

Test Anxiety among Foreign Language Learners: A Review of Literature

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Abstract

The findings obtained from previous research indicate that test anxiety has significant effects on the foreign language learning process. Thus, this paper aims to present a synthesis of research results on the sources and effects of test anxiety among foreign language learners. The results of the studies reviewed in the paper were mainly categorized under two sub-sections: the *sources* and *effects* of test anxiety. It is expected that the study will not only contribute to the limited research on the subject in Turkey, but also help increase the awareness among target groups such as learners, teacher and examiners.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, learning, test anxiety

Özet

Önceki arařtırmalardan elde edilen bulgular, sınav kaygısının yabancı dil öğrenme süreci üzerinde anlamlı etkilere sahip olduğunu göstermektedir. Bu nedenle, bu çalışma, yabancı dil öğrenenlerin taşıdıkları sınav kaygısının kaynakları ve etkileri üzerine yapılan çalışmaların bir sentezini sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Önceki çalışmalardan elde edilen sonuçlar, sınav kaygısının *sebepleri* ve *etkileri* olmak üzere iki alt alana bölünmüştür. Çalışmanın, ülkemizde bu konu ile ilgili sınırlı çalışmalara ve öğretmen, öğrenci ve sınav uygulayıcılardan oluşan hedef grupların farkındalık düzeylerinin artmasına katkı sağlayacağı düşünülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yabancı dil olarak İngilizce, öğrenme, sınav kaygısı

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the reasons that make foreign language learning a problematic area is the fact that individual differences affect learning process. In other words and in a broader

sense, research results demonstrate that learners' beliefs, attitudes, expectations and affective states are significant variables that have influence on the foreign language learning process (Aydın & Zengin, 2008). The results of available studies on the subject suggest that, as an affective state, test anxiety has also considerable effects on the process. Thus, this paper focuses on the sources and reasons of test anxiety, as well as its effects on the foreign language learning process.

Another reason guiding this study is that available research on the issue in Turkey is too limited to draw conclusions. To put it another way, though millions of students aim to learn foreign language at primary, secondary and higher education institutions, few studies have appeared on foreign language learning (Aydın & Zengin, 2008). Therefore, the study also aims to present a synthesis of the research results both to contribute to existing research activities and to increase the awareness among target groups such as learners, teachers and examiners.

Given that test anxiety is a significant factor that affects the foreign language learning process, and that current studies on the issue in Turkey are far too limited, this paper aims to make a synthesis of the research results on the sources, reasons and effects of test anxiety among foreign language learners. It consists of four sub-sections: anxiety among foreign language learners, test anxiety among foreign language learners, its sources and reasons, and its effects on the foreign language learning process.

2. ANXIETY AMONG FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS

For Blau (1955), anxiety as an affective state is an uncomfortable emotional state in which one perceives danger, feels oneself powerless, and experiences tension in the face of an expected danger. In this sense, anxiety could be classified in three types: *trait*, *state*, and *situation-specific anxiety*. First, Scovel (1978) states that *trait anxiety* is viewed as an aspect of personality, and a more permanent disposition to be anxious. Second, for Spielberger (1983), *state anxiety* is an apprehension experienced at a particular moment in time as a response to a definite situation. Finally, as Ellis (1994) notes, *situation-specific anxiety* pertains to apprehension that is unique to specific situations and events.

Language anxiety, as Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) suggest, is a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom

language learning which arise from the uniqueness of the language learning process. On the other hand, Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) describe the concept as apprehension experienced when a specific situation requires the use of a second language in which the individual is not fully proficient. Consequently, language anxiety falls under the category of situation-specific anxiety, and is three kinds: *communication apprehension*, *fear of negative evaluation*, and *test anxiety*. *Communication apprehension* refers to the fear of getting into real communication with others. In other words, it occurs in cases where learners lack mature communication skills although they enjoy mature ideas and thoughts. Secondly, *fear of negative evaluation* is observed when foreign language learners feel incapable of making the proper social impression. It is an apprehension towards evaluations by others and avoidance of evaluative situations. Finally, *test anxiety* is an apprehension towards academic evaluation, and is described as a fear of failing in tests and an unpleasant experience held either consciously or unconsciously by learners in various situations. As a result, the concept concerns apprehension towards academic evaluation which is based on the fear of failure (Horwitz and Young, 1991).

