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FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY

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ABSTRACT

Foreign language teaching is a field that is closely related to human psychology. Recently, the studies in this field have focused on the influences of affective factors on language teaching. This article overviews the relevant research about the effects of anxiety, one of the affective factors, on language acquisition. The study also investigates the previous research related to the role of language anxiety in the acquisition of different language skills such as reading, writing, listening and speaking. Finally, the research results related to the causes and effects of anxiety are summarized and management strategies that can be used by teachers and students are explained.

Key Words: Anxiety, Foreign Language Anxiety, Language Teaching

ÖZET

Dil öğretimi insan psikolojisi ile yakından ilgili bir alandır. Son yıllarda, bu alanda yapılan çalışmaların bir kısmı duygusal faktörlerin dil öğretimi üzerindeki etkilerini incelemeye yöneliktir. Bu makalede duygusal faktörlerden biri olan kaygının dil edinimi üzerindeki etkisini inceleyen çalışmalar özetlenmiştir. Çalışmada ayrıca kaygının okuma, yazma, dinleme, konuşma gibi dil becerilerinin edinimi sırasında oynadığı rol üzerinde durulmuştur. Son olarak kaygının nedenleri ve etkileri hakkındaki araştırma sonuçları genel olarak incelenmiş ve kaygıyla başa çıkmak için öğretmen ve öğrenciler tarafından kullanılabilecek stratejiler açıklanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kaygı, Yabancı Dil Kaygısı, Dil Öğretimi

INTRODUCTION

Foreign language teaching has been highly affected by psychology and many studies have been performed to find out the relationship between language learning and affective variables. As Brown suggests (1994, p.134), the emotional side of human behavior or the "affective domain" involves a variety of personality factors, including feelings both about oneself and about others with whom s/he comes into contact. Research on the relationship between foreign language learning and affective variables generally focus on a number of personality factors: self-esteem, inhibition, risk-taking, empathy, extroversion, motivation and anxiety. The need for understanding of foreign language anxiety (FLA) became clearer in the 1970s and 80s. In the early 1980s, Krashen (1982) underlined the importance of understanding anxiety when he asserted that, as part of the learner's affective filter, anxiety might interfere with the process of learning and acquiring a language. This article provides an outline of the relevant research about FLA. The study also summarizes the causes and effects of anxiety and some management strategies.

Definitions

Anxiety is defined as the "subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system" (Spielberger, 1983; p. 15). It has also been called as an emotional response to "a threat to some value that the individual holds essential to his existence as a personality" (May, 1977; p. 205).

Types of Anxiety

Three approaches to the study of anxiety have been identified as the trait, state and situation specific perspectives (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991a). According to another classification, two types of anxiety have been presented: facilitating and debilitating anxiety.

Trait Anxiety

Trait anxiety is defined as the individual's likelihood of becoming anxious in any situation (Spielberger, 1983). Spielberger has emphasized the necessity of distinguishing trait anxiety from state anxiety. Trait anxiety refers to a relatively stable emotional state that an individual experiences more frequently or more intensely than most people on the average and is part of the individual's personality. According to Goldberg (1993, cited in MacIntyre, 1999), people with high levels of trait anxiety are typically nervous and they lack emotional stability. An individual with a high level of trait anxiety shows tendencies to become apprehensive across a number of different situations as a result of generally regarding these situations as more threatening than they actually are (Spielberger, 1983). On the other hand, a person with a low trait anxiety is an emotionally stable, calm and relaxed person.

Some researchers (Endler, 1980; Mischel and Peak, 1982) have cautioned that a trait anxiety approach in the field of foreign language learning would be senseless and that the interactive anxiety-provoking factors that operate between people and different situations should be taken into account. For instance, while two people may be assessed as having the same level of trait anxiety, one may be more apprehensive in social situations whereas the other could be more prone to nervousness during tests (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991b).

