Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety and its Effects on Language Performance

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A B S T R A C T

Anxiety is complex and linked with personality, gender, instruction, political factors**. Some researchers find it positive in SLA saying it facilitates learning while others mention that it hinders language learning. This work** aims to understand better the nature of anxiety among Uzbek high-school English learners and its relationship to language performance.

Introduction

Education forms the society that prospers their country in economic, societal, and political aspects. Education gives citizens the ability to present their views, develop full potential, grow and form a person with a broad outlook (Idrisa et al., 2011). Considerable attention should be directed to educating the citizens on English since it is the language that distinguishes the influential class from the mainstream society (Hamza et al., 2021).

In the process of learning a foreign language, learners experience real difficulty. Learning a foreign language is a profoundly unsettling psychological stress because it threatens the learner's prepositions and worldview (Guiora, 1983, p8). The researchers distinguish two main factors in L2 learning difficulties, internal and external. First language, motivation, anxiety, personality, age, cognition skills are considered as internal factors that hinder language learning, while culture, instruction, curriculum are the external factors that make language learning hard and challenging (Sunkar, 2013). According to Saleh (2021), among those factors, language anxiety plays a crucial role in language development since half of the second language learners feel anxiety in a different form (Talim et al., 2021).

Classroom anxiety has been a popular investigation subject since the 70s in the field of SLA (Shabani, 2012). The students who took a foreign language class can approve that learning a language is not an easy task. The following quotes gathered by the University of Texas (1988) can prove it:

I feel so dumb in my German class. I want to sit in the back of the room not to get called on to speak.

I put off taking French because I knew it was going to be hard for me

I dread going to Spanish class. My teacher is nice and fun, but I hate it when the teacher calls on me to speak. I freeze up and can't think of what to say or how to say it.

Though foreign language anxiety (FLA) is a much-researched topic, there are still gaps to investigate. This is because of the complex nature of anxiety which is linked with personality, gender, instruction, political factors (Dornyei, 2005). Therefore understanding the nature of classroom anxiety is essential. Besides the majority of the studies measured the foreign language classroom anxiety among University students, and little research has been done among teenagers and children. Therefore, this study aims to understand better the nature of anxiety among Uzbek high-school English learners and its relationship to language performance.

Literature review
Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA)

Classroom anxiety was first investigated in-depth by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986). The term Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) or Language Anxiety (LA) was first introduced by Horwartz and Cope (1986). They have created the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to measure anxiety among language learning students. Horwitz et al. (1986) divided anxiety into test anxiety, communication apprehension, and fear of negative evaluation.

The correlation between anxiety and classroom performance and grades has been previously researched. However, the majority of them show a negative correlation (Horwitz, Horwitz&Cope, 1986; Young 1986). One research found the correlation -.65 in a French class at a University showing that anxiety is a significant factor that determines classroom success (MacIntyre&Gardner, 1994).

Gardner and MacIntyre (1994) described anxiety as tension associated with speaking, listening, and learning. They noted that anxiety is the negative emotions and worry that arise while interacting in a foreign language. Tobias (1986) noted that anxiety affects both input and output stages of the language learning process. In the language processing stage, anxious students get easily distracted and lose attention, especially in speaking. They read the exact text several times, but they cannot ask for clarification or repetition because of their emotional state. In the performance stage, being distracted, they fail to process new material, so errors may occur, and the learning speed may be slower. Anxiety level and oral performance are closely linked (Woodrow, 2006). Anxious learners freeze up and cannot speak a word. Therefore it is essential to investigate the internal and external factors that cause anxiety to control and lessen it (Gardner&MacIntyre, 1991). It also may have physical and cognitive effects on language learners, making them unable to replicate the inflection or rhythm, mispronouncing sounds, forgetting phrases and words that have been just learned (Hameed & Anwar, 2018). Anxious learners usually sweat, feel nausea, dryness in the mouth, and weak knees (Lian & Mardziah, 2014). According to Ismael et al. (2021), the common symptoms of anxious learners are a red or pale face, trembling voice, being annoyed, faster heartbeats, and forgetting the words.

