



Anxiety in the Foreign-Language Classroom

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Abstract. The study aims to analyse the relationship of socio-biographical variables (gender, language proficiency) and generalized anxiety with the foreign-language learning anxiety of 210 adolescents and young adults. Data analyses revealed that higher levels of general anxiety correspond to significantly higher foreign-language learning anxiety scores. A higher level of proficiency in foreign language was linked to lower levels of foreign-language anxiety. The study is a part of research projects VEGA 1/0409/17 and KEGA 060UK-4/2017.

Keywords: *emotions, learning, foreign-language learning, language learning anxiety.*

Introduction

Emotions in the classroom have an impact upon an individual's achievement, the classroom climate and atmosphere and interpersonal relationships, but also upon learning itself. While positive emotions like joy, satisfaction and happiness facilitate learning and students' engagement (Shernoff et al., 2003), negative ones like anger, fear or anxiety lead to inhibition and they may limit the students' motivation, participation and learning outcomes. Teachers are expected to perceive, interpret and adequately react to the emotions in the classroom. Within the context of second- or foreign-language learning, among many emotions, one of the most discussed is foreign- or second-language learning anxiety. The aim of this study is to analyse the relationship of socio-biographical variables (gender, language proficiency) and general anxiety with foreign-language learning anxiety in Slovak adolescents and young adults.

Foreign-Language Learning Anxiety

Anxiety is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. While fear refers to emotional arousal caused by an external stimulus that means real danger (McMartin, 2017), anxiety can be defined as an objectless feeling of worry, a subjective feeling of tension, apprehension or nervousness related to an arousal of the automatic nervous system (Young, 1991). It also applies to “cases when our arousal far exceeds that which is warranted by objective reality” (McMartin, 2017, p. 213). Despite these differences, both fear and anxiety are accompanied by similar physiological reactions and they are often interconnected. Anxious people experience fear more often and frequent experiences of fear may induce anxiousness. Anxiety is usually classified into three types. Trait anxiety is a relatively stable characteristic of an individual’s personality. State anxiety is an apprehension experienced at a particular moment as a response to a definite situation (Spielberger et al., 1983). Situation-specific anxiety is related to experiencing tension in specific situations or around specific events, e.g., public-performance anxiety and test or exam anxiety. A certain level of anxiety may have a facilitative impact upon an individual’s performance because it increases activation and focuses attention on the problem (Stuchlíková, 2002). However, more often it has a debilitating effect linked with narrowing of the attention span, distractibility or cognitive apprehension about an individual’s performance. Therefore, anxiety is one of the most highly-studied psychological variables in an educational setting (Toth, 2010).

The concept of foreign-language learning anxiety attracts the attention of many scientific disciplines including psychology, pedagogy, didactics and psycholinguistics. As an interdisciplinary phenomenon, it has been studied and analysed using a variety of methods and approaches. From the psychological point of view, foreign-language learning anxiety can be defined as a type of anxiety that inhibits the process of acquisition and production of a target language. In other words, this anxiety creates deficits in the cognitive processing of foreign-language stimuli (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Zheng (2008, p. 8) describes foreign-language learning anxiety as a “central emotional construct that is essential in influencing second/foreign-language learning”. Typically, foreign-language learning anxiety is categorized as a situation-specific anxiety, similar to stage fright or test anxiety (Horwitz, 2010). MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) described foreign-language learning anxiety as part of a more general communicative anxiety. Other researchers (e.g., Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012) studied the relation between foreign-language learning anxiety and test or exam anxiety. Language learning anxiety is also often related to other personality characteristics, mainly perfectionism (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002) and lower self-esteem and self-confidence (Worde, 2003), self-worth, perceived abilities (Bailey, Onwuegbuzie, & Daley, 2000), and risk-taking (Worde, 2003).

Foreign-language learning anxiety negatively affects foreign-language achievement (Abu-Rabia, 2004), especially oral performance in a target language (Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012). According to Sparks et al. (1997) and Dewaele, Petrides, and Furnham (2008), there are differences in foreign-language learning anxiety across proficiency levels. More

detailed typologies of foreign-language anxiety were analysed to understand better the impact of anxiety on learning and performance in a foreign language. Bailey, Onwuegbuzie and Daley (2000) differentiate between input, processing and output anxiety types. Wensheng, Jjiamei and Wei (2009) combined the level of anxiety with the dominant coping strategy, and described five types of language learning anxiety: active-low anxiety, avoidance-low anxiety, neutral anxiety, active-high anxiety and avoidance-high anxiety. Students with low anxiety and active strategies are expected to achieve higher language proficiency than their counterparts with a high level of anxiety and avoidant strategies, similarly to the resignation which is linked to a high level of anxiety and positive thinking which is linked to a lower level of anxiety (Kao & Craigie, 2013). Teachers play an important role in the process of reducing foreign-language learning anxiety and classroom tension (Aida, 1994). According to Worde (2003) teachers should be able to provide a supportive and understanding environment to reduce negative emotions.