3. TEST ANXIETY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

The results of the previous studies that focus on the relationship between test anxiety and foreign / second language learning indicate that test anxiety is a significant variable that affects learning process. To give an example, a study by Aida (1994) examined how language anxiety is related to Japanese language learning. The results suggest that the factors that affected Japanese language learning were test anxiety, speech anxiety, fear of failing, and negative attitudes toward the class. Another exemplary study by Petridou and Williams (2007) analyzed the effect of test anxiety on person aberrance and found that higher-scoring pupils, and, to a lesser extent, second-language learners are significantly more often aberrant. Thus, test anxiety constitutes a factor that affects foreign / second language learning.

3.1. SOURCES AND CAUSES OF TEST ANXIETY AMONG FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS

As a synthesis of previous research demonstrates, there exist certain factors that cause test anxiety in foreign learning. Neely and Shaughnessy (1984) reviewed the

literature on cultural differences that affect test performance and the assessment process, including test anxiety. They noted six problems which are frequently cited regarding the use of tests: inappropriate content, inappropriate standardization samples, examiner and language bias, inequitable social consequences, measurement of different constructs, and differential predictive validity. Similarly, as Young notes (cited in Aydin, 2007), factors affecting student reactions to language tests are perceptions of test validity, time limit, test techniques, test format, test length, testing environment and clarity of test instructions. On the other hand, as the relevant literature suggests, low levels of language proficiency and study skills occupy a considerable place among the factors that play a role in test anxiety among language learners. In other words, language proficiency and language background have considerable effects on test anxiety. To give an example, Madsen's research (1981) indicated that there is a relationship between anxiety, and language proficiency and language background. Furthermore, Rasor & Rasor (1998) suggested that the best predictor of higher levels of test anxiety is lower study skills, while, arguing that language anxiety is a specific anxiety, Horwitz (2001) suggested that insufficient language learning is a cause rather than a result of language anxiety. She further concluded that anxiety is a cause of insufficient language learning among certain individuals and the difficulty in authentic self-presentation and various language teaching practices are the possible sources of anxiety. Finally, Rotenberg (2002) investigated whether the increasing use of standardized testing methods could have different effects on learners across language proficiency levels. The results of the study confirm that performance anxiety varies inversely with language proficiency.

Previous studies suggest that environmental and situational variables could as well play a significant role in the level of test anxiety. For instance, Bushnell (1978) attempted to test the effects of altering situational variables in stressful examinations on high-test-anxious and low-test-anxious undergraduates. To this end, he held mid-terms and final examinations in two environmental settings: large lecture halls and small language laboratories. He concluded that environmental and situational variables have important differential effects on high- and low-test-anxious students, and mask learning performance. Similarly, in his study, Lee (1988) aimed to get a rough idea of the language learner's ability in oral communicative exchange. The results suggested that the examiner's flexibility and relaxed manner and a comfortable seating arrangement

that does not put the examiner and learner in direct opposition can eliminate some tension; however, it is difficult to reduce some sources of student tension.

Time limit during test administrations is another significant variable that cause and affect the level of test anxiety among foreign language learners. Immerman (1980), for instance, investigated the effect of time restraints on diagnostic test scores. In his study, he recommended that tests given without time limits would remove test anxiety. Similarly, Madsen and Murray (1984) examined the reflections on the sources of stress during major examinations. Their findings demonstrated that high-test-anxiety students are distressed by time constraints.

Gender, ethnic and socio-economic background are other significant variables that affect the level of test anxiety. Through a sample of UK schoolchildren, Putwain (2007) aimed to collect exploratory data on test anxiety scores, along with socio-demographic variables identified in the existing literature as theoretically significant sources of individual and group differences in test anxiety scores. The study identified gender, ethnic and socio-economic background as significant predictors of variance in test anxiety scores. Furthermore, Madsen (1981) investigated the detrimental effects of anxiety on ESL / EFL. The results indicated that there exists a relationship between anxiety and gender. Similarly, El-Banna (1989) investigated the levels of language proficiency and anxiety among ESL learners. His study revealed a significant interaction between gender differences and specialization in anxiety. Finally, Rasor and Rasor (1998), who conducted a study on community college students in order to determine the correlational values among the variables of test anxiety and study behavior, and student characteristics of age, gender, and ethnicity, found that non-white students might need additional instruction concerning study habits and help with combating test anxiety than whites, and that female students are in greater need for help than males with overcoming test anxiety.

Another factor affecting the level of test anxiety is different test techniques used in testing procedures. Shohamy (1982) aimed to determine student attitudes toward testing procedures and detected a relationship between attitudes toward procedures and achievement on tests. The results revealed that student attitudes towards oral interview test were more favorable than cloze test. On the other hand, Lynne (1984) investigated cultural differences in second language aural comprehension levels among Asians under

the constraints of background noise. It was found that the noise tests were the most anxiety-producing kind of tests for the groups. Finally, with the aim to determine whether students would experience differential levels of anxiety when faced with three different second-language reading assessment methods, Oh (1992) found that cloze and think-aloud procedures increased anxiety.

