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University summer school students' foreign language anxiety levels

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Abstract

The relationship between anxiety and language learning has been scrutinized since the 1960s. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) proposed a situation-specific foreign language anxiety scale to search students' uncomfortable experiences and negative emotional reactions to language learning. By using this scale, I aimed to investigate foreign language anxiety level of a group of university summer school students taking English as a common compulsory course. Although the participants were the ones who suffered from repeated failure in English, their anxiety level was found to be moderate. Also, they mostly blamed their previous learning experiences for their present foreign language anxiety.

Keywords: Foreign language anxiety; English as a foreign language;

1. Introduction

Anxiety reaction is observed to influence learners' ability to perform successfully in foreign language classroom. The relationship between anxiety and language learning has been scrutinized since the mid 1960s because the possibility that anxiety interferes with second language learning and performance has been an intriguing issue for many scholars. As being one of the affective variables influencing learning, anxiety can either be a state or a permanent trait of fear or apprehension (Horwitz & Young, 1991; MacIntrye, 1995; Young, 1998). In general terms, anxiety is defined as "an unpleasant emotional state or condition which is characterized by subjective feelings of tension, apprehension, and worry, and by activation or arousal of the autonomic nervous system" (Spielberger, 1983, cited in Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986, p. 125).

It is believed that foreign language (FL) anxiety is specific and unique as it involves learners' self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom learning (Horwitz et al, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). Due to the need for specifying the type of anxiety to be measured by researchers, Horwitz et al (1986) proposed a situation-specific foreign language anxiety construct. They called this construct FL anxiety which they believed was responsible for students' uncomfortable experiences and negative emotional reactions to language learning.

2. Literature Review

The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) which was developed by Horwitz et al (1986) has been used in many studies measuring FL anxiety and found highly reliable. In their study, MacIntyre and Gardner (1989)

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for instance factor analyzed eleven anxiety scales to show that scales of FL anxiety and state anxiety are associated with performance. Phillips (1992) used a group of French learners' oral exam scores, FLCAS results and interview data to come up with some findings supporting an inverse relationship between FL anxiety and performance. In another study, von Wörde (2003) conducted the FLCAS and phenomenological interviews with students from a diverse set of language classrooms (French, German and Spanish) who reported numerous sources of anxiety (e.g., speaking activities, inability to comprehend, negative classroom experiences, fear of negative evaluation, native speakers and so on). Focusing on listening comprehension and anxiety, Elkhafaifi (2005) used listening comprehension grades of 233 Arabic language program students who answered two anxiety surveys, a foreign language listening anxiety scale and the FLCAS designed by Horwitz et al (1986). According to the results, FL anxiety and listening anxiety are separate but also found to be related as they both correlate negatively with achievement.

Among the anxiety research conducted in Turkish educational context, Aydın (1999) investigated the sources of FL anxiety that Turkish students of English experience in speaking and writing. By using self-report instruments-the FLCAS, the beliefs about language learning inventory, diaries and interviews, she observed three main sources of FL anxiety; students' personal concerns, teachers' manner in the classroom and the teaching procedures in speaking and writing classes. In another study, Bekleyen (2009) used the FLCAS and the foreign language listening anxiety scale together with interviews and the participants' final course grades. The findings revealed several sources of listening anxiety; the low priority placed on listening in the participants' previous education, and the failure to recognize the spoken from of a known word, segments of sentences or weak forms of words. Gültekin-Çakar (2009) on the other hand investigated the relationship between past language learning experiences and FL anxiety levels of university English as foreign language (EFL) students. The previous learning experiences of both high and low anxiety students were observed to have an impact on forming the current anxiety levels of the participants. With a focus on writing anxiety, Atay and Kurt (1996) employed a second language writing anxiety inventory and an open-ended questionnaire to show that more than half of the participating prospective teachers had high or average writing anxiety.

As language teachers, we oftentimes come across extremely anxious students who are "highly motivated to avoid engaging in the classroom activities they fear most, they may appear simply unprepared or indifferent" (Horwitz et al, 1986,p. 131). Similar to math anxiety which serves as a job filter channeling some women and some members of minority groups away from high-paying jobs, FL anxiety may also be a factor in students' selection of departments or in their objections to class requirements. Therefore, "teachers should always consider the possibility that anxiety is responsible for the student behaviors. Before attributing poor student performance solely to lack of ability, inadequate background, or poor motivation" (Horwitz et al, 1986, p. 131). Keeping this tenet in mind, with this study I aimed to investigate FL anxiety level of a group of university summer school students taking English as a common compulsory course. The reason for the choice of these students was that English is one of the common compulsory courses in universities in Turkey and students failing this course suffer a lot because of repeated failure. Therefore, they take it in summer school "to get rid of the so called "trouble" of their academic lives" (Yayli, 2010, p. 3798). As suggested in the literature, poor student performance may be related to their FL anxiety and one of the most commonly used tools of data collection is the FLCAS developed by Horwitz et al (1986). Hence, in the present study, I used the translated version of FLCAS and semi-structured interviews to answer the following research questions:

1. What level of FLCA do the participants have?
2. What are the possible sources and effects of FLCA?
3. Do the participants have strategies to cope with FLCA?

3. Method
3.1. Instruments
3.1.1. FLCAS

Developed by Horwitz et al (1986), the FCLAS is a 33-item paper-and-pencil questionnaire which aims to measure levels of anxiety experienced by foreign language learners. In essence, it is based on an analysis of potential sources of anxiety in a language classroom covering three components; communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation in the foreign language classroom. This self-report measure is scored on a five-point Likert Scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. For the present study, the Turkish version of the scale

which was adapted by Aydın (1999) was used because of the foreign language proficiency level of the participants. Similar to the scale she used, I also eliminated the 27th item "I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes" from the scale because the participants of the study were taking one or two more courses other than English in their summer school education. The internal consistency was .93 (*n*=75) in Horwitz et al. (1986) and in the present study the estimated reliability for the FLCAS (Cronbach's alpha) was .94 (*n*=103).