Research Questions

This study aims to analyse the relationship of socio-biographical variables (gender, language proficiency) and general anxiety with foreign-language learning anxiety in Slovak adolescents and young adults. Based on the results of previous research from other countries and sociolinguistic environments three research questions were posed:

1. Are there gender differences in the level of foreign-language learning anxiety?
2. Is foreign-language proficiency linked to levels of foreign-language learning anxiety?
3. Are higher levels of general anxiety linked to higher levels of foreign-language learning anxiety?

Method

Participants

The participants in the study were Slovak adolescent and young adult language learners (N = 210). They were recruited via e-mail and social media. Each participant who took part in the online survey had to declare that he or she was at least 18 years old and to give his or her informed consent for participation in the study. The mean age of the sample was 24.8 years (min = 18, max = 35), with 152 (72%) female and 58 (28%) male participants. All participants had finished their secondary school studies: 76 (36%) were studying at the university for their master's degree and 75 (36%) had finished their master's degree. Each participant learned at least two foreign languages. Their foreign-language learning anxiety was analysed for English as a foreign language. A total of 65 (31%) of the participants reported an expert level of English, having achieved level C1 or C2 based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, and either had a certificate or studied English for professional purposes at the university.

Instruments

The data were collected via three web-based questionnaires and analysed using SPSS 17.0 software. The first instrument (19 items) was related to the individual language learning history of the participants. The items covered their demographic data, the number of languages spoken or learned, language exams or certificates and self-reported achievement based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)

The scale was created by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope in 1983 to measure specific language learning-related anxiety. It consists of 33 items measuring three areas of anxiety: communication apprehension (item example: “I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class.”) test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation (item example: “I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign-language class.”). FLCAS is commonly used in many countries as a one-dimensional scale. Horwitz et al. (1986) reported excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .93$) and test-retest reliability ($r = 0.83$, $p < .001$). FLCAS has been adapted and validated in several language variants (Perez-Paredes & Martinez-Sanchez, 2001; Arnaiz & Guillen, 2012; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Toth, 2008; de la Morena Taboada, Buron & Martin, 2011).

General Fear, Social Anxiety and Communicative/Exam Anxiety Scale (KSAT)

The scale was published for the first time by Kondas in 1986, but the standardized version from 2007 was used for this study. The scale is designed to measure the level of object and situational fear, public-performance and test anxiety (jitters), and social and interpersonal anxiety. The instrument consists of 31 items with a five-point Likert-type scale grouped into three subscales: common fears (12 items, item example: “Seeing a snake.”), social situations anxiety (10 items, item example: “Being ignored by others.”) and public-performance and test anxiety (9 items, item example: “Speaking in public.”). Kondas (2007) reported adequate reliability of the instrument measured by test-retest correlation ($r = .89$), factor analysis and inter-correlations of the subscales.

Results

Descriptive Analysis and Reliability of Instruments

FLCAS in the Slovak sample ($N = 210$) proved to have excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .957$) with scale mean $M_{FLCAS} = 80.88$ and standard deviation $SD_{FLCAS} = 24.24$ (Table 1). Most of the individuals in the sample ($n = 142$, 68%) exhibit a moderate level of foreign-language anxiety. Exactly the same number of participants ($n = 34$, 16%) exhibit either low (-1SD) or high (+1SD) levels of foreign-language anxiety.

KSAT in our sample (N = 210) also had excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .905$) with scale mean $M_{KSAT} = 77.60$ and standard deviation $SD_{KSAT} = 18.67$ (Table 1). Based on normalized scores 49% of participants (n = 102) had moderate or low scores for generalized anxiety and 51% of participants (n = 108) had high scores.

