# Foreign language anxiety of adolescent students

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### ABSTRACT

Anxiety has been a problem to many foreign language students and educators for many years. Studies on the anxiety of students regarding foreign languages have been conducted by educators, foreign language teachers, education experts and researchers. Thus, foreign language anxiety has become the focus of language learning. In the research, attempts have been made to reveal the effect of gender, class levels, and ages of adolescents on the anxiety felt in foreign language classes. Descriptive survey model has been used in this research. Research sample consist of eighty-one (81) students aged 13-15, in the 7th and 8th grade at Adana / Seyhan Mehmet Akif Secondary School, and in the 2016-2017 academic year. The "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale" prepared and developed through a validity and reliability research, has been used for these randomly selected students. The arithmetic mean, standard deviation, corrected mean and standard error values of scores obtained from Foreign Language Class Anxiety Scale have been calculated. Independent groups t-test and one-way variance analysis have been applied to determine if differences are significant or not. According to the result obtained, it has been determined that there is significant difference in the support of female students from the point of gender factor in foreign language anxiety during adolescence. However, there is no significant difference in grade level and age factors. Considering gender, grade level, and age factors, increasing the number of foreign language anxiety research at all levels has been suggested.

**Keywords:** Anxiety, foreign language anxiety, adolescent, gender, grade level, age.

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## INTRODUCTION

Adolescence, which is the transition process from childhood to adulthood, is a period when a person experiences very rapid changes and transformations in physical, cognitive, emotional and social terms. While adolescents develop physically, they also begin to think abstract, versatile, and multiple in cognitive terms. Increasing interest and curiosity in sexuality, emotional independence from the family, as well as the search for peers, identity, belief and ideology, and finally, efforts to develop a unique morality are the basic characteristics of adolescents (Steinberg, 2017; Kulaksızoğlu, 2020). Along with all these, the beliefs of resilience (I can afford everything) and indestructibility (nothing will happen to me) develop, especially in adolescents who are extremely confident in their mental and physical development. Moreover, when adolescents are not adequately aware of themselves and their potential, they may experience disappointment in the face of the negativity and failures they encounter. This situation may lead to a decrease in their self-esteem and an increase in their anxiety level. Additionally, when they feel blocked and experience a relative sense of deprivation, they may exhibit psychologically reactive behaviors (Kulaksızoğlu, 2020).

The issues mentioned so far reflect the developmental characteristics of the adolescence period. If we take into account the historical time factor, it can be said that the cognitive and psychosocial development of adolescents in this sense, their interests, desires, fears, anxieties, expectations, world views, and personality structures have undergone a radical change in the age we live in. Although it is partially different in rural and urban areas,

the education process extends until the mid-twenties, and consequently the age of marriage increases.

The phenomenon of delayed adolescence and prolonged youth, which was previously described as exceptions in the literature, has become more and more observable with each passing day. Twenge (2009) states that in this new world, adolescent homework has changed, the age of emotional maturation increases, the sense of responsibility is not sufficiently developed, and dependence on parents increases. In fact, interesting definitions are made for adolescents as "both their self-esteem and anxiety levels are high".

In the postmodern world, global factors, especially marketing and digital media, affect people's health and well-being, as well as their life flow and speed. Sociologists mention that the death of time and distance has been declared in a world turning into a global village (Robertson, 2000; Harvey, 1997; Yapıcı and Yıldırım, 2003). With these dizzying trends affecting all age groups, legislation, social policies and service structures are taking on a new form and shape, and the conventional meanings of adolescence are experiencing fundamental changes in this process.

Adolescence is now defined as the 10-24 age range rather than the 10-19 age range (Sawyer et al., 2018). Adolescence, where physical, cognitive, emotional and social developmental maturation is observed, is moving in a different direction, with the opportunities and challenges of historical times. Especially with the digitalization and virtualization process, it is noted that conceptualizations such as "I generation" (Twenge, 2009) and "Narcissist generation" (Twenge and Campell, 2010) have been surpassed and new types of adolescents called "i-generation" have emerged (Twenge, 2018). Adolescence has become much more problematic with digital technology in a problematic era.

Researchers mention that adolescents experience anxiety in health and image, economic status, school success, friendship and romantic relationships (Akse et al., 2007). As it is understood, the relationship between adolescence and anxiety makes its presence felt more in the postmodern social structure than in traditional and modern societies.

