



Foreign Language Anxiety, Important Causes, and Effective Solutions

Narjes Ghafournia

Department of Language, Neyshabur Branch, Islamic Azad University, Neyshabur, Iran.

Email Address: narjesghafournia@yahoo.com

Abstract

The present paper is a brief review of the important sources of foreign language anxiety concerning the viewpoints of different scholars. Foreign language anxiety is seen in every aspect of language learning, particularly in speaking settings, in which language learners have to speak in front of others and may be corrected by others. Foreign language learning anxiety may be arisen a lot when language learners are constantly corrected by language teachers in front of many students in language learning settings. In this paper, some probably influential solutions are given to resolve the problem and decrease language learners' anxiety problem and facilitate learning process. In this paper, the role of language teacher in decreasing the degree of foreign language anxiety has been explored.

Key Words: Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), Foreign language learning, language communication

Introduction

FLA has the same clinical picture as any other type of anxiety (Horwitz, 1986) – sweating, palpitations, trembling, apprehension, worry, fear, threat, difficult concentration, forgetfulness, freezing, going blank and avoidance behavior (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986). In the research conducted by Hashemi and Abbasi (2013), the participants described their own signs of anxiety such as blushing, perspiration, staggered voice, either too fast or too slow speed of speech, rubbing the palms, poor performance, less being interpretative, less eye contact because of the reading from the paper or screen while giving presentations, and so forth.

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA)



FLA may be a result as well as a cause of insufficient command of the target language (Sparks – Ganschow, 1991). Eysenck (1979) explained the negative effects of anxiety in foreign language learning saying that anxious people divide their attention between task-related cognition and self-related cognition, making cognitive performance less efficient. Learners commonly report various kinds of evaluative situations, in which their knowledge and performance of foreign language will be monitored by people around them as the most stressful situation contributing to FLA. They fear to make mistakes and as a result get corrected by the teacher in front of their classmates.

Horwitz related	(1986)	established	three
foreign	language	performance	anxieties:
1.	communication		apprehension,
2.	test		anxiety,
3. fear of negative evaluation.			

Communication apprehension is defined as the anxiety to communicate with people, to talk in front of others, and to talk in groups. Despite the fact that communication apprehension leads to communication fear, it also causes fear of not being able to understand the others' speech. Test anxiety, arises out of the fear of failing to perform. It can be explained through the high demands that learners put on themselves to be perfect masters of the foreign language.

Fear of negative evaluation is explained as the learners' expectation to be evaluated negatively by others in any kind of situations (Wörde, 2003). Since FLA is a psychological construct, it most likely stems from the learner's own "self" (Scovel 1991, p. 16) – self perceptions, perceptions about others, perceptions about FL learning and performance, etc. Therefore, competitiveness and self-esteem may also be a potential source of learners' anxiety. Bailey (1983) claimed that the Competitive nature can lead to anxiety because students tend to compare themselves or idealize self-images. Moreover, low-esteem causes worry and fear of the negative responses or evaluation from the classmates (Krashen, 1985).

Likewise, cultural and social environment, mainly the environment where learning takes place may influence the students' level of anxiety. Other causes of anxiety may be students' own concerns about their ethnicity, foreignness, social status, relations within the class or gender (Hashemi – Abbasi, 2013). What is considered as the major source of stress is following traditional learning styles due to great strictness and formality.

Generally, we call the factors stemming from the individual's inner-self, intrinsic motivators and the factors stemming from the outer environment, the extrinsic motivators (Scovel, 1991). Moreover, English plays an important role in a global market as it is a communication language of business, education, science and technology. This fact may n the one



hand serves as a motivator for students, but on the other hand, it may be perceived by students as pressure and consequently negatively contribute to FLA (Tranet al., 2012). Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) explained that FLA mostly shows up in its strongest form in testing situations. Students claim that they know and understand the certain grammar, but they tend to “forget” them when it comes to test or oral exercise when many grammatical points must be recalled at the same time. Doing persistent errors in spelling or syntax due to nervousness is also very common. Horwitz, et al also explained that overstudying is a related phenomenon. Although students devote a lot of time to studying, they still do poorly in tests or oral exams. They become even more frustrated when they realize they do the same mistakes repeatedly.

On the contrary, some students tend to give up, avoid studying or miss the class to alleviate their anxiety.

As every human is individual and distinct in their character, the above-mentioned causes and consequences influence each student in a different way and severity.

