

IDENTIFYING ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM ANXIETY OF STUDENTS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Zarina Markova¹, Teodora Yaneva²

Abstract: *The article presents the findings of a small-scale study of the English language anxiety of students of International Relations at South-West University “Neofit Rilski”, Blagoevgrad. Data were collected via the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). The survey results suggest that speaking and test taking are the aspects of English language learning that provoke most anxiety in the surveyed group. Additionally, there are indications that respondents fear their peers’ negative evaluation. Changes in the teaching practice are suggested that might reduce the level of students’ English language classroom anxiety.*

Key words: *English language teaching, foreign language classroom anxiety, students of International Relations.*

Introduction

Anxiety as an affective factor in foreign language learning has received a lot of attention (e.g. Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; Scovel, 1978). Traditionally, a distinction has been made between state and trait anxiety – the former denoting a temporary emotional state with varying intensity, whereas the latter referring to a stable tendency to experience state anxiety continually (Cattell, 1966; Spielberger, 1983). Foreign language anxiety has been examined in the context of attitudes and motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989), and language proficiency (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989, 1991; Shopov, Atanasova, Nenova, Simeonov & Sofronieva, 2017; Shopov & Sofronieva, 2018, pp. 89-108), and many studies report a negative correlation between foreign language anxiety and success in language learning (e.g. Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Shopov et al., 2017; Shopov & Sofronieva, 2018, pp. 89-108).

The distinctiveness of foreign language anxiety was first brought to the fore by Elaine Horwitz, Michael Horwitz and Joann Cope (1986). Following the findings of research on specific anxiety reactions, Horwitz et al. describe

1. PhD, Faculty of Philology, South-West University “Neofit Rilski”, Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria, email: zarinamarkova@abv.bg, ORCID: 0000-0003-0760-1274

2. Lecturer, Faculty of Law and History, South-West University “Neofit Rilski”, Blagoevgrad, email: teodorayaneva33@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0003-3489-2134

foreign language anxiety as a particular “syndrome” linked to foreign language learning, and draw parallels between it and three related performance anxieties: communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 127). Communication apprehension plagues people who are intimidated by public speaking. In foreign language learning, such people might be additionally frustrated by the mismatch between their mature thoughts and immature foreign language skills (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002, p. 562). Test anxiety relates to people who set high standards for themselves, and feel everything but a faultless performance a failure. In foreign language learning, language production might be interpreted as a test situation rather than a communication opportunity, and this might cause anxiety in some learners (Gregersen, Horwitz, 2002, p. 563). Fear of negative evaluation is not limited to test-taking only, but pertains to any situation that involves some kind of evaluation, for example expressing opinion in a foreign language class (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 128).

Correspondingly, Horwitz et al.’s Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) targets anxiety across communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 130). It is a self-report measure consisting of thirty-three five-point items which range from strongly agree to strongly disagree. FLCAS has been tested several times. In studies related to Eastern students or languages, there have been differences as to the original three dimensions of foreign language anxiety posited in developing the measure (Aida, 1994; Cheng, Horwitz & Schallert, 1999; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004). In Western contexts where students’ English language anxiety is concerned, however, the scale has been verified several times (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989; Tóth, 2008; Panayides & Walker, 2013), which justifies its use in Bulgarian contexts.

Method and participants

Below, we present the results of a small-scale survey of the English language anxiety of students of International Relations at South-West University “Neofit Rilski”, Blagoevgrad. The survey used the above-mentioned Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz et al., 1986), and was conducted by the second author in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Language and Linguistics in the Global World. It aimed to provide data illustrating the aspects of English language learning the second author’s students feel more anxious about. It was believed the data might serve as a stimulus for the customization of the language teaching techniques and the language content, which in turn might result in better learning outcomes.

The survey was taken by 40 first- and second-year students, 21 of whom females and 19 males. The data collection took place during the summer term, when

the first-year students had had enough experience with their teacher of English, with their university colleagues and with the evaluation procedures. Student participation was anonymous and voluntary. No time limit for taking the survey was set – on average, the respondents took twenty minutes to answer the questions.

Results and discussion

The FLCAS items with the percentages of students selecting each alternative are presented in Table A.

