

Do Anxious Students Learn English Better or Worse?

Gamze Kızıltepe¹, Eyyüp Yaşar Kürüm²

¹MA Student at İstanbul Aydın University

gamzecesur[at]stu.aydin.edu.tr

gamzeecsr[at]outlook.com

²Assistant Professor, İstanbul Aydın University, Department of ELT

eyyupkurum[at]aydin.edu.tr

yasarkurum[at]gmail.com

Abstract: *This study aims to examine the difference between students' language proficiency and their anxiety level. The research was conducted at an institution of higher education, at the English Preparatory School, located in Istanbul, Turkey. The investigator employed a quantitative data collection approach that incorporated both descriptive and inferential techniques. A questionnaire was utilized to explore the correlation between foreign language anxiety and language proficiency in the context of English Language Teaching (ELT). The research was conducted among two groups of students with varying levels of proficiency, who were administered a questionnaire. A total of 103 students were selected randomly from a population of 2,000 students enrolled in the English Preparatory Program. The findings suggest that there is no significant correlation between foreign language anxiety and language proficiency, either in a positive or negative direction. This study provides insights for both language educators and learners by examining the correlation between foreign language anxiety and students' proficiency levels.*

Keywords: Anxiety, Foreign Language Anxiety, Language Proficiency

1. Introduction

When learning a foreign language, people usually have some degree of anxiety due to their fear of not achieving the desired outcome. Sometimes they may feel they are not making any progress or they are not quite enough for learning the language or they may feel inadequate in mastering the skills for the target language. Learners who feel this way and who could not deal with that feeling may hesitate and may not enjoy when they are learning, and keep themselves at back in some skills such as speaking because of this anxiety feeling. They may not participate in the class; they might not want to be a part of the group work as they think they might not accomplish the task as expected. Not accepting this anxiety feeling could be the most important reason to be demotivated and could lead to have weak results when they are learning.

A study (Semendeferi et al., 2011) claims that language is a special human ability and that language influences all aspects of conscious experience, including emotional experience. The view that language and the cognitive functions necessary to enable language functions contribute complexity to the human experience, which was long contested (Lakoff, 1987; Lucy, 1997), has regained favor. English speakers can categorize their dread and anxiety into more than 30 different groups, whereas people without language skills cannot do so (Marks, 1987).

Furthermore, according to Brown's (1994) research on the correlation between anxiety and acquiring a second language, individuals experience anxiety when faced with complex assignments due to a subliminal belief of inadequacy in accomplishing them. It is widely acknowledged that an important percentage of learners

perceive the acquisition of a second or foreign language as a powerful undertaking.

A number of researchers have investigated the relationship between foreign language acquisition anxiety and proficiency, achievement, or performance (Batumlu & Erden, 2007; Dalkılıç, 2001; Liu, 2006; Woodrow, 2006). According to Batumlu and Erden (2007), Dalkılıç (2001), and Liu (2006), it has been noted that individuals who possess lower levels of proficiency in a foreign language tend to demonstrate a higher degree of anxiety throughout the course of their learning experience. The study conducted by Woodrow (2006) aimed to examine the correlation between the oral proficiency of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners and their level of speaking anxiety. The findings of the study indicate that second language learners who experience higher levels of anxiety during oral communication tend to exhibit lower levels of effectiveness. This trend is consistent with the results of three previously conducted studies, which also found a negative correlation between language anxiety and success in language learning.

2. Literature Review

The objective of the present study was to explore the correlation between anxiety experienced by students when learning a foreign language and their level of proficiency in the target language. The present chapter offers an in - depth examination of the available research associated with the foreign language anxiety.