Causes of FLA

Multiple situations cause FLCA. MacIntyre (1998) reported that language anxiety is closely connected to situational anxiety. According to Dewale (2013), foreign language anxiety is attributable to a learner's personality and situational factors (age, gender, formality of situation, interlocutor). Many researchers have found that interacting with teachers (Young, 1991), competitive classroom environment (Bailey, 1983), fear of embarrassment (Fly, 1986), and even tension between ethnic groups might cause FLCA. Students from the lower societal class also showed a higher level of FLA (Dewale, 2013). According to Damir et al. (2020), the main reason for foreign language anxiety is a lack of English language ability. Some researchers suggest that learners experience anxiety because of dissatisfaction with their communication in a foreign language (Lian & Mardziah, 2014; Jamal et al., 2021). Many learners state that speaking in a target language is the most anxiety-provoking situation (Horwitz et al., 1986). There have been cases when learners stated: "I'd rather be in prison camp than speak a foreign language" (Price, 1991, p. 104). Low trait emotional intelligence group showed the highest FLA levels (Dewale, 2013).

Also, worrying too much about pronunciation and intonation has been shown to cause anxiety (Sabir et al., 2021). Talim et al. (2021) identified that a lack of vocabulary and speaking engaging supportive atmosphere, oral practice, fear of speaking in a target language and making mistakes, high expectations might be the factors creating foreign language anxiety. Lack of group membership with peers, self-perceived low level of ability, false beliefs about languages reported causing foreign language (McCoy, 1979).

Also, there were cases when competitiveness caused anxiety. The diaries of foreign language learning students were investigated, and it was found that when learners compared themselves with other learners, the level of anxiety increased (Bailey, 1983).

Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) found a correlation between anxiety and perfectionism. Some anxious learners have been found to have better performance of the target language, concern seriously about the errors, worry about others' opinions, and are prone to procrastinating.

Finally, false learners' beliefs might be the factor provoking anxiety (Horwitz, 1988). In the research made by Horwitz (1988) with University students, it was found that they expected to learn the language during the two years, which was an impossible task. They expected to learn the language through memorizing the grammar rules and vocabulary, which is an improper way of achieving language production.

Anxiety might be beneficial (Anwar&Qadir, 2017). Albert and Haber (1960) identified facilitative and debilitative anxieties. Debilitative anxiety serves as an effective filter (Krashen, 1982) that prevent learners from improving their language skill. On the other hand, facilitative anxiety encourage learners to solve language problems (Perez Paredes, 1999)

According to the research (Dewale, 2013), the early starters of language learning seemed to have lower anxiety. Besides, those who practiced the language regularly out of class reported seemed to suffer less from FLA than those who limited themselves with classroom practice (Dewale, 2013). It can be explained by the fact that extra effort compensates for the distractions during classroom instruction. MacInyre and Gardner (1994) also noted that anxiety shows itself immediately but can be compensated with the strategies. Furthermore, extrovert learners reported having a lower level of anxiety. Probably, their optimism demonstrates superiority over their fear of embarrassment while interacting in the target language.

So, the current case study will answer for the following questions:

1. Are anxiety and foreign language learning correlated?
2. Do anxiety influence second language acquisition positively or negatively?
3. Do early starters of language learning have lower level of foreign language anxiety?
4. Do male or female students suffer from foreign language anxiety?

Hypothesis

If foreign language anxiety level is high, the test results are lower

The students with high foreign language anxiety do not cope with the new information

Male students have a higher level of foreign language anxiety.

Early starters have lower level of foreign language classroom anxiety.

