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FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING ANXIETY OF TURKISH CHILDREN AT DIFFERENT AGES

Sühendan Er

TED University

suhendaner@gmail.com

Sühendan Er got her undergraduate degree in English Language Teaching at Gazi University in 1990. She worked at TED Ankara College Primary school as an English teacher between 1990 and 1997. In 1997 she started working at Gazi University as an English language instructor. She got her MS degree from the same university in the field of English Language Teaching. In 2011, she got PhD from Ankara University, Child Development and Education Department with the thesis on children's foreign language learning and belief. While she was working at Gazi University, she completed teacher training programme. Besides, she took place as Tester, Academic Coordinator, Teacher Trainer and lastly the Vice Director of the school of foreign languages. Since 2012 she has been working at TED University, Education Faculty, and Department of Early Childhood Education. Dr. Er has been having her academic and scientific studies on children's language development in early childhood, teaching foreign languages to children, values education, school readiness and constructive approach in education. She is the founder member of the World Council for Curriculum and Instruction and she has been the vice president of the institution's Turkish chapter since 2011.

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Sühendan Er

suhendaner@gmail.com

Abstract

Although it is always under debate that anxiety has been experienced by most learners in the process of learning a foreign language, their culture is normally expected to help children avoid such a psychological risk in their language classes regardless of their age. In this study foreign language learning anxiety of Turkish children have been examined as a learning barrier. For the study both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from six EFL teachers and 544 students in randomly selected primary, secondary and high schools in Ankara. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), developed by Horwitz et.al. (1986), was administered as the data collection tool. The internal reliability achieved an alpha coefficient of 0.93 with all items producing significant corrected item total scale correlations and test- retest reliability over 8 weeks yielded the correlation coefficient 0.83($p<.0001$). The results of the study revealed that as Turkish children get older, their level of anxiety rises too, and their culture of trust in their teachers and parents does not help them overcome this kind of a learning barrier.

Keywords: Turkish children, culture, foreign language learning anxiety, learning barrier

1. Introduction

Family environment is one of the factors influencing child's development, it stimulates intellectual and emotional development, shapes values, etc., which has a great impact on their school life (Mikos and Czerwiec 2008). Mothers are the first teachers at home, private tutors of their children when they start school, even grandparents start school each time their grandchildren do. And relatives are always ready as reliable helping hands any time their children are in need of their warm support for education. Therefore there is no visible risk for children to feel anxious in or outside of the educational contexts regardless of their age or educational level. However, according to most researches in the field of foreign language learning, anxiety is one of the most important affective factors that influence foreign language learning (Bailey 1983; MacIntyre and Gardner 1994; Young 1991; Chen and Chang 2004; Na 2007; Spielman and Radnofsky 2001).

Studies conducted over the years have shown that language anxieties are caused by several factors. These factors might significantly have an effect on learners in learning a foreign language (Lucas 2011). Bailey (1983) claims that in order to get positive feedback from their teachers with regard to their progress and competence, the learners outperform each other. Such competitive behaviors may cause anxiety among them. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) discuss that students with language anxiety have difficulty in expressing their own views and underestimate their abilities. The reason why students prefer to be silent instead of being active might be their fear of making mistakes in front of other students (Tunaboylu 1993). It is derived from lack of self-confidence and lack of confidence affects success negatively. Nunan (1999) reports that sense of confidence is a factor which influences learning so the confidence level of the student is important. The attitudes and motivation towards learning,

teaching, school and target language affect the achievement level in foreign language learning (McDonough and Shaw 1998). Among all language skills speaking is accepted as the most difficult one. Because of this while students are improving their speaking skills; communication with others is likely to create anxiety (Maclntyre and Gardner, 1994). Foreign language learning anxiety takes its roots from the student, the teacher or the quality of education. Personal problems of language learner, communication difficulties, low self-esteem, fear of identity loss, rivalry, unrealistic beliefs and expectations towards learning cause anxiety. Unfair and wrong behavior of some teachers is among the factors which cause anxiety (Young 1992). Williams and Andrade (2008) state that language anxiety is often associated with the performance of productive skills. He also claims that tests and the learner perceived relationship with their teacher also contribute to the learners' language anxiety (Bailey 1983 as cited in Na 2007).

