

A Literature Review of Foreign Language Anxiety

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Abstract

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is regarded as one of the affective factors in language learning. It is described as an unusual experience that language learners are inevitably to face in their attempt to learn a language. Also, language learning is described as a psychological process. The effect of anxiety on language learning has been investigated for a long time. Results of the relevant studies have revealed that anxiety possesses remarkable effects on language learning. This paper provides an overview of the previous studies that are related to language learning anxiety. To this end, definition of anxiety, types of anxiety, relevant literature, causes of anxiety and ways and strategies that have been suggested by researchers to cope with anxiety are presented sequentially. Hopefully, the paper will contribute to research activities and increase the awareness of both language teachers and language learners.

Key words: Anxiety, Foreign Language Anxiety, Language Learning.

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, hundreds of millions of people speak English as an international language and therefore it has inevitably become a very significant component of globalization. This leads to the fact that English is one of the prime essentials that students, especially higher education students, should possess to obtain their academic purposes in addition to integrating themselves into a globalizing world. Additionally, there are cultural and social senses that render learning English necessary.

Students often describe language learning as an arduous task due to the anxiety most language learners inevitably face in the process of language learning. However, every language learner may possess different levels of language learning anxiety.

The possibility that anxiety lowers language learners' performance preventing them from fully exploiting their potential has interested researchers and language instructors in addition to learners themselves (Horwitz, 2001). According to William and Andrade (2008), language instructors are also aware of the existence of language learning anxiety and additionally they believe that it possesses effects on language learning. This results in the fact that language learning anxiety should be perpetually and thoroughly studied. Besides, uncovering the causes of anxiety is of great significance. This paper presents an overview of the previous studies conducted on language learning anxiety. Its causes and effects on language learning in addition to some management strategies are provided.

1. DEFINITIONS of ANXIETY

Anxiety is often defined as uneasiness and being vaguely fearful. According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), foreign language anxiety is "the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning." Similarly, Hilgard, Atkinson, and Atkinson, (1971) as cited in Scovel, 1991: 18) describe language anxiety as "a

psychological construct, commonly described by psychologists as a state of apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object."

Horwitz et al., (1986, p.128) state that foreign language anxiety is "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language-learning process". MacIntyre (1995) describes anxiety as "the transient emotional state of feeling nervous that can fluctuate over time and vary in intensity" (p. 28).

2. TYPES of ANXIETY

There are three types of anxiety: trait anxiety, state anxiety and situation-specific anxiety (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1989). Additionally, According to Alpert and Haber (1960), there are two types of anxiety: facilitative anxiety and debilitating anxiety.

2.1. Trait Anxiety

Trait anxiety is regarded as a facet of personality and defined as "an individual's likelihood of becoming anxious in any situation" (Spielberger, 1983, in MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991b, p. 87). A person who has trait anxiety is always inclined to feel anxious in any situation. It is the constant characteristic of an individual and it is rather difficult to overcome this type of anxiety. When it is experienced, it has influence on both language learning and other subjects (Ellis, 2008).

2.2. State Anxiety

It refers to being anxious in a particular situation (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1989). It is "apprehension experienced at a particular moment in time, for example, prior to taking examinations" (Spielberger, 1983, in MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991b, p. 90). According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1991b, p. 87), "It is interested in the here-and-now experience of anxiety as an emotional state." State anxiety "varies in intensity and duration and fluctuates over time as a function of the amount of stress that impinges upon an individual and that individual's interpretation of the stressful situation as personally dangerous or threatening" (Spielberger, 1976; p. 5).

2.3. Situation-specific Anxiety

Learners are exposed to anxiety in defined situations. Situation specific anxiety "can be seen as trait anxiety limited to a given context" and "foreign language anxiety should be studied with situation specific measures" (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991b). This type of anxiety is related to language learners' reactions to specific, well-defined situations. That is, it is experienced in certain situations like speaking in public or taking part in language classroom activities (Ellis, 2008). In this context, Horwitz et al., (1986) regard foreign language classroom anxiety as a typical example of situation-specific anxiety.

2.4. Facilitative Anxiety vs. Debilitative Anxiety

Facilitative anxiety refers to being a little anxious and encourages language learners to perform better. Language learners who experience facilitative anxiety regard language learning as taking risks, which motivates them further to learn language (Spielmann and Radnofsky, 2001). This type of anxiety prompts language learners to struggle to overcome their anxiety. However, according to Horwitz et al., (1986), facilitative anxiety is experienced only when language learners are given simple learning activities and when they try to succeed in these activities.