Research Results on Foreign Language Anxiety

Most research studies confirmed the debilitating effect of FLA on FL learning. What is more, it has been documented that the relationship between FLA and FL achievement can be affected by a number of other factors. Research has also examined how FLA and FL achievement are related to a number of variables, such as age, length of FL study, gender, living or staying in a FL country, academic achievement, other FLs learned, self-perceived FL proficiency, perceived self-worth, and perfectionism (Kunt – Tm, 2010). Perhaps one of the most interesting findings of this research is that advanced learners and learners who have lived or stayed.

Teaching Foreign Languages in Inclusive Way
Nitra: Constantine the Philosopher University, 2015 in a FL country are more susceptible of FLA (Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999; Kitano, 2001; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). Kitano (2001) found a relationship between gender and the anxiety – male learners, who perceived themselves as less competent in FL, suffered from FLA more than female learners.

Most research has proven that there is a negative correlation between FLA and FL achievement in a large number of contexts and situations (Horwitz, 1986; Horwitz, 1996; Kunt, 1997; Yan, 1998; Sellers, 2000; Kitano, 2001; Yan and Wang, 2001). Anxiety also has negative influence on the three stages of cognitive processing: input, processing and output (MacIntyre – Gardner, 1991). Furthermore, a number of studies have examined FLA in relation to specific language skills, such as reading, listening, and speaking (Saito – Samimy, 1996; Cheng, 1998; Cheng –



Horwitz – Schallert, 1999; Saito – Horwitz – Garza, 1999; Sellers, 2000; Argaman – Abu-Rabia, 2002; Cheng, 2002; Elkhafaifi, 2005). Dixson (1991) found out that while listening, anxious students had difficulty to comprehend the content of the target language. Sellers (2000) investigated the relationship between anxiety and reading and concluded that anxious students do not understand the tasks correctly and tend to recall less passage content while reading than their less anxious mates. As regards speaking, more anxious students produce longer texts and smaller continuous speech and make longer mid-clause pauses (Djigunovic, 2006). All of these studies provide evidence for the existence of skill- specific FLA.

More recently, Baran-Lucarz (2013) has investigated the effect of anxiety on the learning of phonetics – Phonetics Learning Anxiety – which represents an interesting step in the understanding of the impact of affective factors on pronunciation. She points out that no instrument has been designed yet to examine specifically the pronunciation anxiety (Baran-Lucarz, 2013, p. 60-61).

In Woodrow's research (2006) it is stated that English language learners from countries such as China, Korea and Japan were more anxious than other ethnic groups. Further, Al-Saraj (2011) explains why Saudi Arabian culture creates a social and cultural setting for examining FLA. The education system in Saudi Arabia is free for all levels, where male and female students are separated, typically attending segregated schools.

The Role of Teacher

Beyond all doubt, a teacher plays one of the most important roles in increasing or alleviating anxiety by students. Price (1991) explains, that students need to feel teacher's support encouragement and patience with their errors without being excessively critical. In the research by Al-Saraj (2011), the majority of participants pointed out teacher's characteristics as the major cause of their anxiety. Teacher's no-sense explaining of the subject, over-correcting the students and visible favoritism strongly contributed to increasing anxiety by the students as well. Moreover, teacher's authoritative nature, embarrassing and humiliating attitude towards students create stressful environment in the class (Tanveer, 2007). Therefore, it is important that teachers pay attention to signals of anxiety radiating from the students and accommodate the later steps.

Hashemi and Abbasi (2013) have collected some helpful recommendations for teachers to alleviate anxiety by students:

1. Scan for the signs of anxiety by students and apply quick strategies to help them overcome the destructive feelings.
2. Create student-friendly and learning-supportive environment in the class.
. Create friendship and cooperation among students.
4. Put more emphasis on formative assessment and constructive feedback rather than summative assessment.



5. A communicative approach should be adopted so that students get more chances to practice their speaking skills.
6. Encourage students not to be afraid of doing mistakes.
7. Do not correct student's each mistake. Horwitz et al. (1986) recommended teachers to select the error correction techniques and base them upon instructional philosophy to reduce defensive reactions in students.
8. Make students feel successful and satisfied when using FL.
9. Choose activities and task that do not cause instant frustration.
10. Initiate discussion about how the students feel, for instance, when giving presentations, and help them overcome their worries.
11. Search for more training courses on general psychology including language anxiety and learning differences.