2.1 Anxiety

The lack of an easy definition for anxiety can be attributed to its complicated nature, as noted by Zhanibek (2001). According to Bekleyen (1977), anxiety can be defined as an

emotional reaction to a perceived threat to a fundamental personal value that is crucial to an individual's existence. According to Spielberg (1983), as cited in Horwitz et al. (1986), the autonomic nervous system arousal is linked to a subjective experience of tension, apprehension, anxiety, and concern. The definitions of anxiety provided by various scholars exhibit common features, including but not limited to apprehension, worry, tension, and discomfort (Brown, 1994; Horwitz et al. 1991; Scovel, 1991). Ehrman (1996) suggests that these attributes are associated with negative evaluations of an individual's behavior.

In general, anxiety could have the definition as "encompasses the feelings of worry and negative, fear-related emotions associated with learning or using a language that is not an individual's mother tongue" (MacIntyre and Gregersen, 2012, p.103). Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing and receiving and processing information (Brown, 1994; Burns & Joyce, 1997). Researchers have agreed on the complexity of learning a new language especially the necessary skills which are grammar, pronunciation, memorization of new words; but the uppermost one is the one's ability to talk with others and plus the ability to talk in front of others. Steinberg & Horwitz (1986) believe and agree on that people who describe themselves as sociable and have the intelligence of social skills may experience some difficulties with communicating in foreign language. Therefore, research has proved that anxiety and particularly speaking anxiety plays remarkable role on student's learning and acquiring the foreign language. One of the most studied issues in linguistic communication is the tendency of some people to avoid or even fear of oral communication (Daly, 1991.)

2.2 Language Proficiency and Anxiety

While certain scholars contend that insufficient language proficiency is the fundamental cause of anxiety, others argue that anxiety is the underlying reason for insufficient language acquisition. Horwitz (2001) proposed that insufficient language acquisition leads to anxiety. The author suggests that the fundamental nature of acquiring a foreign or second language requires participating in various kinds of risk-taking, which may potentially have negative impacts on an individual's self-perception. Consequently, individuals may experience apprehension regarding their societal status subsequent to making an error. As a result, individuals who possess insufficient linguistic proficiency may exhibit behaviors indicative of anxiety. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), foreign language anxiety was identified as a unique syndrome that can be distinguished from other forms of anxiety such as communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety.

3. Statement of the Problem

The researcher was motivated to investigate the issue of anxiety-related factors in language acquisition within a Turkish university setting, as it is believed to be a significant aspect of the language learning process. This study is expected to make a valuable contribution to the existing literature on the subject. The aim of the study is to identify

the origins of foreign language anxiety and evaluate its impact on the language proficiency of Turkish university students who are learning English as a foreign language.

3.1 Research Questions

- 1) Do the English learners' levels of anxiety vary according to their language proficiency level?
- 2) What is the correlation between the level of test anxiety experienced by students and their proficiency in language?

4. Method

4.1 Setting and Participants

This research is a quantitative study that seeks to explore the potential correlation between English language proficiency and foreign language anxiety, as well as to determine whether anxiety levels vary depending on learners' level of competency. This section provides details pertaining to the participants, settings, stages, data collection procedures, data analysis, and instruments used for the study.

The study was conducted at a foundational university located in Istanbul. A total of 103 students were selected at random from the population of 2,000 students enrolled in the English Preparatory Program. The study's sample consisted of students who were chosen from classes categorized as level 2 (elementary) and level 4 (intermediate). The researcher obtained permission from the instructors of the participants to conduct the investigation with their students. The aforementioned individuals are currently registered in a preparatory curriculum provided by the English Preparatory Program. Upon their arrival at the university, students undergo a categorization process that involves the assessment of their proficiency levels. This process entails the classification of students into distinct levels, namely starters (Level 1), elementary (Level 2), lower-intermediate (Level 3), intermediate (Level 4), and upper-intermediate (Level 5). The placement assessment, which is administered at the beginning of the semester, serves as the basis for this categorization. It is expected that the concerned individuals will achieve an upper-intermediate level of proficiency by the end of the academic year.

