

Foreign Language Anxiety: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Research in foreign language learning has notably revealed that foreign language anxiety has been a crucial area in applied linguistics. Therefore, this study tends to give a comprehensive review of literature on foreign language anxiety. This review also tries to add an additional explanation to the earlier studies of this issue. It clarifies the concept of foreign language anxiety and how it is different from other related types of anxiety. Finally, it shows the main causes and effects of foreign language anxiety that influence language learners.

Keywords: causes of foreign language anxiety, English as a foreign language (EFL) learners, effects of foreign language anxiety, foreign language anxiety

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1. Introduction

With growing concern being devoted to foreign language learning, anxiety has been ranked to be a crucial challenge to language learners. Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, (1986) believe that anxiety undermines the process of foreign language learning. Language researchers almost agree that anxiety emerged from language learning process is one of the most primary obstacles that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners encounter when learning a foreign language (Alrabai, 2014; Wu, 2010). Horwitz (2001) assures that most EFL learners suffer from language anxiety in different levels. Moreover, Horwitz and Young (1991) state the increased number of language learners who feel anxious in their language classes is alarming. Krashen (1982) explains that anxiety associated with a foreign language can be as barriers that prevent information to reach the language acquisition area in a learner's brain. Additionally, several studies were conducted on foreign language anxiety stressed that language learners who experience anxiety in their foreign language learning might not be enjoyable, which negatively affects the learners' performance and achievement (MacIntyre, 1999; Riasati, 2011). Language educators also stress that their students experience foreign language anxiety in language classes, which negatively influences their achievement and performance. Von Worde (2003) reports that previous research on foreign language anxiety has systematically detected that anxiety can obstruct second/ foreign language achievement and performance. Since anxiety causes crucial problems for EFL learners in which can undermine their performance and achievement, it needs more research and exploration (Elaldi, 2016). This current paper gives a comprehensive literature review on foreign language anxiety. It also discusses the theoretical models to explain the concept of language anxiety, causes of foreign language anxiety, and effects of foreign language anxiety.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Foreign Language Anxiety

In the literature, several definitions of foreign language anxiety are available. According to Ortega (2009), the two prominent definitions that have been enriching our knowledge of language anxiety were proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986) and MacIntyre (1999). Horwitz et al. (1986) define language anxiety to be "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 128). Similarly, MacIntyre (1999) describes that language anxiety as a feeling of stress, nervousness, emotional reaction, and worry that linked to second/ foreign language learning.

To understand foreign language anxiety in a boarder scope, the aspects of anxiety, in general, should be discussed. Psychologically, anxiety has been categorized into three aspects: 1) trait anxiety, 2) state anxiety, and 3) situation- specific anxiety (Speilberger, 1983). The trait perspective occurs when a person has a permanent intent to be anxious (Scovel, 1978). It is a general personality trait, which does not change across several situations. Sieber, O'Neil & Tobias (1977) claim that trait anxiety indicates to "stable personality differences in anxiety proneness" (p. 99). This aspect of anxiety remains stable over time because it is a feature in the personality of an individual. According to Eysenck (1979), trait anxiety can damage cognitive functioning and interrupt memory.

The state perspective is defined as an emotional state. Spielberger (1972) explains the state anxiety to be “the emotional reaction or pattern of response that occurs in an individual who perceives a particular situation as personally dangerous or threatening, irrespective of the presence or absence of objective danger”(p.489). The state anxiety can also be defined as a feeling of nervousness that can change over time and fluctuate in rigor (Young, 1998). Test anxiety distinctly exemplifies the state anxiety whereby students experience anxiety from a particular test, but this feeling can change over time. The state anxiety affects the emotions, cognition, and behaviors of a person.

The situation-specific perspective occurs at a particular point of time as a result to a specific situation (Spielberger, 1983). MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) state that the situation-specific anxiety is a unique anxiety form that happens invariably over time within a given situation. It is closely related to specific situations in which one situation differs from another, but it is consistent over time. Language anxiety and math anxiety are examples of situation-specific anxieties. Language researchers believe that learning a foreign language is related to situation-specific anxiety rather than trait anxiety because trait anxiety is a stable trait wherein all situations provoke anxiety feeling while a situation-specific anxiety is associated with specific situations (Oxford and Ehrman, 1992). Similarly, MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) claim that a situation-specific perspective is the best research approach for foreign language anxiety because language learners experience anxiety in different aspects of the situation in a language class. In sum, a situation-specific anxiety focuses on the particular forms of anxiety that occur systematically over time.