Adolescence is relatively different from other age groups with its unique anxiety, fear, expectations and designs. The developmental tasks of adolescence and the conditions of the period bring new situations and different needs. The needs met and unmet, the changes in the meaning and purpose of life, the shortening of the time interval between desire and satisfaction, the situation of being stuck between pleasure and security, increase the anxiety of adolescents.

Clarifying the relationship and difference between anxiety and fear may be functional in distinguishing adolescents' fears and anxieties. However, it should be emphasized that fear and anxiety may be intertwined from time to time. However, these two concepts can be separated from each other with certain criteria. According to psychologists, fear, whose object is concrete, has a high intensity and a short life span. Anxiety, whose object is abstract and imaginary, has a weak intensity and a long duration. At this point, it is noteworthy that the fear and anxiety experienced at a normal level ensures the continuation of the human being, motivate the human being, increase perseverance and determination. In this sense, it can be easily said that the optimal level of fear and anxiety is beneficial (Schulz, 1991; Cüceloğlu, 1994).

However, when these are felt lightly, they do not provide sufficient motivation, and when they are experienced excessively and intensely, they can become harmful to the individual with the high tension they create. In other words, if the strength and length of fear and anxiety, which gives life energy, is lived in the right place and at the right pace, it can have a negative impact on the individual's everyday life, career, relationship and academic performance; when fear is experienced excessively, the feeling of dread and anxiety increases, with panic and anxiety disorder seen. In this sense, there is a reflective perception of threat and danger in all anxiety disorders. This perception of threat and danger can lead to life restriction and functional impairment in various areas. According to Eysenck and Wilson (1998: 80), "Those who are highly anxious start to experience immediate and serious mental breakdown due to their wrong deeds, they worry about many unnecessary and unlikely issues." Since the autonomic nervous system is highly active in these people, psychological symptoms such as excessive tension, anxious waiting and distraction are frequently observed. Those with low anxiety levels are calm and peaceful; they are generally resistant to irrational fears and anxieties (Mannoni, 1992; Batlaş and Batlaş, 1990; Köknel, 1990; Cüceloğlu, 1994). On the one hand, adolescents experience problems in their relationships with their social environment, especially their family and friends; on the other hand, they may experience anxiety due to individual reasons, such as image, visibility and desire to be liked. School, examination, romantic relationships and future design can become prominent in adolescence anxiety (Cüceloğlu, 1994).

As the state of anxiety increases, the problems of not being able to focus on a subject and making sense of what is happening in the outside world may begin (Kutlu, 2001). Anxiety, which is one of the most serious problems of our age, makes its effects felt on many issues, especially the individual's achievement of a job and academic performance (Spielberger et al., 1971; Hilgard et al., 1971).

In a research conducted, anxiety is generally divided into two as continuous and state (Öner and Le Compte (1998: 1-2). Scovel (1978) defines constant anxiety as an individual's permanent tendency to be anxious. State anxiety is a temporary anxiety type that occurs under certain conditions. For example, this is generally the case

when a person who is not anxious only gets anxious when speaking in front of the public, taking an examination or interview. Young (1994) expresses the situations that cause anxiety about the learner as low self-esteem, competitiveness, perceiving oneself as incompetent, communication problem, feeling incomplete within the group, and biased attitudes and stereotypical attitudes and beliefs regarding language learning.

People can learn more when their minds are empty and free from anxiety. Since people who teach and learn a foreign language play an important role in the acquisition of a foreign language, more emphasis is needed on understanding the anxiety factor. For this reason, research has been conducted on students' anxiety about foreign language by many educators, foreign language teachers, education experts and researchers. Over the years, it is stated that foreign language anxiety has become an obstacle in language learning (Fadillah, 2010). Although many people claim to have a mental barrier to learning a foreign language, the same individuals may be successful and strongly motivated learners in other situations. So, what prevents them from achieving their desired goal? There may be anxiety that hinders their ability to perform successfully in foreign language lessons.

Just as anxiety negatively affects the success of some people in science or mathematics, it also affects some people negatively in learning foreign languages. When anxiety is limited to language learning, it falls into the specific category of anxiety reactions. Psychologists use the term specific anxiety response to distinguish people who are usually anxious in various situations from those who are anxious only in certain situations. Second, language researchers and theorists are aware that anxiety is often linked to language learning. Teachers and students often feel that anxiety is a major obstacle to overcome in learning to speak another language, and approaches to foreign language teaching are aimed at reducing learner anxiety. Foreign language anxiety is defined as a conceptually different variable in foreign language learning and interpreted in the context of the existing theoretical study on specific anxiety responses, trying to fill the gap in this area (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Researchers define foreign language anxiety in different ways. According to Clement (1980), students' feelings and self-confidence come to the fore in foreign language anxiety. Emphasizing the distinctive feature of foreign language anxiety, Young (1992) defines it as a complex psychological phenomenon specific to language learning. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994b) examines foreign language anxiety in speaking, listening, etc. especially in a foreign language context; it is treated as a feeling of anxiety or a negative emotional reaction to learning. In fact, these definitions came about by the claim of Horwitz et al. (1986), that foreign language anxiety is "a phenomenon related to but distinguishable from other concerns". Horwitz et al. (1986) are the first