Participant profile

The participants were four (two male and two female) school students in Uzbekistan. Two of them are in grade 9, while others are in grade 8. All of them have been studying English as a subject at school from grade 2. They had English lessons twice a week for 8-7 years and got a beginner knowledge of English at school. I have been teaching them English for a month. Before starting the course, a placement test was taken, and the results showed that their level was elementary. Unlike other students in Uzbekistan, their all four language skills have been developed to an elementary level. They can understand discourse and interact in familiar situations. They can comprehend the passage written at the elementary level, but they do not know upper-intermediate and advanced vocabulary.

They have the same language background. Their first language is Uzbek, and the second is Russian. They are fluent in their second language, as they were engaged with since early childhood. They are learning English as L3 to go abroad and get tertiary education in English speaking country.

When it comes to their family condition, only Girl A has a relative living in the USA and proficient English user. She has access to practice English with that person. However, others are the eldest child in

their families and do not have any English-speaking relatives. They are the first who learns English language in their families.

When I ask them to talk about a particular topic, I notice that they get confused and make simple errors in topics they know pretty well. They rarely volunteer answers that should be given in the target language. When we try to speak with native speakers of English, none of them wish to interact, and when I ask them to talk, they have a trembling voice and tap their feet. Most of the time, I ask them to talk about the topics we have studied in detail. The reason for this blocking of the mind might be nervousness and anxiety. So, in this paper, I will try to identify whether anxiety is linked with foreign language performance and try to distinguish the factors causing the anxiety.

Research design

The research consisted of 4 stages. Qualitative and quantitative methods were employed to gather data.

Stage 1.

The first stage was the interview with the participants. In the interview, I asked about their name, family, language, economic and social background, the age they started learning the language, whether they practiced the language out of the classroom and whether they compensated for the lessons they missed. By asking the question about the starting age of L2 learning, I wanted to check the hypothesis made by Dewale (2013) about early starters having a lower rate of language anxiety and the role of extra practice to decrease anxiety levels. The last question about compensating missed lessons aimed to prove a hypothesis stating those who compensate the complex topics have lower anxiety levels proposed by Gardner and MacIntyre (1994). By asking about family, language, economic and social background, I wanted to check those factors' effect on second language development.

Stage 2.

After the interview, during six lessons, I taught the subjects the language. I used the Enterprise 2 (Evans & Dooley, 1992). In this period, I taught them grammar (making comparisons, order of adjectives, past simple, past continuous, adverbs), vocabulary (shops, shopping, shapes, feelings, reactions), reading (article about shopping in Paris, article about Harrods, stories), listening and speaking (talking about school facilities in a place, talking about a big department store, sequencing events, telling a story), pronunciation (pronunciation of "h", sentence stress), communication (describing lost property, asking about prices, polite request, offers, witness' reports), and writing (letter to a lost property office, story).

Stage 3

In order to measure language anxiety level I used the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). Originally, it consisted of 33 items; however, I took out some questions (6, 9, 11, 13, 17, 20, 22) and added three new questions (3, 6, 9).

The questions measure the anxiety and identify the possible factors causing the anxiety, such as instruction (21, 26), teacher (16), competitive classroom atmosphere (23,24, 19), peer pressure (20, 27), fear of embarrassment (12), lack of English ability (4, 14, 25), dissatisfaction with the communication (23), false beliefs about language (6) and self-perceived low level of ability (1). Each question was measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with responses like highly agree, agree, neutral, neither agree nor disagree, and disagree. The lowest score is 29, and the highest score is 145. The higher score, the more anxious students are in language class.

Stage 4.

The last part is the Language test. I have been using the book "Interprise 2" as a course book with the participants. It provides a test after every two units. As our goal is to check whether there is a correlation between anxiety level and language performance, this correlation of the results of FLCAS and the test from the book will show the actual connection.

The test was created by the authors of the course book I use with the participants.

