

A Review of Studies on Foreign Language Anxiety

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Abstract: Presently, English is globally recognized as a lingua franca, rendering English language acquisition a widespread pursuit. In parallel, this recognition has cast a pervasive shadow of apprehension upon foreign language learning. Nonetheless, this phenomenon gives rise to specific challenges. Notably, not everyone possesses a disposition suited for acquiring a foreign language, leading the majority to grapple with formidable obstacles. In this study, the author conducted an in-depth exploration of foreign language learning anxiety by delving into the research of esteemed scholars. The overarching aim was to fathom how apprehension linked to foreign language acquisition impacts the very process. In the main, anxiety predominantly functions as a barrier hindering the acquisition of a second language. Nevertheless, it's pivotal to recognize that anxiety can paradoxically serve as a catalyst for second language acquisition. The intention is to propel forthcoming empirical research geared toward scrutinizing the intricate relationship between second language acquisition and the anxiety entwined with learning a foreign language. This endeavor seeks to equip a larger contingent of students with a comprehensive grasp of foreign language learning anxiety, enabling them to adeptly navigate the dynamic connection between anxiety and foreign language acquisition. At the same time, it is hoped that it will provide some lessons for educators and researchers to make the topic of anxiety in foreign language learning more colorful.

Keywords: anxiety, foreign language learning, relationship

1. Introduction

The significance of English as a worldwide language is beyond dispute. People seeking to communicate effectively across the world recognize the necessity of English for clear and logical expression. Proficiency in English equates to the capacity to connect with the global community, and individuals proficient in English can contribute to the prosperity of their nations. Furthermore, English fluency has become nearly indispensable, both in our professional environments and daily lives. Consequently, English holds a vital place in the lives of people worldwide. However, this widespread significance also implies the prevalence of language-related anxiety. More than half of those engaged in learning a foreign language report experiencing some form of anxiety during their studies [1]. Foreign language courses have been identified as sources of more anxiety than any other courses within a student's academic program. Consequently, scholars in the realm of foreign language anxiety (FLA) have embarked on more profound investigations [2-4]. FLA is progressively becoming a subject of concern for many foreign language learners. Through this research, the objective is to

furnish students with an all-encompassing comprehension of anxiety associated with learning foreign languages and the potential solutions. The author also aspires to offer support to foreign language learners who encounter challenges in acquiring a new language, facilitating a smoother path toward proficiency.

2. Definition of Anxiety

In the context of foreign language classes, language anxiety is perceived as a situation-specific form of distress [5]. This poses a significant challenge that can manifest in any second language environment. According to Horwitz et al., they argue that language anxiety comprises “a unique blend of self-perceptions, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors associated with classroom language learning, stemming from the distinct nature of the language acquisition process” [6]. Furthermore, anxiety is a multifaceted concept, encompassing aspects of learners’ psychology such as emotions, self-assurance, self-esteem, and more [7]. There are two approaches to defining this anxiety: firstly, it’s considered a diversion from other anxiety types; secondly, it’s seen as a separate anxiety category that induces fear and unfavorable emotional reactions [8-11]. In the latter perspective, Macintyre and Gardner posit that the second language (L2) environment is intertwined with language anxiety. Individuals in such situations often experience nervousness and fear, affecting their abilities in speaking, listening, and learning [12]. A more recent perspective presented by Horwitz identifies language anxiety as one of the factors contributing to subpar language performance [13]. According to this viewpoint, during the language learning process, anxiety should be considered alongside other skill sets. Consequently, it becomes conceivable that students who struggle with language skills may have concurrently developed heightened anxiety, including concerns like spelling and syntax, within the second language context. However, Spielmann and Radnofsky propose a different standpoint [14]. They suggest that language anxiety is an all-encompassing condition that can stem from various situations or incidents. Moreover, every individual’s experience with language anxiety is inherently unique. There are also various factors that give rise to anxiety. In addition, each person has a different tolerance for anxiety; while some people can turn it into motivation and thus facilitate learning, others may experience stress and thus affect their learning. So learners should also have a proper perception of foreign language learning anxiety.

3. Classifications of Anxiety

Students encountering anxiety when dealing with foreign languages might encounter difficulties in grasping these new linguistic skills. Nevertheless, it’s essential to recognize that scholars often categorize this anxiety differently, leading to a range of classifications. Notably, there are diverse categories pertaining to anxious feelings. Some scholars have classified them into two simple categories, while others have classified them into four, in short there are quite a lot of academic studies on the categorization of anxiety. Among them, people find state anxiety and trait anxiety as the foremost distinctions. State anxiety arises within specific circumstances. For instance, if someone is asked to deliver a speech or perform in front of a large audience, they may become anxious due to the heightened visibility and scrutiny. This type of anxiety is a common experience for most students when they are called upon to present in front of their peers. Conversely, trait anxiety represents a more enduring personal characteristic that is not easily altered. In general, individuals with trait anxiety tend to feel anxious and distressed across various situations [15]. Consequently, language-related anxiety can be persistent, with some individuals carrying it throughout their lives. Furthermore, there exists an alternative classification proposed by Horwitz et al. [6]. This classification system divides anxiety into three distinct groups: fear of failure, test anxiety, and communication anxiety. According to their framework, communication apprehension arises from the fear of engaging in

interpersonal interactions. The fear of failing and apprehension about the classroom environment contribute to test anxiety. Anxiety often surfaces when individuals find themselves in evaluative situations, driven by the apprehension of receiving unfavorable assessments.