Language anxiety is also classified into two distinct types: debilitating (harmful) anxiety and facilitating (helpful) anxiety (Alpert & Haber, 1960). A consensus of studies concentrates on debilitating anxiety, which harms learners and impacts their performance negatively (Brown, 2007; MacIntyre, 1999; Kim, 2000, Horwitz et al, 1986; Jones, 2004; Oxford, 1999). The effects could be direct such as reducing class participation or indirect such as fear, frustration, and worry (Oxford, 1999). On the other hand, facilitating anxiety helps learners in a particular way to truly perform well in the language. A few researchers have adapted facilitating anxiety, which can be a trait to help the learners in overcoming their anxiety (Bailey, 1983; Ellis, 1994; Kleinmann, 1977).

2.2 Theories/ Models to Explain Foreign Language Anxiety

To recognize language anxiety, models or theories of second/ foreign language acquisition provide beneficial insights into this phenomenon. The following theories of second language acquisition are discussed: Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope’s Theory of Foreign Language Anxiety.

2.2.1 Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis

Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982) is a fundamental theory in the field of second language acquisition. This theory stresses how affective factors associate with the second language acquisition process. Krashen (1982) states that the affective factors are emotional variables, which can be categorized into: 1) motivation, 2) self-confidence, 3) anxiety. These factors can indirectly influence learning by preventing input from reaching the language acquisition device in the brain. To be more precise, this theory explains the relationship between emotional variables and success or failure of second language acquisition. For example, when the affective filter increases, learners

may experience anxiety, tension, and lack of self-confidence that prevent success. On the other hand, low filters do not lead to anxiety, which help language learners to understand the input easily. The importance of this hypothesis in pedagogy is that the idea of affective filter presents a language instructor in a new way, in which the language instructors who can effectively facilitate input and make it understandable in a low anxiety situation where an appropriate classroom environment can be created. In other words, a language teacher can minimize the students' anxiety by following certain strategies such as focusing on the message, neglecting the form, and not insisting on the early production unless the teacher feels that the students are ready. By utilizing this theory, English is expected to be improved because input will be gained, the filter will be low, and the learners will not be afraid to take part in class exercises.

2.2.2 Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope's Theory of Foreign Language Anxiety

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) in their popular research define foreign language anxiety as "a distinct complex construct of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of language learning process" (p. 128). They state that anxiety associated with a foreign language is a situation-specific form emerging from the uniqueness of foreign language learning, not as a general anxiety moved to learning a foreign language. They prove their theory by observing language learners during the process of teaching in language classes and feedback from thirty language learners attending a language class as well. This theory proposes that other academic fields of study do not have the same degree of self-concepts and self-expression like foreign language learning, which makes this type of anxiety different from other academic anxieties. Learners who perform well at other subjects experienced anxiety when learning a foreign language. Numerous studies adopted this theory and provided a piece of evidence to validate it. For example, nine anxiety scales were used by MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) to test anxiety dimensions in relation with various measures of learning. They found that foreign language anxiety is notably associated with foreign language proficiency while the general anxiety does not relate to foreign language proficiency. Similarly, Chen and Chang (2004) believe that foreign language anxiety is a perspective of situation-specific anxiety. In their article, neither test characteristics nor academic learning history were found to be variables of foreign language anxiety, which means that foreign language anxiety is a unique type of anxiety. Those findings supported this theory that anxiety associated with foreign language learning is a specific type of anxiety stemmed from the uniqueness of learning a foreign language.

Another major contribution of this theory was the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to measure the levels of anxiety as evidenced by negative attitudes, subjective perceptions, beliefs, and feelings toward foreign language classes. The FLCAS is a self-report instrument that consists of 33 items aiming to assess a learner's level of foreign language anxiety and to measure whether language anxiety is a specific form to language learning or not. The FLCAS items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale numbered from 1 to 5, which ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. This scale has been widely accepted from language researchers such as Horwitz (1991); Kim (2000); Liu (2006); MacIntyre (1988); MacIntyre & Gardner (1989).