Results and findings

For each measure, the score range was calculated to determine to what extent the students felt anxious in the EFL classroom and which factors are causing the anxiety among L2 learners. The results were interpreted separately first and compared later to see the correlation between anxiety and language progress. Table 1 below shows the level of anxiety of students towards second language learning. Generally, none of the students perceived themselves as highly anxious. However, among the participants, female 1 and male 1 had the highest level, respectively. According to the survey, male 1 has a false belief that language is developed only in the classroom, so he worries about falling behind. Also, he compares his language level to other students' and struggles to understand the instruction fully, which might lead to anxiety in the classroom. The next participant with the highest level of anxiety, Female 1, feels unease talking in front of other students, thinking her language level is much lower than theirs.

Table 1. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale
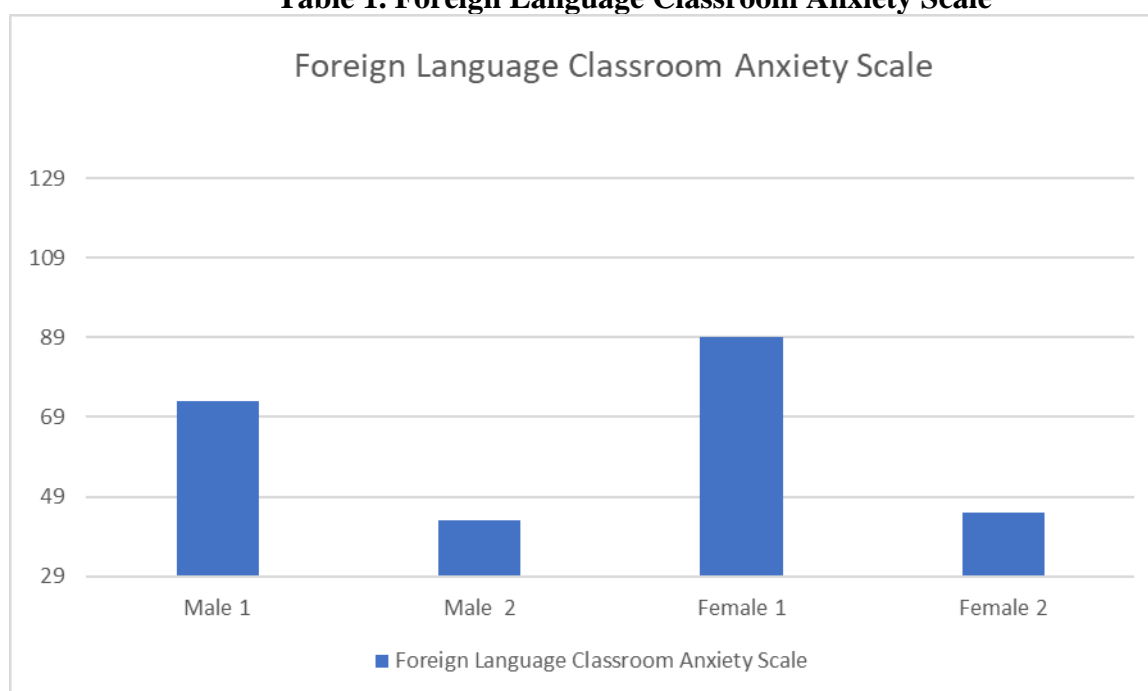
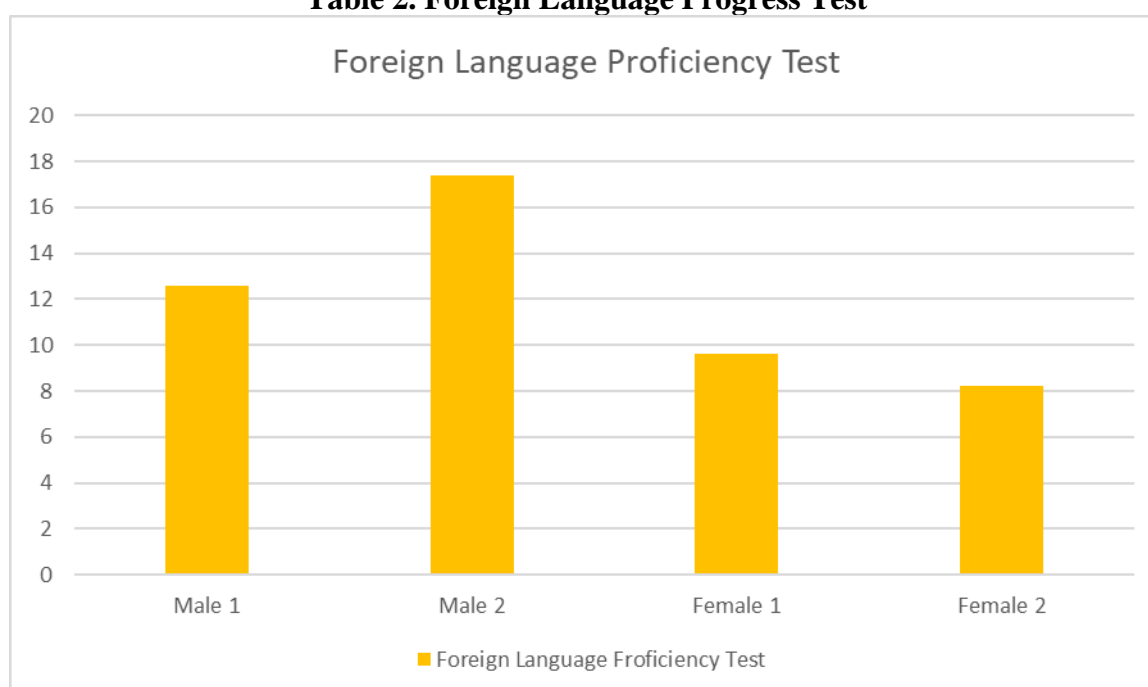**Table 2. Foreign Language Progress Test**