4. Factors

4.1. Negative Evaluation

Negative evaluation has been extensively discussed in prior research [16]. It's widely acknowledged that negative evaluations can have profoundly detrimental effects on individuals, particularly teenagers. Concerns about making mistakes and facing criticism from others can induce anxiety, impeding the acquisition of a second language. Paradoxically, the fear of making mistakes often leads to more errors. Continuous questioning of students' foreign language proficiency can erode their self-confidence, causing them to withdraw from communication and language learning. In everyday life, students with lower English language skills are more prone to anxiety than their more proficient peers. Students with a low level of English proficiency have a general fear of making mistakes, and even if they have conceptualized their writing or oral expression in advance, there is still a high chance that they will make mistakes. The more fearful they are of negative comments from others, the more likely they are to be influenced in their thoughts, resulting in mistakes and learning anxiety.

4.2. General Feeling of Anxiety

The pervasive sentiment of anxiety has been a focal point in countless preceding research documents [17]. Students consistently harbor concerns about academic failure. When students invest significant effort into studying a subject but do not achieve satisfactory grades, it tends to dampen their enthusiasm and may even evoke fear of that particular subject. Notably, anxiety exerts a profound influence on academic performance. For instance, students who experience heightened anxiety in anticipation of exams are more susceptible to displaying various cognitive biases that hinder their ability to engage in critical thinking. Furthermore, students with a substantial fear of speaking often struggle with verbal fluency and articulation when communicating with others. Whether a question is over-interpreted or not fully comprehended, it might have an impact on students' judgment when they reflect on it. However, students' anxiety about academic failure can in some cases keep them from getting good scores, creating a vicious cycle.

4.3. Lack of Confidence

Going into a language unprepared typically makes students more anxious since they will lack confidence. Since grammatical rules differ from language to language, students are basically influenced by two or even more languages when they speak to others. At the same time, the grammatical rules of the mother tongue influence students' thinking to the greatest extent. Therefore, they are afraid of making mistakes in their speech, and the lack of proficiency in grammar and the lack of confidence in their own language proficiency lead to anxiety in learning a foreign anxiety. And some learners are not only worried about grammatical errors, but also about standard of pronunciation. All these add to their anxiety of learning foreign language and is not conducive to proficiency in a language.

5. Impact

Experiencing anxiety while acquiring a new language is a common occurrence, and it can impede students' progress in both ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms. Research has revealed a negative correlation between language scores and

performance on standardized tests like the SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test) and GRE (Graduate Record Examination). Numerous studies have explored how anxiety can either facilitate or hinder foreign language learning. However, it's crucial to note that anxiety tends to aid only in the acquisition of very basic grammatical structures. In contrast, for more complex language learning tasks, anxiety often proves to be an obstacle [18]. Additionally, the author's investigation has uncovered an intriguing connection between two aspects of language anxiety: Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) and value perception. FLCA exhibits an inverse relationship with the perceived value of language learning. Conversely, Foreign Language Emotions (FLE) demonstrates a strong and positive correlation with the motivational aspects of value. While experiencing negative emotions related to learning a foreign language can highlight a learner's weaknesses, positive emotions in this context can enhance the perceived value of learning activities. However, these negative emotions may sometimes make learners somewhat hesitant in approaching language tasks, potentially leading to reduced interest and commitment. Consequently, learners who aspire to master a foreign language should aim to manage their anxiety effectively. They should also strive to engage with the language using positive emotions. Perhaps learners should consciously think of language as a tool for communicating about the world, with an emphasis on reasonable expression, rather than dwelling on every small mistake that can lead to severe anxiety. Learners should give themselves more encouragement rather than dwell on minor issues and prolong their fear of a language. Such an approach not only fosters enhanced learning but also increases the likelihood of discovering an effective and personally suitable learning method.

6. Conclusions

Drawing upon these findings, the author has deduced that FLA undeniably wields a substantial adverse influence on a student's ability to acquire a foreign language. An evident inverse relationship emerges between students' anxiety levels and their proficiency in language learning. However, it's essential to acknowledge that this proficiency encompasses mastery across all four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Among these, achieving proficiency in spoken language exerts a more profound impact on FLA. Furthermore, anxiety tends to abate when language learners immerse themselves in their studies unconsciously. While anxiety can present obstacles in the realm of foreign language learning, it is noteworthy that highly anxious learners do not necessarily lag behind their low-anxiety counterparts. In fact, a certain degree of anxiety might propel a learner toward greater accomplishments and improved retention. For students who lack of confidence the teacher, as the transmitter of the language, should give them encouragement instead of picking out every simple fault in a serious manner. Besides, students should also encourage themselves to a certain extent by trying to think differently, such as whether they would laugh at a foreigner who is not proficient in speaking a foreign language. All these are helpful to eliminate foreign language learning anxiety, so that students can better feel the charm of foreign languages and learn foreign languages without worries. It should not be overlooked that the purpose of learning a language is to facilitate communication between people all over the world and to enable themselves more reasonably, so students should not just focus on exams, it is also great to be able to express themselves reasonably. Nevertheless, despite the extensive exploration conducted by distinguished scholars into the intricate relationship between anxiety in foreign language learning and academic performance, a definitive conclusion remains elusive. This is chiefly due to the varying ways individuals perceive anxiety and employ diverse coping strategies. In conclusion, to foster a more profound understanding of the intricate interplay between foreign language learning anxiety and academic achievements, it is imperative that future research embarks on a series of comprehensive empirical studies. Such an approach will serve to illuminate the multifaceted relationship between these variables, offering invaluable insights for educators and learners alike.

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