Horwitz et al. (1986) have developed Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) as they realized the profound effects of anxiety on many aspects of foreign language learning. They claim that it is important to be able to identify those students who are particularly anxious in foreign language classes. The scale has commonly been used in various studies (Maeng 2007; Arnaiz and Guillén 2012; Ay 2010; Elkhafifi 2005; Wörde 2003; Salim 2004; Bekleyen 2004; Batumlu 2006; Na 2007). Some studies were conducted to indicate the level of anxiety of elementary school, secondary school and high school students by using FLCAS developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). Maeng (2007) studied with 167 primary school students and identified communication anxiety of the students specially emphasized on speaking skills. Ay (2011) examined foreign language anxiety of 160 young adolescent Turkish students who were learning English as a foreign language in relation to language skills at different levels. FLCAS (1986) was used to collect data and results showed that the foreign language anxiety experienced by young adolescent students differs in relation to levels of instruction and to basic language skills. Chan and Wu (2004) used FLCAS, interviews, classroom observations in order to obtain and suggest possible solutions to elementary students' foreign language learning anxiety. In Taiwan 601 fifth grade students answered FLCAS and among them 18 high anxious students and 9 teachers had a semi structured interview besides classroom observations to explore the possible sources and anxiety-provoking situations. It was found that low proficiency, fear of negative evaluation, competition of games, anxious personality, and pressure from students themselves and their parents were sources of language anxiety. Tests, speaking in front of others, spelling, incomprehensible input, and speaking to native speakers were said to be anxiety-provoking situations. Oner and Gedikoglu (2007) determined a negative correlation between Turkish secondary school students' foreign language anxiety levels and their English learning academic successes. Na (2007) revealed that Chinese students had comparatively high anxiety in learning English and high anxiety plays a somewhat debilitative role in high school students' language learning. In the study it was also shown that male learners had higher anxiety of English classes than females. Piniel (2006) found that Hungarian secondary school 9th grade students' foreign language learning anxiety may occur regardless of low levels of trait anxiety. Teacher was a significant factor in influencing students' levels of foreign language learning anxiety.

When the researches above are reviewed, researchers focus on the effects of anxiety in language classrooms with respect to different variables such as success, gender or skills development. Despite the extensive literature in the area, there has not been much research that probes a potential association between age and foreign language learning anxiety.

Age in foreign language learning is considered to be an important factor and children learn a foreign language faster and easier than an adult (Cekic 2002; Krashen and Terrell 1983) but

what philosophy to use and which theories to conduct are the issues which are still being discussed (Mirici 2001). Sarigul (2000) asserts that by getting older students experience foreign language learning anxiety and added that the younger the age they were, the less they were affected by the harmful effects of foreign language learning anxiety. When a child is young s/he isn't able to perceive and control herself/himself well. They aren't afraid of making mistakes like adults. This leads them to adapt learning environments better (Brown 1994; Sarigul 2000). According to Brustal (1974) when children are learning a foreign language, they don't have a negative attitude towards the language and its rules so the barrier in front of language learning is deleted spontaneously and children learn a foreign language easily. It is safe to state that learning a language easily may prevent anxiety. Krashen and Terrell (1983) claim that after puberty effective filter starts to develop causing some limitations in the process of language learning. Similar to Krashen and Terrell, Littlewood (1988) reports that there is a critical age period when brain is more flexible that makes learning easier. This period ends up with puberty, with adulthood natural capacity of language learning is lost and language learning becomes an artificial process. As this is not seen in young learners, it may cause anxiety by getting older. He also emphasizes that age factor and brain development are effective in language learning. Beck (1997) compared young and adult learners' foreign language learning process and states that children have a special capacity of learning languages but this capacity disappears by getting older. When Beck (1997) examined brain maps of people who know two languages, he found that there were striking differences between ages. He claimed that children put the foreign language in the same place with their native language in their brains whereas adults placed them separately. Having a capacity of learning a foreign language at an early age would make learning easy and stop experiencing anxiety in the process.