scientists to conceptualize foreign language anxiety as a unique type of anxiety specific to language learning. The theoretical model of foreign language anxiety plays a major role in language anxiety research, making them effective researchers in this field.

Horwitz et al. (1986) suggests that foreign language anxiety should be seen as a situation-specific anxiety, based on their clinical experience with university students in their teaching processes and the feedback they received from 30 students who participated in a support group for language learning, not because it stems from the uniqueness of the learning of the foreign language. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), no other field of study includes self-concept and self-expression to the same extent as foreign language learning. This feature distinguishes the anxiety caused by learning a foreign language from other academic concerns. Students with general anxiety are likely to experience foreign language anxiety. However, it is not uncommon for those who are very good in other fields to fail in learning a foreign language (Trang, 2012).

Although the theory of Horwitz et al. (1986) evolved mainly from clinical data, numerous studies confirm the anxiety theories specific to language learning by adopting the theoretical model. This theoretical model shows that foreign language anxiety can be differentiated from general anxiety, and that there is a weak relationship between general anxiety and foreign language anxiety. Chen and Chang (2004) interprets foreign language anxiety as a condition-specific form of anxiety that is uniquely associated with foreign language learning. These results supported the theory of Horwitz et al. (1986) of a unique type of anxiety specific to foreign language learning (Trang, 2012).

The aim of this research is to determine the effect of adolescent students' gender, grade levels, and ages on the anxiety felt in foreign language lessons. The following questions have been sought in the research:

- Is there a statistically significant difference in the anxiety experienced by adolescent students in foreign language lessons according to their gender?
- Is there a statistically significant difference in the anxiety experienced by adolescent students in foreign language lessons according to their grade level?
- Is there a statistically significant difference in the anxiety experienced by adolescent students in foreign language lessons according to their age?

## METHODOLOGY

### Research model

In the research, descriptive survey model has been used. Descriptive survey models are models designed to describe events or situations (Karasar, 1998).

## The universe and sample of the research

Research universe is made up of students studying in the 2016-2017 academic year at Adana / Seyhan Mehmet Akif Secondary School. The research sample comprises eighty-one (81) students aged 13-15, in the 7th and 8th grade at Adana / Seyhan Mehmet Akif Secondary School, and in the 2016-2017 academic year, student selection was done randomly.

## Data collection tools

In this research, Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale has been used as a data collection tool. "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale" prepared by Horwitz and Cope (1986) was examined and questions were formed by Öner and Gedikoğlu (2007). The first draft of scale was conducted on 80 students in three schools in the sample of the universe. Validity and reliability tests were conducted regarding results reached in the pilot application. The fact that Cronbach alpha coefficient was found as 0.9178 indicates a reliability of the scale.

## Analysis of data

The data of scale applied to the research group was transferred to a computer. The data obtained was analyzed using a packet-computer program. The arithmetic mean, standard deviation, corrected mean and standard error values of scores obtained from Foreign Language Class Anxiety Scale were calculated. Also, Independent groups' t-test and one-way variance

analysis were applied to determine if differences were significant or not.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Students' foreign language anxiety according to gender

Independent groups t-test results regarding the average scores reached from whole Foreign Language Class Anxiety Scale are shown in Table 1 to determine if there is a significant difference according to gender in students' anxiety about foreign language. According to Table 1, average scores of the independent groups regarding the average scores of whole Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale was 2.57 when examined for male students, and average of the total scores was 2.64 when examined for female students. Examining averages of two groups, significant difference was observed in favor of the female students ($p < 0.05$).

### Students' foreign language anxiety according to grade level

Independent groups t-test results of average scores reached from whole Foreign Language Class Anxiety Scale are shown in Table 2 to determine if there is a significant difference in students' foreign language anxiety according to grade level. According to Table 2, mean of scale total was 2.55 for 7th grade students and 2.62 for 8th grade students. There was no significant difference between scale total score averages of the 7th and 8th grade students ($p > 0.05$).