On the other hand, debilitating anxiety prevents students from learning. Students are naturally inclined to avoid learning a language. Language learners who experience this type of anxiety feel

insecure and fearful, which leads to poor performance. As a result, they are inclined to withdraw from language classes (Gardner, 1985; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991b; Steinberg and Horwitz, 1986). Facilitative anxiety might increase students' desire to learn a language, yet debilitating anxiety is detrimental to language learning preventing students from exploiting their potential for language learning.

3. RELEVANT LITERATURE

Anxiety has effect on various types of learning. When anxiety is related to learning a foreign or second language, it is defined as second/foreign language anxiety. It is commonly believed that learners will potentially face anxiety-provoking situations while they are attempting to learn a foreign language and difficulties of learning a foreign language are probably to provoke anxiety in language courses (Chan and Wu, 2004). There are studies that emphasize the detrimental effect of anxiety on foreign language learning through results revealing that high level of language learning anxiety leads to low level of language learning performance (Gardner, Smythe, Clement and Glikman, 1976), which means low achievement.

Horwitz et al., (1986) argue that language learning may be a bit different from learning other topics. When it comes to learning a language, language learners argue that they are mentally prevented from learning, yet it is strange that those who are mentally hindered from language learning can be very good learners of other subjects.

According to Bailey et al., (1999), language learners who do not have much self-confidence regarding their language learning potential will perform less successfully in their attempts to learn a language. Second language learning process does involve anxiety-provoking situations that possess effects on learners' motivation and interest. Studies show that second language courses are more anxiety-provoking than other university courses (Campbell and Ortiz, 1991). Horwitz (2001) expresses that anxiety has the potential to make language learners feel more stressful than usual in learning process. Language learning anxiety is a compelling problem and it may not be noticed openly.

According to Bailey (1983), students appreciate being praised in language courses for their language learning development and skill, which leads students to compete with each other to perform better. However, language learning anxiety prevents students from disclosing themselves and this may lead students to question their potential of language learning. When students do not have enough self-confidence, it can create the fear of making mistake and this possesses negative effects on students' language learning achievement. Speaking is regarded as the most compelling language skill. When students attempt to speak English or to communicate with others, this will probably provoke anxiety (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994).

According to Na (2007), anxiety is one of the most important affective factors that influence the learning of a second language. Therefore, it has been studied specifically by researchers. Results of the studies conducted on language learning anxiety have shown that it can potentially prevent language learners from being successful (Young, 1991; Ohata, 2005).

MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) conducted a study in which French learners were the participants. The findings of the study revealed that anxiety prevented students from being able to express their opinions. Additionally, anxiety caused the students to feel less motivated about their language learning potential. Na (2007) conducted another study regarding anxiety. 115 Chinese high school students participated in the research. The findings showed that male students' anxiety level regarding learning English were higher than female students and high level of anxiety had a debilitating role in learning English. Students abstained from learning activities in order not to feel anxious.

Williams and Andrade (2008) conducted an anxiety study. 243 Japanese students from four universities took part in the study as participants. The findings of the study revealed that anxiety was mostly related to the output and process of language learning and additionally, the causes of students' language learning anxiety were their language instructors and classmates.

Various studies have revealed that anxiety possesses negative effects on language learning. In a study conducted by MacIntyre and Gardner (1989), less anxious language learners outperformed more anxious students while they were learning words and furthermore, students with high level of anxiety experienced difficulty upon attempting to remember the words. Additionally, language learners who experienced anxiety studied more than ones who did not experience it, yet the latter performed more successfully than the former (Price, 1991). Similarly, a study performed on anxiety by Öner and Gedikoğlu (2007) revealed that students with high level of anxiety were less successful than students with low level of anxiety.

4. CAUSES OF ANXIETY

There are various sources of anxiety that is especially related to learning a second language (Skehan, 1989; Young, 1991 as cited in Ohata, 2005). The environment itself in which language is learned can naturally provoke anxiety when language learners' performance is evaluated continuously or periodically. This continuous or periodic evaluation potentially provokes anxiety as students have to face their language learning performance (Eharman, 1996 as cited in Ohata, 2005).

Horwitz and Young (1991) state that anxiety in foreign language courses results from three different components: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. Communication apprehension prevents students from communicating with others and speaking in front of other students or in groups. Fear of negative evaluation is an apprehension that results from others' evaluative comments. Students who experience fear of negative evaluation avoid evaluative situations. Test anxiety refers to the fear of failing a test or exam. Students may experience test anxiety consciously or unconsciously. If language contents and the ways that they are taught do not satisfy the learners, they may experience cognitive tension. Additionally, if their interactions with other learners and language instructors are not satisfactory, they may face affective tension (Spielmann and Radnofsky, 2001).