It may also be helpful for students to find their own strategies to overcome anxiety in stressful situations. Many students like to have some rituals before big exams or they keep talismans close. Hauck and Hurd (2005) have collected a few strategies to deal with FLA:

1. Be positive and use positive self-talk such as "It will be OK, I will do it, etc".
2. Take risks and guess the meaning or try to speak although you make mistakes.
3. Give yourself a reward after accomplishing the task

If you are anxious when speaking in front of people, imagine that those are you friends and it is an informal chat. (Many students tend to imagine cabbage heads or different objects instead of the people in the audience.)

5. Write down your feelings or let your teacher know about how you feel. Moreover, relaxation techniques are becoming more and more discussed nowadays. Deep breathing, meditation or getting moving are some of the examples. Robinson et al. (2015) suggest progressive muscle relaxation, visualization meditation, yoga or tai chi as further techniques how to overcome stress and alleviate anxiety from the longitudinal point of view.

The above-mentioned recommendations and strategies may be very helpful in the classroom but it is important to bear in mind that all the students are different in their feelings and manifestation and each student requires different approach from the teacher.

Causes of Foreign Language Learning Anxiety

Foreign language classroom anxiety is attributable to a variety of causes. Price (1991) maintained that levels of difficulty in some foreign language classes, students' personal perceptions of their own language aptitude, certain personality variables (e.g., perfectionism or fear of public speaking), and stressful classroom experiences were all possible causes of anxiety. Learners' individual personality traits, such as introversion or extraversion, are associated with anxiety arousal (Brown et al. 2001; Gregersen and Horwitz 2002). Young (1991) identified six potential sources of language anxiety from three areas of arousal: the learner, the teacher, and the



instructional practice. He claimed that language anxiety is caused by (1) learners' personal and interpersonal anxiety, (2) learners' beliefs about language learning, (3) instructors' beliefs about language teaching, (4) instructor-learner interactions, (5) classroom procedures, and (6) language testing.

The cognitive component of anxiety was emphasized early in the literature (Eysenck 1979). Eysenck believed that 'worry' and 'emotionality' constituted two categories of anxiety. For him, the 'worry' component includes cognitive manifestations, such as comparing personal performance to that of peers, considering the consequences of failure, low levels of confidence in performance, and excessive worry over evaluation. The emotionality component refers to the concomitant negative feelings caused by physiological functioning, such as increased galvanic skin response and heart rate, dizziness, nausea, and feelings of panic. Eysenck argued that anxious learners were more often engaged in task-irrelevant cognitive processing than their non-anxious counterparts; hence, the task-irrelevant processing activities 'preempt some of the available effort and capability of working memory' (p. 378). In other words, anxious learners may be anxious about their being anxious, thus hampering the capacity of their working memory. To be more specific, anxious learners are usually more easily distracted, and the defense mechanism triggered by anxiety will interfere with the cognition threshold in learning.

Additionally, with more and more emphasis on communication-oriented language competence, MacIntyre (1998) pointed out that there emerges a pressing need to develop anxiety-reduction strategies and programs. A call for the amelioration of language anxiety was also suggested by Young (1994) and Alrabai (2015). Young (1994) claimed that 'unnatural' classroom procedures—the teacher's error-correcting methods, for example—and the way the teacher interacted with the students were aspects that might arouse students' anxiety. Therefore, pedagogical considerations in course planning need to take into account students' emotional states. Elkhafafi (2005) stated that teachers should provide class structures that ensure that their students' basic need to feel safe is met, and they should also make clear that language learning entails making mistakes, and mistakes are not demonstrations of failure, but a process of learning. Similarly, teachers should avoid turning the language classroom into a testing or competitive environment, but rather, create a supportive space conducive to learning comfortably. Alrabai (2015) further explored the influence of teachers' anxiety-reducing strategies on learners' foreign language anxiety. The findings revealed that teachers' anxiety-reducing strategy intervention led to significantly decreased levels of learners' foreign language anxiety. Kruk's (2018) recent investigation showed that language anxiety changes not only over a longer period (i.e., a semester) but also during a single class and from one language lesson to another.

Conclusion

The presence and influence of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety on performance has often been reported in the literature (e.g., Cubukcu 2007; Horwitz et al. 1986; Liu 2006; MacIntyre and Gardner 1991). Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) claimed that language anxiety was the best single correlate of achievement. In a similar vein, Ganschow et al. (1994) study demonstrated that students with high levels of anxiety exhibited poorer language skills. Ganschow and Sparks



(1996) also reported that students with low anxiety levels outperformed those with high anxiety levels overall.