Table 2 shows the results of the language progress test taken after the aimed topics were taught for two weeks. As the table shows, Male 2 had the highest result, 85%. Male 1 showed 60%. Meanwhile, the female participants had slightly lower than 50 %.

The comparison of FLCAS and Foreign Language progress test results shows that the lower the anxiety level of the students, the more successful language learning is. Though, Female 1 is exceptional. She almost does not feel anxious in the classroom. However, her progress in the language is low. This is probably due to her extroverted character. Macintyre et al. (1994) noted that in the formal classroom where the emphasis is on vocabulary, grammar, reading, introverts will benefit more.

The results proved that anxiety influences negatively. The students, whose anxiety level is high, struggle to understand the lesson and get behind the rest of the group.

Also, Table 1 shows that both females and males may simultaneously suffer from anxiety in the L2 classroom. So, our hypothesis about male students having a higher level of anxiety is rejected.

All of the learners have started the language at the same age when they were at 2nd grade at school, and as overall results show that the student's anxiety is of medium and lower level. This means, the starting second language learning earlier in childhood impacts on their classroom anxiety and stress.

Conclusion

This research pointed out the foreign language classroom anxiety in high-school students in Uzbekistan. The research examined the correlation between FLA level and language progress, whether the influence of anxiety is positive or negative, whether female or male students experience anxiety towards language learning, and tried to answer whether learners who started learning languages at an early age have a lower level of anxiety. Quantitative and qualitative methods were employed to analyze and measure students' anxiety among high-school students in Uzbekistan and their language progress. The results revealed that anxiety influence negatively students' performance. Males and females are samely prone to get anxious in a language classroom. It was found that starting the languages early actually lowers the anxiety of the students.

Limitations and further implications

As any work has its flaws, this research also has some limitations. The main problem was the number of participants and the short time. If there were more participants, the research would be more detailed. Besides, it was impossible to measure the long-term foreign language classroom anxiety and the possible factors causing it because of the short time. Moreover, the research's participants started language learning almost at the same in childhood, so if the subjects started at different ages before and after puberty, it would be better to give the detailed result. Finally, as the participants were teenagers, children and adult learners of English were not investigated. Therefore, these limitations can be considered in future research.

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