Table 1
Descriptive analysis and reliability of instruments

	Items	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	α
FLCAS	33	40	160	80,88	24,24	0,744	0,342	0,957
KSAT	31	31	132	77,60	18,67	-0,079	-0,132	0,905

Gender Differences in Foreign-Language Learning Anxiety

Females are often considered to be more anxious than males (Kondas, 2007). According to Lewinsohn et al. (1998) women are twice as likely to experience an anxiety disorder compared with men. For generalized anxiety, significant gender differences were found. The mean score for general anxiety in women was 81.51 ($SD = 17.12$) and the mean score in men was 71.81 ($SD = 17.16$). The differences are significant for the generalized anxiety score and also for all three subscales (common fears, social situations anxiety and public-performance and test anxiety) confirming that women are more anxious than men. However, for foreign-language anxiety the difference was not statistically significant, even though men had lower scores in FLCAS than women (Table 2).

Table 2
Gender differences in foreign language learning anxiety

	female (n = 152)	male (n = 58)
Mean	82.38	76.97
SD	26.072	18.230
Median	80	75
Min	41	40
Max	160	120
Skewness	.705	.295
Kurtosis	.025	-.017
Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test	.101	.085
Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test – sig.	.001	.200
Mann-Whitney U-test		4048.5
Mann-Whitney U-test – sig.		.361
Cohen's <i>d</i>		.126

Foreign-Language Anxiety across Proficiency Levels

A high level of foreign-language anxiety may inhibit a student's capacity to acquire and produce foreign language. This characteristics leads to the assumption that only a learner with a lower level of foreign-language anxiety or one who can manage anxiety effectively can achieve advanced levels of proficiency. The participants who had obtained English-language certificates or studied English for professional purposes were grouped as advanced learners. The others formed a group of intermediate learners and beginners (based on their self-assessment). The advanced learners reported a significantly lower level of foreign-language anxiety than the intermediate learners and beginners (Table 3).

Table 3

Foreign language learning anxiety within proficiency levels

	advanced learners (n = 65)	intermediate learners & beginners (n = 145)
Mean	64.60	88.18
SD	16.422	23.659
Median	63	85
Min	40	41
Max	128	160
Skewness	1.161	.626
Kurtosis	2.306	.230
Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test	.112	.113
Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test – sig.	.041	.000
Mann-Whitney U-test		7588
Mann-Whitney U-test – sig.		.000
Cohen's <i>d</i>		1.116

Relation between Generalized Anxiety and Foreign-Language Learning Anxiety

Foreign-language learning anxiety seems to be related to communicative and exam anxiety (Hewitt, Stephenson, 2012). Correlation analysis revealed a significant correlation between FLCAS scores and communicative and test anxiety, between FLCAS and social anxiety and between foreign-language anxiety and overall generalized anxiety scores in KSAT. Only common fears are not significantly related to foreign-language learning anxiety (Table 4).

Table 4
Correlation matrix

	Communicative and test anxiety	Social anxiety	Common fears	KSAT	FLCAS
Communicative and test anxiety	1	.666**	.465**	.811**	.324**
Social anxiety		1	.655**	.902**	.149*
Common fears			1	.848**	.119
KSAT (generalized anxiety)				1	.223**
FLCAS					1

**Pearson correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

*Pearson correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

Based on the normative generalized anxiety scores in KSAT, the participants were divided into two groups: low scorers and high scorers in generalized anxiety. Non-parametric statistical analyses revealed that higher levels of generalized anxiety correspond to significantly higher foreign-language learning anxiety scores (Table 5).

Table 5
General anxiety and foreign language anxiety

	Low scorers in generalized anxiety (n = 102)	High scorers in generalized anxiety (n = 108)
Mean	76.17	85.33
SD	21.240	26.092
Median	73	83
Min	40	41
Max	136	160
Skewness	.606	.692
Kurtosis	.004	.124
Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test	.092	.104
Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test – sig.	.032	.006
Mann-Whitney U-test		6619.5
Mann-Whitney U-test – sig.		.012
Cohen's <i>d</i>		.354

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate differences in foreign-language learning anxiety among participants grouped by gender, foreign-language proficiency and scores in general anxiety. The Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1983) had adequate internal consistency in the Slovak sample. Similarly to Shabani's study (2012), the results showed that females are more anxious than males; however, in terms of foreign-language learning anxiety, there was no significant difference between males and females. This result suggests that the gender differences in anxiety are not manifested in the educational and instructional context in the same way as in generalized (trait or state) anxiety.