**Table 1.** Independent groups t-test results regarding the scores the students got from the foreign language anxiety scale by gender.

| Gender scale points | Male (N = 43) | | Female (N = 34) | | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Ss | | Ss | | |
| Scale total | 2.57 | 0.76 | 2.64 | 0.57 | -0.44 | 0.03 |

**Table 2.** Independent groups t-test results regarding the scores the students got from the foreign language anxiety scale by grade level.

| Grade scale points | 7th Grade (N= 18) | | 8th Grade (N= 59) | | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Ss | | Ss | | |
| Scale total | 2.55 | 0.58 | 2.62 | 0.71 | -0.38 | 0.28 |

### Students' foreign language anxiety according to age

Table 3 shows one-way analysis of variance results of

average scores reached from whole Foreign Language Class Anxiety Scale to determine if there is a significant difference according to age in the students' anxiety about

**Table 3.** One-way analysis of variance results regarding the scores the students got from the foreign language anxiety scale by age.

| Variable | Age | N | | Ss | df | F | p | Significant difference |
|----------|-----|---|------|-----|----|------|-----|------------------------|
| Scale total | 13 | 18 | 2.60 | .65 | 3 | 1.10 | .33 | - |
| | 14 | 49 | 2.67 | .70 | 3 | 1.10 | .33 | - |
| | 15 | 9 | 2.30 | .61 | 3 | 1.10 | .33 | - |

foreign language. According to Table 3, mean of the scale total was 2.60 for 13-year-old students, 2.67 for 14-year-old students, and 2.30 for students who are 15-year-old. There was no significant difference between means of scale total (p > 0.05).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of research is to establish the effect of adolescent students' gender, grade levels, and ages on anxiety they feel in foreign language classes. In the research, gender, class levels and age variables of the students have been taken into consideration. As a result of the research, to investigate if a significant difference exist in students' anxiety about foreign language by gender, the average scores of the independent groups regarding the average scores of whole Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale was 2.57 for male students and 2.64 for female students. Examining averages of the two groups, significant difference was observed in favor of female students (p < 0.05). Research conducted by Cheng (2002), Matsuda and Gobel (2004), Elkhafaifi (2005) and Dornijenad and Ahmadabad (2014) on students showed that gender had an effect on foreign language anxiety, that is, female students had higher foreign language anxiety levels than male students. The result reached in this research regarding gender factor is consistent with the literature. As in the literature, in this research, it has been established that adolescent female students have a higher foreign language anxiety compared to adolescent male students.

To investigate if there is a significant difference in students' anxiety about foreign language by grade level, according to the one-way analysis of variance analysis of average scores reached from whole Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety scale, mean of scale total was 2.55 for 7th grade students and 2.62 for 8th grade students. There was no significant difference between scale total score averages of 7th and 8th grade students (p > 0.05).

To investigate if there is a significant difference in students' anxiety about foreign language by age, according to the one-way analysis of variance analysis of the average scores reached from whole Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety scale, mean of scale total was 2.60 for 13-year-old students, 2.67 for 14-year-old students and 2.30 for 15-year-old students. There was no significant difference between means of scale total

(p>0.05).

The most important point in successful language acquisition is the age of the student (Collier, 1988). Lenneberg (1969), the pioneer of the Critical Hypothesis Period, emphasizes that language development in children can be understood with biological factors, emphasizing that age has an extremely large role in second language acquisition and should not be overlooked by teachers. According to Lenneberg (1969), the two sides of the brain (right and left hemispheres) are involved in the process and they develop a special function, which is called lateralization. Lateralization makes learning a language more difficult than it seems. Because the brain loses its flexibility after lateralization, the language function is normally completed during adolescence. In the light of this information, in this research, it has been thought that adolescent students' class levels and ages influence anxiety felt in foreign language classes. However, according to the results reached, it has been established that class level and age have no effect on foreign language anxiety. To overcome foreign language anxiety, some suggestions can be made by considering the analysis results in the research:

Teachers should increase their level of awareness about the types and effects of anxiety and anxiety reducing activities. For this purpose, necessary in-service programs and seminars can be organized for teachers. Students should be allowed to make mistakes and encouraged to be more active in learning foreign languages. There is limited research on relationship between foreign language anxiety and gender factor. Considering developmental psychology, the developmental levels of male and female students can be examined and studies examining the effect of gender on foreign language anxiety should be conducted. Researches on foreign language anxiety are limited and are generally conducted with advanced (high school and university) student groups. Considering this situation, research should be conducted on early students and adolescents.

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