State Anxiety

State anxiety is experienced by an individual at a particular moment as a reaction to a definite situation. This 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). However, there has been a criticism pointed at the ambiguity that the source of apprehension can only be assumed to be given situation because this method does not ask the subject to ascribe his or her emotional state to any cause despite diverse possibilities (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991b). For instance, subjects who are expecting some intimidating situations in the near future (e.g. giving a speech or an examination) can be anxious regardless of the provided experimental condition.

Situation-specific Anxiety

A third type of anxiety is called situation specific anxiety, which refers to anxiety experienced in a well-defined situation (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991a). Situation specific studies can offer more to the understanding of anxiety because various aspects of the situation can be queried. A key difference is that subjects are tested for their anxieties in limited circumstances such as taking a test, speaking in public, writing examinations, performing math or participating in a language class. Situation specific constructs can be seen as trait anxiety measures limited to a given context (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991b).

Facilitating vs. Debilitating Anxiety

In addition to the trait, state and situation specific distinctions, previous research has also differentiated "facilitative anxiety", which actually helps people do better than they might otherwise, from "debilitative anxiety", which gets in the way (Alpert and Haber, 1960 cited in Brown, 1994). Debilitative anxiety hinders the process of successful language learning and it is detrimental to the students' learning whereas facilitative anxiety might keep the students poised and alert.

Research Background

As MacIntyre (1999) suggests, until rather recently, the literature on anxiety was scattered and difficult to interpret, often presenting more questions than answers. Because, the results were not consistent, perhaps due to the complex nature of language learning process, or the inconsistency of measuring instruments.

Scovel (1978) also noted that early research on anxiety as an affective variable in language acquisition, development and performance often had mixed results. In his review of literature, Scovel mentioned four early studies related to anxiety in foreign language learning context: in their study of English-speaking French immersion children, Swain and Burnaby (1976) found a negative correlation between language class anxiety and one measure of children's ability to speak French but no significant correlation with other measures of proficiency. Similarly, Tucker, Hamayan and Genesee (1976) found one index of performance to be significantly negatively related to French class anxiety, but reported that three other indices were not correlated significantly with this type of anxiety. Chastain (1975) also found a negative correlation between French Audio-lingual Method students' scores on tests and anxiety, but in contradiction, he discovered a positive correlation between anxiety and the scores of German and Spanish students using the traditional method. Chastain concluded that probably some concern about a test was a plus while too much anxiety could produce negative results. Kleinmann's study (1977) considered two types of anxiety for the first time in anxiety research: facilitating and debilitating. He reported evidence showing the effects of facilitating anxiety in second language acquisition.

In the 1980s, language learning became the focus of research. In a study, investigating anxiety in a Spanish language classroom, Ely (1986) devised scales to measure Language Class Discomfort (anxiety), Language Class Risktaking and Language Class Sociability. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) noted that the discrepancies in foreign language research findings could due at least in part to the

inconsistency of anxiety measures used and they developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), for the purpose of providing researchers with a standard instrument.

Aida (1994) used the FLCAS (Horwitz et al., 1986) in her study related to the American students of Japanese. It was previously known that the Japanese language required approximately 1320 hours to reach the same level of proficiency that the students of French, Spanish or German reached in approximately 480 hours. Aida was interested in knowing if students of such a difficult language had different experiences from students learning languages more similar to English. The findings were consistent with other research using Western languages and the results indicated that there was a considerable level of anxiety in the Japanese class. The students with a higher rate of anxiety took significantly lower grades from those of the low anxiety group.

Another study on anxiety and language learning was conducted by Price, (1988 cited in von Wörde, 1998) who examined the foreign language anxiety in relation to selected learner variables such as, age, sex, foreign language aptitude, test anxiety, and public speaking anxiety. It was found that foreign language anxiety was negatively associated with foreign language aptitude, but positively associated with test anxiety and public speaking anxiety.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1991c) performed a study to manipulate the anxiety level of beginning language learners. They asked the students to think about and report either positive or negative events from their own experiences by writing half-page focused essays, which forced the students to concentrate on their own reactions to events. It was anticipated that "by writing about one type of experience, the students' perceptions of themselves would become biased in the direction suggested by the essay topic" (p. 298). The students were also administered six anxiety scales to span the range of anxieties. The results indicated that language anxiety negatively affected language learning and production, which finally caused a disadvantage for the anxious students in the language classroom when compared to their more relaxed peers. Another interesting finding revealed from the examination of the content of the essays was that, when called upon to report anxiety arousing experiences, students focused almost exclusively on situations involving speaking. Since some of the other studies had similar results, a number of researchers performed studies focused on the relationship between anxiety and a specific language skill. The following part will present the findings of the studies related to the role of anxiety in skill development.