Table A

Items	SA	Agree	NAND	D	SD*
1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class.**	23%	30%	15%	20%	13%
2. I don't worry about making mistakes in language class.	30%	38%	8%	23%	3%
3. I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class.	3%	10%	23%	43%	23%
4. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language.	5%	30%	20%	28%	20%
5. It wouldn't bother me at all to take more foreign language classes.	45%	43%	13%	0%	0%
6. During language class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.	8%	15%	10%	48%	20%
7. I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am.	13%	20%	38%	25%	8%
8. I am usually at ease during tests in my language class.	10%	28%	15%	40%	8%
9. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class.	15%	33%	5%	25%	23%
10. I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class.	3%	33%	25%	23%	18%

Items	SA	Agree	NAND	D	SD*
11. I don't understand why some people get so upset over foreign language classes.	25%	45%	8%	20%	3%
12. In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.	18%	25%	8%	40%	10%
13. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class.	5%	20%	13%	43%	20%
14. I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers.	25%	25%	10%	38%	3%
15. I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.	5%	43%	13%	30%	10%
16. Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it.	5%	15%	10%	50%	20%
17. I often feel like not going to my language class.	18%	3%	10%	35%	35%
18. I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class.	10%	13%	40%	28%	10%
19. I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	3%	23%	5%	33%	38%
20. I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in language class.	5%	33%	18%	13%	33%
21. The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get.	10%	25%	8%	35%	23%
22. I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for language class.	20%	43%	15%	15%	8%
23. I always feel that other students speak the foreign language better than I do.	5%	40%	20%	25%	10%
24. I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students.	5%	20%	28%	33%	15%
25. Language class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.	3%	23%	18%	38%	20%

Items	SA	Agree	NAND	D	SD*
26. I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes.	0%	13%	10%	48%	30%
27. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class.	0%	43%	20%	23%	15%
28. When I'm on my way to language class, I feel very sure and relaxed.	20%	43%	23%	10%	5%
29. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says.	8%	33%	13%	38%	10%
30. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak a foreign language.	10%	23%	20%	33%	15%
31. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language.	0%	38%	5%	33%	25%
32. I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language.	15%	33%	28%	20%	5%
33. I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	0%	35%	20%	25%	20%

*SA – strongly agree, A – agree, NAND – neither agree nor disagree, D – disagree, SD – strongly disagree

** Data in this table are rounded to the nearest whole number. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

A good number of the responses indicate elements of speaking anxiety as part of communication apprehension: 48% of the respondents agree or strongly agree with the statement “I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class” (item 9); 43% agree with “I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class” (item 27). Correspondingly, 38% disagree or strongly disagree with the statement “I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class” (item 18), whereas 40% choose to remain neutral. Additionally, 25% agree or strongly agree with “I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students” (item 24). These data partially correspond with the results of Horwitz et al.'s survey, where 49% of the respondents agree or strongly agree on item 9, 29% agree or strongly agree

on item 18, 28% agree or strongly agree on item 24, and 33% agree or strongly agree on item 27 (Horwitz et al., 1986, pp. 129-130).

The data addressing comprehension as a factor related to communication apprehension are as follows: 35% of the respondents feel frightened when they do not understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language (item 4), which matches the result on this item of Horwitz et al.'s study; in contrast, 41% of the respondents agree or strongly agree with the statement "I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says" (item 29) unlike Horwitz et al.'s result, where only 27% endorse this statement.

This fright can be related to the fear of feeling less competent than peers or to the fear of negative evaluation. A good number of the participants in the present survey agree or strongly agree with the following statements: "I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do" (item 23, endorsed by 45%); "I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language" (item 31, endorsed by 38%); "I keep thinking that other students are better at languages than I am" (item 7, endorsed by 33%); "Language class moves so quickly, I worry about getting left behind" (item 25, endorsed by 26%); "It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class" (item 13, endorsed by 25%). Horwitz et al.'s survey results strikingly differ for three of the items: item 25, where more than twice as many (59%) respondents agree or strongly agree; item 31, where fewer than one third (10%) agree or strongly agree; item 13, endorsed by only 9%. Explanations of these mismatches might be sought in students' language level, perfectionism, and cultural differences. In comparison, in Debreli and Demirkans' (2016) study, conducted in a country much closer to Bulgaria than Texas, more anxious students also seem to fear more of being laughed at by their peers (p.55).