Additionally, some situations that provoke anxiety are described as (Daly and Buss, 1984; Richmond and McCroskey, 1988 cited in Daly, 1991): judging learners' speaking performance, new environments, previous negative experiences such as fear, anxiety and failure, activities that are beyond learners' potential and unclear evaluation process.

Similarly, Young (1991) identifies six anxiety-provoking situations: 1- personal and interpersonal anxieties; 2- learner beliefs about language learning; 3- instructor beliefs about language teaching; 4- instructor-learner interactions; 5- classroom procedures; and 6- language testing. Horwitz et al., (1986) state that second language learners are inclined to feel anxious most when they participate in speaking and listening activities due to their common belief that when they use the second language to communicate, what they say should be accurate. Taking tests or exams is anxiety provoking situations for learners. Additionally, excessive practices can cause language learning anxiety.

According to Young (1992), students, language teachers and language education are the main causes that provoke anxiety. Additionally, when students have difficulty in communicating with others, when they face personal matters or when they attempt to be better language learners than others and when they have little self-assurance but high and improbable expectations concerning language learning, these all provoke anxiety. Also, Bailey (1983) argues that when there is struggle among students regarding outperforming each other to be praised by their teachers more, this can create

anxiety. Additionally, exams and the relation between teachers and students cause language learning anxiety.

5. MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

There are lots of studies that suggest strategies to deal with language learning anxiety. Tanveer (2007) argues that in a friendly atmosphere and in a homogeneous class, students will experience less anxiety. Additionally, activities into which drama is integrated are less anxiety provoking. Liu (2006) conducted a study in which the participants were teachers. They stated that they did their best to be friendly and nice to their students to minimize their anxiety. Besides, they reported abstaining from using embarrassing remarks when students made mistakes and they readily appreciated students to increase their motivation. Beauvois (1999) suggests teaching language in a computer laboratory classroom to lower students' anxiety. In such an atmosphere, students will have more opportunities for interaction and more time to deliver their responses without experiencing any fear of being criticized by teachers.

Von Worde (2003) suggests several strategies that language instructors should use to minimize learners' anxiety;

- Topics that interest students should be chosen.
- Learning process should be entertaining.
- An environment in which students feel more comfortable should be provided.
- Language teachers should speak slowly.
- Teachers should avoid putting students in an embarrassing situation.
- Teaching materials should always be strengthened.

Additionally, Aydin and Zengin (2008) argue that students should be taught anxiety management strategies and teacher should provide a less anxiety provoking learning environment for students. Young (1990) states that students' mistakes should be regarded as usual and part of language learning when teachers attempt to correct them. That will make students feel more comfortable. Phillips (1991) argues that language teachers should change students' anxiety provoking beliefs regarding language learning.

Findings of the relevant studies show that there is a negative relationship between language learning and anxiety, yet when students experience anxiety to a certain degree, it may have positive effects on language learning. Hadley, Terrell and Rardin (as cited in Young, 1992) argue that students should feel some anxiety to be motivated for language learning. Tran et al., (2013b) support this opinion arguing that anxiety might make students more motivated to learn English showing their weaknesses. They might pay more attention to English.

Also, Young (1991) argues that students should be in the center of learning and teachers should have a facilitating role to minimize anxiety in the process of language learning. According to Gregersen, MacIntyre, and Meza (2014) "Everyone experiences vibes and/or emotions, along with an increasing or decreasing heart rate, but neither is itself stimulating or debilitating— how the emotion is interpreted or appraised forms the basis of action" (p. 98). To conclude, anxiety can facilitate or debilitate language learning based on the interpretation of the emotion. Therefore, facilitative aspects of FLA should be exploited.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper is to present an overview of the previous studies regarding language anxiety. FLA, its causes and effects have been investigated by many researchers. The findings of the previous studies reveal that language learners inevitably face anxiety provoking situations and these situations

result from different sources. Additionally, anxiety possesses a significant role in language learning and potentially hinders language learners from being successful, which means there is a negative relationship between anxiety and language learning. As learners' anxiety level increases, their achievement level will be naturally and inevitably lower. However, some researchers claim that if anxiety is experienced to a certain degree, it might be useful for students increasing their desire to learn. Language instructors should be aware of this unusual experience and try to decrease anxiety employing different techniques and strategies suggested by researchers.

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