Foreign Language Anxiety and Different Language Skills
As language learning consists of developing skills such as reading, writing, speaking and listening, some of the researchers who dealt with FLA investigated the role of anxiety on the development of different skills.

Speaking Anxiety
In the studies related to FLA, students generally report that speaking in the foreign language classroom produces the highest level of anxiety. In 1964, Pimsleur, Sundland and MacIntyre (cited in Donley, 1997) observed that language courses which required students to speak the foreign language were more likely to produce anxiety than courses that did not require speaking. Similarly, in her study in 1990, Young

investigated the students' perspectives on anxiety and speaking. The results of her study revealed that, in a language class, the students feel most anxious when they have to speak in front of their peers.

Reading Anxiety

Lee (1999) discusses the relationship between second language reading and FLA from pedagogical and cognitive perspectives. He mentions four misconceptions of the reading process. First, he examines the misconception that "successful reading equals answering comprehension questions" (p. 51). He emphasizes that according to the typical reader, the comprehension questions restrict their interaction with the text. Second, he examines the misconception that reading is a private act and points out his observation that readers feel isolated when they are supposed to read alone. Lee proposes that the teacher should give assignments which refer to working with classmates, or the activities should require reading, discussion or work groups. The third misconception mentioned by Lee is that "reading is a linear process". He notifies that for some of the anxious language learners, the reading goal is "to get through the text, to reach the bottom of the page, or to get to the end of the chapter" (p. 53).

Writing Anxiety

As Leki suggests (1999), writing is generally thought to be the least anxiety-provoking situation. There are several reasons for this false impression. For instance, the writers keep control of the content of the message unlike reading or listening and they may find as much time as they want to perform the task. According to Raisman (1982; cited in Leki, 1999), writing anxiety (or apprehension) can be significant and students often cope with the feeling by choosing careers not requiring writing or they complete the writing task without paying much attention.

The sources of writing anxiety are quite diverse (Leki, 1999). For some students poor writing skills may be the cause of anxiety whereas for some others the source may be having a perfectionist character. On the other hand, for some learners the thought that they are going to be evaluated by someone else (the instructor) creates an anxiety-provoking atmosphere. Even if the student do not have such a feeling, the evaluations may still cause anxiety because the students generally have difficulty in understanding the meaning of the remarks written by the instructors on their papers. Leki points out another flaw of writing courses that causes anxiety: Until rather recently, the writing courses were seen as ways of practicing grammar. The situation is still the same in some language courses. However, paying extra attention to grammar may cause extreme caution and fear of failure, which leads to anxiety.

Listening Comprehension Anxiety

Although listening activities are generally considered not to be anxiety-provoking, current research has shown that listening activities may also cause anxiety (Campbell, 1999). Since some students believe that they should understand every word they hear, they feel frustrated when there are some unknown words. Vogely (1999) listed the sources of Listening Comprehension (LC) anxiety:

> 1- the nature of speaking (voice clarity, speed of speech, and variation in pronunciation,

2- inappropriate strategy use,
3- level of difficulty of a LC passage
4- fear of failure

(p. 108)

Grammar Anxiety

VanPatten and Glass (1999) have investigated the effects of anxiety on students who take grammar courses and resulted that some students feel a certain amount of anxiety in grammar courses due to various factors. For instance, some students have a fear of not sounding as good as the other students in the class. Their level of anxiety increases as their instructors criticize their answers. Some students, on the other hand, feel threatened by the amount of materials presented in a given time. If too much grammatical information is presented in a short time, the students may feel apprehensive. Another factor that causes anxiety is the fear of evaluation. The teachers' way of evaluation may be another anxiety-provoking factor. Some teachers generally use the communicative approach in the classroom and put the emphasis on discussion, vocabulary development or listening. However, they adopt a totally traditional approach in the exams and most of their questions generally focus on grammatical features. The students who experience such an inconsistency generally feel that the lessons do not serve their purpose: learning the grammatical structures. Additionally, some students come to the foreign language courses with an expectation of learning the grammatical features of the language and feel frustrated when the lesson is based on a communicative approach.