The survey was conducted on a sample of 52 students from Level 2 (elementary) and 51 students from Level 4 (intermediate). The age range of the individuals in question falls between 18 and 22 years. The questionnaire functions as the principal instrument for gathering data. The questionnaire comprises inquiries aimed at identifying the probable cause of anxiety. Its administration across two proficiency levels causes it a means of determining the particular anxiety association between different levels of proficiency, as well as the nature of anxiety encountered within an English classroom setting.

5. Data Collection Instruments

The study utilized Horwitz's FLCAS (1983), which is a scale designed to measure language classroom anxiety. The

FLCAS was developed by Horwitz with the aim of examining the degree and intensity of language anxiety. The items included in the FLCAS are a sign of the presence of anxiety related to speaking, as well as apprehension regarding the possibility of receiving negative feedback. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, a 33 - item Likert - type measure with five possible outcomes ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," was created by Horwitz (1986).

The objective of this assessment is to evaluate the level of anxiety experienced by individuals when communicating in a foreign language. This is manifested through self - doubt in terms of performance and social comparisons, as exemplified by item 23: "I frequently perceive my peers to be more proficient in the foreign language than I am". Additionally, psycho - physiological symptoms such as increased heart rate, as indicated by item 20: "I experience palpitations when anticipating being called upon in a language class", and behavioral issues, such as item 17: "I frequently contemplate skipping my language class", are also considered.

The data obtained from the questionnaire was analyzed using SPSS version 21.

This study employed both descriptive and inferential quantitative data collection methods. A questionnaire was employed as a means of gathering quantitative data. The data collected through the questionnaire was analyzed utilizing descriptive and inferential quantitative statistical methods. The data collection stage involved the utilization of a questionnaire entitled "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale," which was developed by Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., and Cope, J. in 1986. The Turkish version of the survey instrument was administered to Level 2 students to facilitate their comprehension and response to all items. Given the frequent utilization of the Turkish version in anxiety research, no admission was deemed necessary. The survey instrument was integrated into the Google Forms platform, and subsequently, the link was distributed to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners enrolled in preparatory courses at the university level. The questionnaire asked about the participants' levels. The questionnaire could be completed within a maximum duration of 15 minutes. The data was analyzed using SPSS 21, which is a software package commonly utilized in social sciences for statistical analysis. The analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed to investigate variations among groups with respect to the independent variables.

6. Results and Discussions

In this section, the findings about the research questions given above are shown. In Table 1 below the findings related to foreign language anxiety test anxiety and language competency, test anxiety and language competency are listed.

6.1 Results

In Table 1 below, the findings of the research question 1 and research question 2 are shown according to ANOVA results.

Table 1: Results of the One - Way ANOVA Between Subjects Comparing Students with Different Proficiency Levels in Terms of Their Foreign Language Anxiety and Subscale Scores

	Proficiency	Mean	SS	F	p
Foreign Language Anxiety	A2	95.12	18.01	0.55	0.58
	B1	95.35	15.46		
	B2	92.04	20.05		
Test Anxiety	A2	8.98	2.35	2.04	0.13
	B1	9.88	2.01		
	B2	9.51	2.51		

$p < .05$

The study conducted a One - way ANOVA to assess the impact of English competency on the level of foreign language anxiety (FLA) experienced by students. The findings of the study revealed that the impact of English competency on Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) was not significant, as evidenced by the statistical analysis of the data ($F(2, 152) = .55, p = .58$), as presented in Table 1. Similarly, both Fischer's LSD and Tukey's HSD post - hoc test did not indicate a statistically significant distinction between groups with respect to FLA ($p > .05$).

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) with one independent variable was conducted to examine the impact of English competency on levels of test anxiety. The findings suggest that the influence of competency on the test anxiety scores of the participants was not significant, as evidenced by the statistical results of $F(2, 152) = 2.04, p = .13$ (refer to Table 1).

7. Discussions

Based on the results of the study, it was noted that there exists no correlation between competence in languages and test anxiety in students. The current findings are consistent with prior research.