3.1.2. Semi-structured interviews

Drawing upon the interview questions used in previous FL anxiety research (Bekleyen, 2009; von Wörde, 2003), the following set of interview questions were prepared to elicit answers related to the participants' FL anxiety, its sources and effects, and the participants' possible coping strategies:

1. Do you feel confident or nervous while learning English in class?
2. (If the answer to the previous question is I feel nervous), what are the causes of your nervousness or anxiety?
3. Have you shared your experience of learning anxiety with anyone?
4. How do you think your anxiety affects your learning English?
5. What do you do to cope with this feeling?

3.2. Data analysis

In July, 2010, all the 103 students taking English as a common compulsory course in summer school were asked to answer the FCLAS. After completing the FLCAS, 18 students voluntarily participated in the second phase of the study, semi-structured interviews. For research purposes, the data gathered from these two sources were analyzed by means of a combination of quantitative and qualitative strategies. The FLCAS was analyzed by summing the participants' ratings of the 32 items. As for the qualitative data obtained in the second phase of the study, the audio-taped interviews were transcribed verbatim and the transcriptions were subjected to content analysis (Dörnyei, 2007; Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). Through purposive reading, I looked for ideas that led me up from the particular transcriptions to the themes (Richards, 2005) of the second and third research questions.

4. Results and Discussion

The first research question concerned the FLCA level of the participants who were prospective teachers of various programs such as Turkish language, pre-school, classroom, science or social science. The possible scores of the translated version of the FLCAS used in this study ranged from 32 to 160. The data were analyzed in order to determine the mean scores and standard deviations for each item of the scale. The total scale scores ranged from 1 to 5, and the participants' mean FLCA value was found 3.27. Therefore, corroborating Gültekin-Çakar's (2009) findings, the anxiety level of these students was classified as moderate (i.e., between 2.31-3.60).

Also, the highest and the lowest mean scores were determined to observe the strong and weak causes of FL anxiety of the participants (Table 1 and Table 2). While the items 10, 9 and 1 received the highest mean score, the items 6, 30 and 25 scored the lowest. Corroborating Gültekin-Çakar's (2009) study, "failing English course" formed the biggest cause of anxiety for the participants. Among the items with the lowest mean scores, item 30 also emerged in Gültekin-Çakar's (2009) analysis. Although speaking in front of the class is seen as an exclusive source of anxiety (Young, 1990), the participants in this study were not observed to suffer from peer pressure while speaking in the language classroom. Interestingly, the items 9 and 1 got the next highest mean scores, which could be interpreted as that the participants felt anxious while speaking with the teacher not with their peers especially when they were not prepared. Fear of receiving negative evaluation exists in sensitive students who are doubtful about their abilities in language (MacIntyre&Gardner, 1991).

Table 1
The highest mean scores of the FLCAS

No	Item	M	SD
10	I worry about the consequences of failing English course	3.96	1.07
9	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English classes	3.81	1.12
1	I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in English classes	3.73	1.10

Table 2
The lowest mean scores of the FLCAS

No	Item	M	SD

6	During English classes, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course	2.84	1.31
30	I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English	2.84	1.39
25	English classes move so quickly I worry about getting left behind	2.86	1.34

The second research question concerned the possible sources and effects of the FL anxiety that the participants had. They all agreed that their anxiety influenced their present learning negatively and most of them blamed their previous learning experiences (i.e., their experiences in primary and secondary education) for the anxiety they had in their common compulsory English course at university.

Since I was a weak student in English classes in middle and high school, I felt anxious in English classes at university as well. In fact I would want to be a research assistant after I graduate but I cannot because of my low level in English. (P4)

I started school in Van and I never had an English teacher. The other field teachers forced us to memorize long texts in English or let us play football during English classes. That is why I could not be successful in English here, either. (P11)

The mostly stated causes and effects of the participants' FL anxiety corroborates the fact that FL anxiety is a learned response which occurs only after certain attitudes and emotions specific to the language learning experience are formed (Gültekin-Çakar, 2009; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1989; von Wörde, 2003). Therefore, high levels of anxiety that some learners have are not an inherent state but a direct consequence of environment and negative experiences (Young, 1990; 1992). As these negative experiences persist, this anxiety becomes a regular occurrence which causes performance deficits.

Finally, the third research question concerned the participants' coping strategies. In interviews, 12 out of the 18 participants stated that they did not do anything to deal with their anxiety. The others however stated that they stated to take private courses from English teachers or attended English courses other than the one offered at university. Some other coping strategies stated were listening to English songs with their lyrics or watching movies with subtitles. With all these, their purpose was to like and understand English better so that they believed they could be more successful. According to the affective filter hypothesis, success in language learning and students' emotional condition are directly related (Krashen, 1982). The participants were also observed to share their anxiety problem with their close friends or family members to seek guidance or relief. The participants found sharing their fears with others helpful as anxiety is reduced for many students by knowing that they are not alone in their fears (Foss & Reitzel, 1988).

5. Conclusion

It is well documented in the literature that anxiety reaction has an influence on learners' ability to perform successfully in foreign language classroom. In this study, although the participants were the ones who suffered from repeated failure in English, their anxiety level was found moderate. Also, they saw their previous learning experiences as the main cause of their FL anxiety. Thus, a word of caution is due here. Not only tertiary level English teachers but, equally or more importantly, all the language teachers working at primary and secondary levels should be familiar with the FLCAS instrument to increase their awareness of FL anxiety, to better understand students' learning experiences and thus to refrain from causing negative feelings about learning.

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