References

- Alrabai, F. (2015). The influence of teachers' anxiety-reducing strategies on learners' foreign language anxiety. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 9(2), 163–190.
- Al-Saraj T. M. (2011). Foreign language anxiety: What is it? Paper presented at 4th Bloomsbury Student Conference in Applied Linguistics. Birkbeck College, University of London, the UK. 2-3. Retrieved on 20th October 2015 from https://scholar.google.com/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=en&user=02s0WsMAAAAJ&citation_for_view=02s0WsMAAAAJ:d1gkVwhDpl0C.
- Argaman, O., Abu-Rabia, S. (2002). The influence of language anxiety on English reading and writing tasks among native Hebrew speakers. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 15, 143-160.
- Bailey, K. M. (1983). Competitiveness and anxiety in adult second language learning: Looking at and through the diary studies. In H. W. Seliger and M. H. Long (Eds.), *Classroom oriented research in second language acquisition*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Baran-Łucarz. (2013). Phonetics learning anxiety - results of a preliminary study. *Research in Language* Vol. 11.1: 57-79. DOI: 10.2478/v10015-012-0005-9.
- Brown, JD, Robson, G, Rosenkjar, PR (2001). Personality, motivation, anxiety, strategies, and language proficiency of Japanese students. In Z Dörnyei, RW Schmidt (Eds.), *Motivation and second language acquisition*, (pp. 361–398). Honolulu: University of Hawaii.
- Cheng, Y. (1998). Examination of two anxiety constructs: Second language class anxiety and second language writing anxiety. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Texas at Austin.
- Cheng, Y. (2002). Factors associated with foreign language writing anxiety. *Foreign Language Annals*, 35, 647-656.
- Cheng, Y., Horwitz, E. K., Schallert, D. L. (1999). Language anxiety: Differentiating writing and speaking components. *Language Learning*, 49, 417-449.
- Cubukcu, F. (2007). Foreign language anxiety. *Iranian Journal of Language Studies*, 1(2), 133–142.
- Dixson, R. (1991). Listening comprehension: Textual, contextual, cognitive, and affective considerations. Paper presented at the Annual Central States Conference on Language Teaching (23rd, Indianapolis, IN, March 21-24). (ED 332513)
- Djigunovic, J. M. (2006). Language anxiety and language processing. In S. H. Foster- Cohen, M. M. Krajnovic and J. M. Djigunovic (eds), *EUROSLA Yearbook 6*, pp. 191-212.



- Elkhafaifi, H. (2005). Listening comprehension and anxiety in the Arabic language classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, 89, 206–220. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2005.00275.x>.
- Eysenck, MW. (1979). Anxiety, learning, and memory: A reconceptualization. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 13, 363–385. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0092-6566\(79\)90001-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/0092-6566(79)90001-1).
- Ganschow, L, & Sparks, R. (1996). Anxiety about foreign language learning among high school women. *The Modern Language Journal*, 80, 199–212. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1996.tb01160.x>.
- Ganschow, L, Sparks, RL, Anderson, R, Javorshy, J, Skinner, S, Patton, J. (1994). Differences in language performance among high-, average-, and low-anxious college foreign language learners. *The Modern Language Journal*, 78, 41–55. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1994.tb02013.x>.
- Gregersen, T, & Horwitz, EK. (2002). Language learning and perfectionism: anxious and non-anxious. *The Modern Language Journal*, 86, 562–570.
- Hashemi M., Abbasi M. (2013). The role of the teacher in alleviating anxiety in language classes. *International Journal of Applied and Basic Sciences*. Science Explore Publications, 4 (3), 2251-838X.
- Hauck M., Hurd S. (2005). Language learning and perfectionism: Anxious and non-anxious language learners' reactions to their own oral performance. *The Modern Language Journal*, 86, 562-570.
- Horwitz, E. K. (1986). Preliminary evidence for the reliability and validity of a Foreign Language Anxiety Scale. *TESOL Quarterly*, 20 (3), 559-562.
- Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., Cope, J. A. (1986). Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol. 70 (2), 125-132.
- Kitano, K. (2001). Anxiety in the college Japanese language classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, 85, 549-566.
- Krashen, S. D. (1985). *The input hypothesis: Issues and implications*. Torrance, CA: Lored Publishing.
- Kruk, M. (2018). Changes in foreign language anxiety: A classroom perspective. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 28(1), 31–57.
- Kunt, N. (1997). Anxiety and beliefs about language learning: A study of Turkish-speaking university students learning English in North Cyprus. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of Texas, Austin.
- Kunt, N., Tm, D. O. (2010). Non- feelings of foreign language anxiety. *World Conference on Educational Sciences*, Bahcesehir University, Istanbul, Turkey. *Procedia, Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2 (2), 4672-4676.