As for the fear of making mistakes as part of test anxiety, 26% of the respondents agree or strongly agree with the statement "I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make" (item 19), and the same percentage disagree with the statement: "I don't worry about making mistakes in language class" (item 2). This might suggest that the surveyed students of International Relations feel comfortable with their tutor, and the anxiety level concerning making mistakes is comparatively low. On the contrary, Horwitz et al.'s results, where 15% of the responses agree or strongly agree with item 19, and 65% disagree or strongly disagree with item 2, indicate that their participants "seem to feel constantly tested and to perceive every correction as a failure" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p.130).

It appears, though, that the participants in the present survey make a difference between mistakes while learning in a language class, and mistakes in test situations. Two of the most endorsed survey items refer to the latter context: 40% of the respondents disagree and 8% strongly disagree with the statement "I am usually at ease during tests in my language class" (item 8); 43% agree and

5 % strongly agree with “I get upset when I don’t understand what the teacher is correcting” (item 15). These results are in tune with the corresponding results of Horwitz et al.’s survey, and are supported by the findings of a Bulgarian study, which shows test anxiety as a factor in a survey of the language learning motivation of 96 students at the National Sports Academy (Slavova & Mileva, 2013, p.66).

The most endorsed survey item in this study, however, is item 1, which relates to communication apprehension – more than half of the respondents agree (30%) or strongly agree (23%) with the statement “I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class”. It is followed by another item related to communication apprehension – item 9, “I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class”, where 33% of the participants agree and 15% strongly agree.

The least endorsed survey item significant for the students’ anxiety level is item 5, “It wouldn’t bother me at all to take more foreign language classes”, where nobody disagrees. This might suggest a classroom atmosphere of trust and harmony, and a feeling of respect towards the language teacher. This suggestion seems to be supported by the responses on item 3, “I tremble when I know that I’m going to be called on in language class”, which is the second least endorsed item (only 10% agree and 3% strongly agree). Such interpretations should be viewed with caution, though, as item 5 was among the misfitting items during the Rasch analyses in one of the tests of the FLCAS, and it has been claimed it does not refer to anxiety per se (Panayides & Walker, 2013, p. 501). In future studies, qualitative data addressing these aspects of foreign language classes might help to clarify the responses on these items.

Qualitative data might also aid the interpretation of the results on item 26, “I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes”, which has been found to be “the single best discriminator of anxiety on the FLCAS as measured by its correlation with the total score” (Horwitz et al., 1986, p.130). In the present study, item 26 is endorsed by only 13% of the respondents, and thus, together with item 3, ranks as the second least endorsed item in this survey.

Pedagogical implications

These results are of importance first and foremost for the language teacher of the surveyed students. As anxious students may appear unprepared or indifferent due to avoidance coping strategies, Horwitz et al. (1986) suggest that the teacher should consider anxiety as an alternative explanation of unsatisfactory student performance (p. 131). This suggestion may be relevant to the present context, especially when it comes to speaking since the most endorsed items are those addressing English language speaking anxiety. Additionally, the teacher could think of ways to ease students’ speaking anxiety by devising less stressful

speaking activities through careful staging, role-plays, group work, speech shadowing. Apart from reducing students' speaking anxiety, such activities might contribute to a better classroom climate, and thus reduce anxiety pertaining to negative evaluation by peers. Awareness raising techniques and the thoughtful inclusion of motivational stories about success in overcoming obstacles as part of the studied language content might also aid in lessening students' foreign language anxiety.

Conclusion

The survey results show that the aspect of foreign language learning that provokes most anxiety in the surveyed group is speaking – the most endorsed items address different strands of communication apprehension (53% for item 1; 48% for item 9; 45% for item 23). Perhaps unsurprisingly, these are accompanied by the high rankings of the items related to test anxiety (48% for item 8; 48% for item 15).

While the small scale and the convenience sampling do not allow broad generalizations, the present study might serve as a first stage of a further, more thorough exploration of anxiety as one of the affective factors in foreign language learning. A possible avenue to pursue might be the replication of this survey with a larger group of respondents, which would justify a more detailed statistical analysis, and consequently the generalization of findings. A second avenue could involve a follow-up use of qualitative research instruments, which could provide more details as to the specifics of the different aspects of the language anxiety outlined in this study, and thus contribute to a richer, deeper understanding of the nature of the foreign language learning anxiety experienced by students of International Relations at SWU “Neofit Rilski”. Additionally, the study results could give food for thought concerning the need for appropriate adaptations of the language content and the teaching procedures of the English language course.

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