They should choose their friends wisely. They should make their character strong and be honest with everyone. If they have faced negative peer pressure in the past, they should help other students get out of it, if any. They should share their problems with teachers and parents instead of indulging in social evils like smoking and drugs. The peers should try to be independent and solve their problems independently. Most of the time, the peers do not even know they are negatively influencing another student. Hence, filling the communication gap and making others aware of how you feel is important.

Conclusion

Negative peer pressure is not a big issue unless the individual facing it makes it himself. It can be controlled easily if one is aware of it. It can be turned into positive peer influence and consequently better academic, health and social status. This study has tried to create awareness about this social issue among teachers, parents and students. Especially in the case of language learning students and their academic performance, peer pressure matters a lot. We want to offer new researchers to fill the gaps and limitations of this study and consider this area for their research.

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