Sources of Foreign Language Anxiety

In the studies presented above, some of the sources of anxiety have been revealed. In this part of the study, the general sources of anxiety will be presented in detail.

As McDonough and Shaw suggested (1993), "every class is composed of individuals each of whom will have different capabilities and general work rates, and among these heterogeneous groups it can obviously be a problem for the teacher to allow for the variety of pacing which will be necessary if all students are to learn effectively" (p. 242). The problem presented above generally led the instructors to individualization, which can be defined as "a term that is used to cover all topics which focus on the learner as an individual" (p. 243). For some learners the time of the study was important whereas others paid extra attention to the place. Working alone or in groups might also be an important factor for some students. These differences in the learners' perception of the environment and thus the language class might be one of the factors that lead them to anxiety.

The review of literature also reveals that some scholars have begun to consider the nature of situation-based apprehension, especially at the time of communication. The researchers have started to examine the situations that make people more or less anxious about communication. Five different characteristics of anxiety-provoking situations have been identified (Daly and Buss, 1984; Richmond and McCroskey, 1988 cited in Daly, 1991):

- People may start being nervous while they are speaking a language after they become conscious that someone may be judging their performance.

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- People are more comfortable in familiar settings and if they encounter <u>new situations or problems</u>, the first tendency is to remain quiet.
- People are likely to become more silent if they do not know <u>what they are being judged on</u>,
- If people think that they are engaging in an activity where their <u>competence</u> is <u>low</u>, they generally prefer not to be the focus of attention.
- Students who previously have had positive experiences when learning languages are likely to be less anxious than are those who recollect <u>fear, anxiety and failure from prior experiences</u>.

Young (1991), on the other hand, identified six potential sources of anxiety: These are: 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.

Effects of Foreign Language Anxiety

As indicated by MacIntyre (1999), FLA may have a number of academic, cognitive, social and personal effects: The academic effects of anxiety have been shown by the previous research, which revealed that high levels of FLA are associated with low levels of academic achievement in language courses (e. g. Horwitz, 1986; Young, 1986; Aida, 1994).

According to the model developed by Tobias (1979, 1980, 1986 cited in MacIntyre, 1999), the cognitive effect of anxiety is evaluated in three stages: input, processing and output. The role of anxiety at the input stage is like the role of a filter, which prevents the information from getting into the cognitive processing system. The effect of anxiety in the processing stage is that it distracts students' attention and consequently influences both the speed and accuracy of learning. During the output stage, anxiety can influence the quality of speaking or writing in the second language.

The social effect of anxiety can be seen in different phases. The results of the study performed by MacIntyre and Charos (1995, cited in MacIntyre 1999) indicated that anxious learners are less willing to communicate and they speak less frequently when they are provided with an opportunity to communicate in a natural setting. These findings contradict with a feature of successful language learners: possessing a willingness to talk in order to learn (Skehan, 1991). As suggested by MacIntyre, the personal effects of anxiety on a person may be the severe anxiety reaction for an individual language learner and for some students language learning is like a "traumatic experience" (1999, p. 39).

Coping with Foreign Language Anxiety

As a result of the studies performed on FLA, a number of researchers have described the ways of lowering the anxiety levels of the students. In this part of the article, the techniques for reducing students' anxiety levels will be summarized.