2.3 Causes of Foreign Language Anxiety

Studies have discussed various variables concerning foreign language anxiety. Those studies have found factors like foreign language aptitude and language skills in relation to foreign

language anxiety (Ganschow & Sparks, 1996), teachers' belief (Cheng, Horwitz, and Schallert, 1999), students' perceptions about foreign language proficiency (Dewaele et al., 2008), and self-esteem (Yamini and Tahriri, 2006). Additionally, a synthesis of previous studies reveals that various factors lead to the feeling of anxiety in learning a foreign language. Horwitz et al. (1986) stress that foreign language anxiety is caused by three factors related to performance: 1) fear of negative evaluation, 2) communication apprehension, and 3) test anxiety. Fear of negative evaluation is the feeling of "apprehension about others' evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively" (Horwitz et al. 1986, p.127). Communication apprehension can be associated with foreign language anxiety because it is a form of situational anxieties related to interpersonal communication and oral expression (Argaman & Abu-Rabia, 2002; MacIntyre & Gardner 1989). To be more precise, people who fear from oral communication may feel anxious when asked to talk a foreign language as well. Foreign language anxiety can be linked to test anxiety, which is defined as "a type of performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 127).

Other causes are significant in provoking foreign language anxiety. Those causes are related to interpersonal issues and personal characteristics, such as fear of speaking a foreign language, low self-perceived foreign language proficiency, and low self-esteem. (Mahmoodzadeh, 2013; Young, 1991). Liu and Jackson (2008) stress fear of making mistakes, teachers' correction of learners' errors, and speaking in front of their teachers or peers are crucial causes of foreign language anxiety as well. Dewaele, Petrides, and Furnham (2008) suggest that learner's perception is an essential cause of foreign language anxiety. Other researchers such as Bailey et al. (1999) and Yamini and Tahriri (2006) and Young (1992) have explained that learner's degree of self-esteem negatively associates with foreign language anxiety. People with low self-esteem will be worried about the way that other people think toward them, which highly increase the level of anxiety.

Besides that, teachers' role and the learning atmosphere can also be causes of foreign language anxiety. For example, calling on students by the teachers in language classes could provoke the feeling of anxiety for the students. Aydin (2008) also states that the manner of correcting the mistakes of students by teachers is another source of anxiety. Argaman and Abu-Rabia (2002) reveal that attitudes and personalities of teachers can be indicators of foreign language anxiety. All those causes have been supported by recent studies like Aydin (2016), Kurk (2018), Sammephet and Wanphet (2013), and Yoon (2012).

The literature on foreign language anxiety can generally be summarized into six major causes stemmed from three primary sources: the learner, the educator, and instructional practice. These causes are 1) interpersonal and personal anxiety, 2) learners' beliefs about learning a foreign language, 3) classroom procedures, 4) employing teacher-centered method, 5) teachers' beliefs about language teaching, and 6) language examination (Young, 1991). More recently, Luo (2012) believes the main sources that lead to experiencing foreign language anxiety are the classroom atmosphere, attributes of learners, the target language, and the process of foreign language learning itself.

2.4 Effects of Foreign Language Anxiety

Research done on foreign language anxiety has shown that anxiety associated with foreign language has negative effects on foreign language learning (Horwitz, Tallon and Luo, 2010; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 1999; Marwan, 2016). Those effects can be classified into five main effects. First, academically, foreign language anxiety indicates to the level of language proficiency in which experiencing high levels of foreign language anxiety lead to a poor academic achievement. Studies have reported that a negative relationship has been found between foreign language anxiety and academic achievement as well (Horwitz, 2001). Another academic effect is students' drop out. So, Bailey, Onwnegbuzie, and Daley (2003) show that high anxious students are more probable to drop out their courses than low anxious students. Second, socially, high - level anxious students are not interested in communicating with others (Price, 1991). Horwitz et al. (2010) claim that language anxiety leads students to be unwilling to communicate in English. Third, cognitively, foreign language anxiety can be as an affective filter that denies information from reaching a learner's cognitive processing system (Krashen, 1982; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1989). Fourth, affectively, since anxiety is one of the affective factors in language acquisition, it may negatively influence the other affective factors such as motivation and attitude. Horwitz et al. (2010) report that foreign language anxiety likely influences a student's feeling about the study. Liu and Huang (2011) state that anxiety is negatively associated with students' English learning motivation. Finally, personally, students who experience anxiety in learning a foreign language could become miserable, worried, forgetful, sweaty, and such other symptoms.

3. Conclusion

A review of related literature on foreign language anxiety shows that foreign language anxiety is a challenging issue in foreign language learning. However, researchers should treat this issue systematically and offer fully understanding. A thorough understanding of causes of foreign language anxiety would help to find ways to reduce this problem. Based on this comprehensive review, more studies in this field are still needed to confirm previous studies on foreign language anxiety. This study suggests research timeline was conducted up to this time. It is also noticed that foreign language anxiety has negative effects on foreign language learning. Finally, it shows the well-known instrument (FLCAS) that measure the level of foreign language anxiety among language learners.

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