Yoğurtçu and Yoğurtçu (2013) identified a lack of correlation between test anxiety and the linguistic proficiency of students enrolled in preparatory university programs. The research conducted by Cheraghian, Freidooni Moghadam, Baraz - Pardjani, and Bavarsad (2008) revealed that there was no statistically significant association between test anxiety and academic performance. The presence of a correlation between test anxiety and academic achievement does not automatically indicate a direct causal association between these two variables. As per Goonan's (2003) claim, there exists no direct impact of test anxiety on academic performance. The expression of this phenomenon can be subject to changes based on various factors, including but not limited to familial history, degree of accomplishment, drive, and cognitive aptitude (2003: 7). The relationship between test anxiety and academic performance remains ambiguous, as Cassady and Johnson (2002) have proposed. It is uncertain whether test anxiety is a consequence of inadequate academic proficiency or if poor academic performance is a result of test anxiety.

On analysis of the correlation between foreign language anxiety and competency level, it was determined that the participants' levels of anxiety were not significantly

impacted by their competency level. The study found that the anxiety level of learners was not significantly impacted by their level of competency, whether it was facilitating or debilitating. Prior studies have established correlations between language anxiety and proficiency level, as exemplified by the research conducted by Dalkılıç (2001), Llinas and Garau (2009), and Liu (2006). Dalkılıç (2001) and Liu (2006) conducted studies investigating the correlation between foreign language anxiety and proficiency. The results of their study suggest a negative correlation between foreign language anxiety levels and competency levels, whereby higher levels of proficiency are associated with lower levels of anxiety. The study conducted by Liu (2006) revealed significant discrepancies in the levels of anxiety experienced by participants with different levels of proficiency in a foreign language, namely advanced and elementary.

A study was conducted by Juan Garau in 2009 to explore potential variations in levels of anxiety related to learning a foreign language. The results revealed a significant distinction in the association between linguistic capacity and linguistic anxiety. The findings of her research revealed that participants categorized as advanced learners attained the most elevated scores on the language anxiety scale. This suggests a correlation between language proficiency and levels of anxiety.

8. Conclusion

The objective of this study is to contribute to the existing understanding of foreign language anxiety and its associated factors by examining its correlation with language competency. The findings of the study suggest that there exists not a significant association between the level of competence exhibited by individuals learning English as a second language and their levels of anxiety towards the foreign language. The findings of the study suggest an absence of association between the level of competence of individuals learning English and their experience of test anxiety.

The absence of a reduction in foreign language anxiety among proficient learners in the present investigation implies that their general proficiency may not necessarily correspond to their foreign language competence.

The findings of this investigation indicate that educators should acknowledge that students encounter anxiety when learning a second language, irrespective of their EFL proficiency level. In light of the potential negative impact of anxiety on students' academic performance, it is advantageous to put forth specific recommendations.

9. Future Scope and Recommendations

It is advisable to provide learners with positive reinforcement to stimulate their participation in activities and offer them constructive feedback within a supportive educational environment. It is advisable for educators to maintain vigilance towards indications of anxiety amongst their pupils. The act of observation can aid educators in identifying students who display heightened levels of

anxiety, thereby enabling them to offer assistance in managing their anxious conduct. In addition to engaging in observational practices, it may be beneficial to assign students the task of regularly keeping weekly or monthly journals. This exercise would afford them the opportunity to exercise their autonomy in expressing their emotions, both positive and negative, regarding the lesson, as well as offer recommendations for addressing any issues they may identify.

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Author Profile



Gamze KIZILTEPE is Instructor. She did Bachelor's in English Language teaching in İstanbul Kültür University 2020. She received Master's in English Language Teaching İstanbul Aydın University in 2023



Eyyüp Yasar KURUM is Assistant Professor. He did PhD. Bachelor's English Language Teaching Boğaziçi University 1994 and Master's Technology Education Marmara University in 2002. He did Master's English Language Teaching Hacettepe University 2008 and Ph. D. English Language Teaching Hacettepe University 2012