Various techniques and classroom practices have been used in the classroom by the instructors or suggested by the researchers to reduce anxiety. The suggestions have been grouped into four categories (Donley, 1997): 1- skill-building activities and

programs, 2- procedures that promote self-regulation of emotions by bringing them under conscious control, 3- suggestions for making students more aware of the nature of language learning and 4- recommendations concerning ways to make language classes less anxiety-provoking for students. Each category is examined below in detail.

Skill-Building

Structured skill-building activities constitute an important part of Foss and Reitzel's relational model for managing FLA (1988). They have used a model of communication competence as a starting point for discussing ways of handling anxiety in second language classrooms because some researchers believe that the level of anxiety will diminish as communicative competence increases. The model of competence, developed by Spielberg and Cupach (1984, cited in Foss and Reitzel, 1988), includes five fundamental processes. The first process is motivation, which means the affective approach or avoidance response to a particular communication situation. Knowledge is the second step to the model and it consists of a repertoire of behavioral patterns and strategies upon which a person draws in order to decide how to communicate in a given situation. Skill, the third component of the relational competence model, is closely related to knowledge criteria outcomes and context. A person needs certain skills to converse successfully in the new language even if s/he is motivated to interact competently. The fourth component of the model is outcome. The teacher should help the students be aware of the idea that a negative outcome involving some dissatisfaction may still reflect competence if that outcome is relatively better than its alternatives. Context is the final component of the relational model. Each person creates an environment that facilitates or hinders language learning.

Skill-building is also advocated by Lucas (1984) in the form of patterns, dialogues and gambits to help students structure and maintain communicative interactions. She also notes that the students can be given valuable skill practice by being exposed to numerous ways of using language such as that role-playing, cooperative story-telling, problem-solving, and assignments.

Self-Regulations of Anxiety

This section discusses how cognitive restructuring, anxiety graphing, systematic desensitization, biofeedback and perspective-building can be used to cope with anxiety. The use of cognitive restructuring suggested by McCoy (1979) was called as rational-emotive therapy and it was explored in some detail by Foss and Reitzel (1988) in their relational model of FLA. These researchers believed cognitive restructuring could alleviate anxiety by helping students identify distorted or illogical thoughts that were anxiety provoking, question the logic of those thoughts and substitute more productive and reasonable cognitions.

Another anxiety management tool discussed by Foss and Reitzel (1988) was anxiety graphing, which involved charting anxiety about a conversational encounter immediately after it occurs. The researchers noted that the anxiety graph was designed to help students gain an accurate understanding of the nature of their anxiety. In addition, they suggested that the instructor could also use the graph in individual conferences when discussing the ways of coping with anxiety experienced most frequently. Finally, the anxiety graph can help students internalize the fact that speaking a new language is not a uniform process that is consistently difficult and anxiety

provoking.

The use of systematic desensitization was proposed by McCoy (1979). Later, Schlesiger discussed it at greater length (1996, cited in Donley, 1997) and described it as a process of getting accustomed to an anxiety-inducing situation. The anxious individual would imagine an anxiety-provoking situation during the typical systematic desensitization process and then associate that situation with relaxing thoughts and with visualizations of handling the situation appropriately and would repeat this process until the anxiety disappeared. In the case of anxiety-provoking situations that involved a hierarchy of fears, the anxious individual would work through them until the entire situation was no longer associated with anxious feelings. On the other hand, Schlesiger noted that systematic desensitization could be time-consuming and that determining complex anxiety hierarchies could be problematic.

Biofeedback, progressive relaxation and autogenic training are three other terms discussed by Schlesiger. The former refers to an activity in which a person would attempt to gain voluntary control over reflex-regulated body functions. In order to learn how to monitor and regulate physiological responses that were previously automatic and uncontrolled, a person would receive information about his or her physiological reactions during biofeedback, either through sounds or visual cues. Progressive relaxation, on the other hand, refers to learning to tense and relax the muscle groups in the body in order to reduce anxiety. Autogenic training, in which individuals learned to create feelings of warmth and heaviness in the body through self-suggestion, was another important point discussed by Schlesiger. He concluded that the time and money required to implement biofeedback, progressive relaxation and autogenic training made it difficult to implement them in foreign language education.