Exam format and instructions in language testing are two factors related to test anxiety among learners. For example, a study by Mandelson (1973) aimed to clarify some dynamics of test anxiety in foreign language classroom. The author notes that different test instructions affected the levels of test anxiety. Furthermore, the results of the study by Madsen and Murray (1984) indicate that student concerns went beyond the usual research interest in exam format to show that factors such as lack of familiarity with question types or perception of exam defects constitute important sources of stress. On the contrary, Scott (1986) assessed native Brazilian students' affective reactions to different test formats that assessed proficiency in oral English as a foreign language. A multivariate analysis of variance based on the results of a factor analysis displayed no significant difference among student reactions to the different test formats.

3.2. EFFECTS OF TEST ANXIETY ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

The results of the previous research demonstrate that test anxiety among foreign language learners have certain effects on learning process, one of which relates to achievement. In his study investigating the relationship between trait and test anxiety, Julkunen (1992) found a connection between anxiety and foreign language achievement. The research results also showed that test anxiety affects the actual language potentials of language learners. Discussing effective ways of appraising and communicating, Latulippe and Light (1983) note that certain factors such as cheating, test coaching, testing emphasis upon language recognition rather than production, cultural bias, test interpretation, and test anxiety often cause discrepancies between test scores and actual ESL potential. It could also be emphasized that test anxiety is a barrier to successful performance for learners. The results of El-Banna (1989) revealed that ESL learners with high language levels tended to do poorly in language tests, whereas ESL learners with low language anxiety levels seemed to perform successfully on the language tests used. Last but not least, in a study (Aydın, Yavuz & Yesilyurt, 2006)

aiming to detect the test anxiety level among Turkish students as EFL learners as well as to investigate its reasons, effects and results on foreign language learning, it was found that test anxiety causes physical and psychological problems; negatively affects motivation, concentration and achievement; increases errors in learning process; prevents students from reflecting their actual performance in their test results and from studying efficiently; and reduces the interest in language learning.

Findings of previous research also point to a relationship between language skills and test anxiety among foreign language learners. For instance, the results obtained by Smith and Racine (2003) indicate that oral communication, writing, and reading in the target language cause foreign language anxiety. To put it another way, test anxiety has negative effects on the oral proficiency of language learners. Another exemplary study was conducted by Young (1986), who examined the relationship between anxiety and foreign language oral proficiency ratings. The results of her study show that anxiety does not exert as much influence on scores as ability does. However, once oral proficiency interview is made an official test, anxiety might increase. Searching for a means to improve listening comprehension through the use of visualization, Arnold (2000) found that visualization strategies reduce test anxiety. In'nami's (2006) study investigating the effects of test anxiety on listening test performance found that test anxiety does not affect the performance in listening tests. Studies also indicate that test anxiety and writing apprehension are not different from each other. For example, Hall's (1991) study contrasted both the texts and behaviors of students of English as a second language in a practice essay test and an actual English composition proficiency examination. The results of the study suggest that assessment needs to distinguish writing problems from language problems, and that instructional processes need to focus on composing behaviors and accommodating students who feel apprehension about writing or anxiety about tests. Finally, anxiety is also related to reading skills. Oh (1992) aimed to determine whether students would experience differential levels of anxiety when faced with three different second-language reading assessment methods and found that both cloze and think-aloud procedures foster anxiety.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Depending on the synthesis of the research results, some practical suggestions could be made. Given that inappropriate content, inappropriate standardization samples, examiner and language bias, inequitable social consequences, measurement of different constructs, differential predictive validity, test validity, time limit, test techniques, test format, test length, testing environment and clarity of test instructions relate to test anxiety among foreign language learners (Neely & Shaughnessy, 1984; Young, cited in Aydin, 2007), language teachers and examiners need to be aware of the factors that have an influence on the level of anxiety. Moreover, they should also be informed that language proficiency, environmental and situational factors, time limit, gender, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, test techniques, exam format and instructions are significantly correlated with the level of test anxiety among language learners. In conclusion, as the results indicate that the ways to alleviate test anxiety are directly related to their information levels on testing procedures, communication skills, and awareness of individual differences of their students, teachers and examiners should be trained both during their pre-service and in-service education programs on the methods to relieve test anxiety. In addition to the above-mentioned factors, as research results show that test anxiety considerably affect students' levels of achievement, performance, proficiency and language skills, teachers and examiners should also receive training to improve their insight into the effects of test anxiety on learning process.

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