- MacIntyre, PD. (1998). Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in a L2: a situational model of L2 confidence and affiliation. *The Modern Language Journal*, 82, 545–562. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1998.tb05543.x>.
- MacIntyre, P. D., Gardner, R. C. (1991). Language anxiety: Its relation to other anxieties and top-processing in native and second languages. *Language Learning*; 41, 513-534.
- Onwuegbuzie, A. J., Bailey, P., Daley, C, E. (1999). Factors Associated With Foreign Language Anxiety. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, Vol. 20 (2), 217-239.
- Price, ML (1991). The subjective experience of foreign language anxiety: interviews with highly anxious students. In EK Horwitz, DJ Young (Eds.), *Language anxiety: From theory and research to classroom implications*, (pp. 101–108). Englewood Cliff: Prentice Hall.
- Robinson, L., Segal, R., Segal, J., Smith, M. (2015). Relaxation techniques for stress relief. Retrieved November 5, from <http://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm>.
- Saito, Y., Horwitz, E. K., Garza, T. J. (1999). Foreign language reading anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 83, 202-218.
- Saito, Y., Samimy, K. K. (1996). Foreign language anxiety and language performance: A study of learner anxiety in beginning, intermediate, and advanced-level college students of Japanese. *Foreign Language Annals*, 29, 239-251.
- Scovel, T. (1991). The Effect of Affect on Foreign Language Learning: A Review of the Anxiety Research, in Horwitz, E. K. – Young, D. J. (eds.) *Language Anxiety: From Theory and Research to Classroom Implications*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 15-24.
- Sellers, V. D. (2000). Anxiety and reading comprehension in Spanish as a foreign language. *Foreign Language Annals*, 33 (5), pp. 512-521.
- Sparks, R. L., Ganschow, L. (1991). Foreign language learning differences: Affective or native language aptitude differences? *The Modern Language Journal*, 75, 3-16.
- Tanveer, M. (2007). Investigations of the factors that cause language anxiety for ESL/EFL learners in learning speaking skills and the influence it casts on communication in the target language. Unpublished Thesis, Faculty of Education, University of Glasgow
- Tran ,T. T. T., Karen M., Baldauf , R. B. Jr. (2012). Foreign language anxiety and its effect on students' determination to study English: To abandon or not to abandon? *TESOL in Context: Special Edition S3*
- Woodrow, L. (2006). Anxiety and Speaking English as a Second Language. *RELC Journal*, 37(308), 308-328.



Wörde, V. R. (2003). Students' perspectives on foreign language anxiety. *Inquiry*, 8 (1)

Yan, X. (1998). An examination of foreign language classroom anxiety: Its sources and effects in a college English program in China. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Texas, Austin.

Yan, J. X., Wang, P. (2001). The impact of language anxiety on students' Mandarin learning in Hong Kong. *Language Teaching and Research*, 6, 1-7.

Young, DJ. (1991). Creating a low-anxiety classroom environment: what does language anxiety research suggest? *The Modern Language Journal*, 75, 426-439. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1991.tb05378.x>.

اضطراب زبان خارجی، علل مهم و راه حل های موثر

نرجس غفورنیا

Email Address: narjesghafournia@yahoo.com

گروه زبان انگلیسی، واحد نیشابور، دانشگاه آزاد اسلامی، نیشابور، ایران

چکیده

مقاله حاضر مروری کوتاه بر عوامل مهم اضطراب زبان خارجی از دیدگاه دانشمندان مختلف است. اضطراب زبان خارجی در هر جنبه ای از یادگیری زبان دیده می شود، به ویژه در محیط های گفتاری، که در آن زبان آموزان باید در مقابل دیگران صحبت کنند و ممکن است توسط دیگران اصلاح شوند. اضطراب یادگیری زبان خارجی ممکن است زمانی به وجود بیاید که زبان آموزان به طور مداوم توسط مدرسان زبان در مقابل بسیاری از فراگیران زبان در محیط های یادگیری زبان تصحیح می شوند. در این مقاله راه حل های ممکن تأثیرگذار برای حل مشکل و کاهش اضطراب زبان آموزان و تسهیل فرآیند یادگیری زبان خارجی ارائه شده است. در این مقاله نقش مدرسان زبان در کاهش درجه اضطراب زبان خارجی بررسی شده است.

کلمات کلیدی: اضطراب زبان خارجی (FLA)، یادگیری زبان خارجی، ارتباط زبانی