Schlesiger also discussed assertiveness training, in which individuals learned to outcome negative self-statements and beliefs via explanation and persuasion, He noted that individuals who have had assertiveness training would usually have enough confidence to express their emotions, wishes and needs, an increased level of self-esteem and a higher degree of confidence.

Mantra training, the last strategy discussed by Schlesiger, involved learning to concentrate on or meditate about one thing at a time. He noted that this technique usually led to a state of increased awareness and calmness. He finally pointed out that, among his experimental subjects, all the techniques mentioned above were effective in reducing anxiety. None of the anxiety reducing strategies was significantly better than any of the others in this regard. Quite surprisingly, only mantra concentration appeared to have a positive effect on achievement in terms of grades. Schlesiger concluded that mantra concentration should probably be the first technique to which foreign language learners should be exposed.

Awareness-Raising

A review of literature also reveals that the teachers can help reduce their students' anxieties by offering new perspectives on their learning tasks. For example, Crokal and Oxford (1991) proposed that the teachers should deal with anxiety directly and explicitly instead of showing some behaviors that will minimize anxiety or limiting their efforts to creating situations in which they hope anxiety will not rise. In their article, they detailed several activities that could help learners gain a more healthy

perspective on language learning. These included a simulation of an advice column in which students wrote about their anxieties to an imaginary person, exchanging letters with other students, keeping a diary of feelings about language learning and writing advice to each other about their anxieties. The letters and responses could then be shared in small groups or with the whole class.

Other Recommendations

Oxford (1990) listed some recommendations, which could be helpful for the students in trying to reduce their anxieties:

1. Physical/emotional strategies: These are strategies such as progressive relaxation, deep breathing, mediation, listening to music and enjoying good humor;

2. Self-encouragement: Positive self-talk might be a good way of reducing anxiety. A person might also encourage himself to take judicious risks in order to learn and reward himself for doing well in the target language;

3. Taking one's emotional temperature: The body sends some signals that show physical and emotional distress. The teacher might also use checklists to find out one's ideas about learning a language or ask the students to write a language diary in which they can record their feelings.

Phillips (1991) noted that teachers were in an excellent position to encourage good language learning behaviors, such as appropriate risk-taking when attempting to communicate. They could also help their students establish appropriate expectations for learning by identifying and modifying student beliefs about language learning that might be apt to provoke anxiety.

In their FLA workshops, Campbell and Ortiz adopted a similar approach (1991) and asked the participants to discuss the myths and realities of foreign language learning, as well as qualities and behaviors conducive to successful language learning.

Certain teaching techniques and teacher behaviors may also make language classes less stressful. For example, several researchers have suggested that teachers should modify their methods of error correction. Although Young (1990) noted that some students seem to want teachers to correct their errors, they would probably be more comfortable with teachers who treated errors as a natural and expected part of the language learning process. Crookal and Oxford, who tried to help teachers gain some perspectives on error correction, (1991) offered a training activity in which teachers were invited to discuss learner errors. In this activity, they also share with their colleagues their ideas about which errors needed to be corrected, why they needed to be corrected and how correction might best be offered.

According to Beauvois (1999), the level of anxiety experienced by the students may be lessened if the language is taught in a computer laboratory classroom. She argues that with the help of a computer-mediated instruction, the students can interact with one another and with the teacher in the target language without a fear of being criticized by them and they will find the necessary time to think before they give the answers.

Conclusion

In this study, the literature related to the foreign language anxiety has been reviewed. Although the early studies on anxiety and foreign language learning were filled with mixed results and contradictory conclusions, more consistent results were obtained after new scales were developed. In recent years, the effects of FLA in foreign language learning have been studied by many researchers. As can be seen in the literature review, researchers have examined the process by which anxiety may affect language learning, the sources and effects of anxiety in language learning situations, and the ways of coping with the effects of FLA.

The results of the studies outlined above indicate that FLA can be a prominent factor that may affect the achievement levels of language learners. Language teachers should be aware of this fact and try to diminish the level of debilitative anxiety by using different techniques offered by the researchers.

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