Regarding the link between foreign-language learning anxiety and language proficiency, significant differences were found between advanced learners and learners with lower proficiency. Advanced learners seem to be less anxious than the rest of the sample. Sparks et al. (1997) and Dewaele, Petrides, and Furnham (2008) also found differences in foreign-language learning anxiety across proficiency levels. As Worde (2003) reported, language anxiety may lead to lower self-esteem, self-confidence, and risk-taking ability; these factors may negatively affect proficiency in the second language.

The data analysis revealed a significant correlation between generalized anxiety and foreign-language learning anxiety. These findings correspond to previous studies (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Dewaele et al., 2008). Foreign-language learning anxiety is linked with social anxiety, communicative and test anxiety. A significant correlation was not revealed between foreign-language learning anxiety and common fear. However, learners with high scores for generalized anxiety reported significantly higher scores in foreign-language learning anxiety. Individuals with a higher level of generalized anxiety most probably tend to transfer their apprehension to educational situations in language learning that function as anxiety-provoking stimuli.

This research revealed that higher levels of generalized anxiety correspond to significantly higher foreign-language learning anxiety scores. A higher level of proficiency in English as a foreign language was linked to lower levels of foreign-language anxiety, but there are no significant gender differences in foreign-language learning anxiety. The research also had some limitations. For example, more detailed data on the educational context of foreign-language learning were not analysed. As anxiety is often a product of social learning, deeper analysis of foreign-language learning experiences is needed. The research sample was not homogenous for gender which might affect the analysis of gender differences.

Conclusion

The majority of the participants in our sample expressed a moderate or high level of anxiety related to foreign-language learning. Their language learning anxiety is related to general anxiety and there are differences in foreign language anxiety across proficiency levels. This anxiety may affect not only their performance in the foreign-language classroom but also their foreign-language competence in various real-life situations. These results might be useful for language teachers, who are expected to deal with emotions in the classroom and to reduce the negative impact of language learning anxiety upon students' learning and performance. Even more sensitivity to anxiety in the classroom is needed when teaching children from marginalized communities whose general communicative skills could differ from the mainstream population (Jursová Zacharová, Čierniková, & Glasová, 2017).

Teachers play an important role in reducing classroom tension (Aida, 1994). According to Worde (2003) teachers who provide a supportive and understanding environment and use non-threatening methods of instruction may enhance foreign-language learning. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) suggested that these methods should reduce stress-provoking learning situations and teach students how to cope with their anxiety. Kao and Craigie (2013) found that resignation as a coping strategy contributed to a higher level of foreign-language learning anxiety, while positive thinking was linked to lower levels of foreign-language learning anxiety. Teachers should be able to help students develop positive and active coping strategies. To be able to implement these methods and approaches effectively, the training of language teachers should be more focused on active practising professional vision and stress-reducing teaching methods.

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Nerimas užsienio kalbos pamokose

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Santrauka

Šio tyrimo tikslas – išnagrinėti ryšį tarp sociobiografinių kintamųjų (lyties ir kalbos mokėjimo lygio) ir bendro nerimo bei užsienio kalbos mokymosi nerimo, tyrimui pasitelkus 210 Slovakijos paauglių ir jaunų suaugusiųjų. Duomenys buvo surinkti naudojant internetinius klausimynus (Nerimo užsienio kalbų pamokose skalė ir Bendros baimės, socialinio nerimo ir bendravimo / egzamino nerimo skalė). Dalyviai buvo suskirstyti į grupes pagal lytį, užsienio kalbos mokėjimo lygį ir bendro nerimo rodiklius. Neparimetrinė statistinė analizė atskleidė, kad aukštesnis bendro nerimo lygis atitinka reikšmingai aukštesnius užsienio kalbos nerimo rodiklius. Aukštesnis anglų, kaip užsienio kalbos, mokėjimo lygis yra susijęs su žemesniu užsienio kalbos mokymosi nerimu. Mokytojai atlieka svarbų vaidmenį mažinant įtampą klasėje, jie turėtų kurti supratingą aplinką ir naudoti gresmės nekeliančius mokymo metodus, būtent tai gali pagerinti užsienio kalbų mokymąsi. Būsimi mokytojai turi gebėti ugdyti savo profesinę įžvalgą ir suprasti mokinių emocijas.

Esminiai žodžiai: *emocijos, mokymasis, užsienio kalbos mokymasis, kalbos mokymosi nerimas.*

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