As age is mentioned to be one of the important factors of foreign language learners this study aims at investigating the level of foreign language learning anxiety between the ages of 10 to 18, and reveals the sources of foreign language learning anxiety of Turkish children with some possible practical solutions.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The participants of the study were 544 students at the ages of 10 and 18 from different schools obtained with convenience sampling. 22.1 % of the students were from elementary schools, 32.1% from secondary schools and 45.8% from high schools. In addition, 2 elementary, 2 secondary and 2 high school teachers also took part in the research.

2.2. Instruments

In this study, both quantitative and qualitative data was collected. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) which was developed by Horwitz et.al. (1986) was administered in order to collect quantitative data. It was considered by several researchers as a "valid" and "credible" measuring instrument (Aida 1994; Horwitz 1986; Price 1991). The internal reliability achieved an alpha coefficient of 0.93 with all items producing significant corrected item total scale correlations and test- retest reliability over 8 weeks yielded the correlation coefficient 0.83($p<.0001$). The adaptation of FLCAS for Turkish students was done by Aydin (1999). Batumlu (2006) did the reliability study with 150 university students and found internal reliability alpha coefficient of the scale as 0.90. In this scale, there were 33 question items and a 5-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" (5 points) to "strongly disagree" (1 point). Each anxiety score was gained by summing the ratings of the thirty-three items. The theoretical range of this scale was from 33 to 165. The higher the total points

were, the more anxious the student was. As the validity of FLCAS was done by Aydin (1999), no validity search was conducted in this study. The scale was used with 544 elementary, secondary and high school students in total and the reliability coefficient of the scale was found 0.78. For collecting qualitative research data, a semi structured interview was organized and 6 volunteer elementary, secondary and high school teachers; 2 from each level; were interviewed about the factors of language anxiety.

2.3. Procedure and data analysis

Two elementary schools, two secondary schools, two high schools were visited to conduct FLCAS. From each school, the scale was conducted to randomly select two classes and from each class volunteer students filled the scale. From 4th and 5th grades the data was collected from 120 students. From 6th to 8th grades 175 students and from 9th to 12th grades 249 students participated to the study. In the study 4th and 5th grades were categorized as elementary, 6th to 8th classes as secondary and 9th to 12th classes as high school.

The collected data was analyzed by using SPSS 12. There was no normal distribution among students' foreign language learning anxiety scores and their ages ($p < .05$). Consequently, the non-parametric test of Kruskall Wallis H Test was administered.

3. Findings

The findings of the study are as follows:

Table 1. *The comparison of FL anxiety scores and elementary, secondary and high school grades*

		Foreign Language Learning Anxiety						Kruskal Wallis H Test			Paired comp.
		N	Mean	Med	Min	Max	SS	Mean Rank	H	p	
Grades	4-5th grades Elementary	120	83,5	80,5	43,0	145,0	23,1	219,2	93,089	0,000*	1-3 2-3
	6-7-8th grades Secondary	175	81,2	81,0	36,0	153,0	22,9	208,5			
	9-10-11-12th grades High school	249	107,9	110	38,0	161,0	31,5	343,1			
	Total	544	93,9	91,0	36,0	161,0	30,1				

*p<0,05

Table 2. *The comparison of FL anxiety scores and ages*

		Foreign Language Learning Anxiety						Kruskal Wallis H Test			Paired comp.
		N	Mean	Med.	Min	Max	SS	Mean Rank	H	p	
Ages	Age 10	59	83,2	81	51	145	21,4	216,7	116,390	0,000*	4-6 4-9 4-10 4-11 4-12 5-6 5-9 5-10 5-11 5-12 6-7 6-8 6-9 6-10 6-11 6-12 7-9 7-10 7-11 7-12 8-9 8-10 8-11 8-12 10-12 11-12
	Age 11	61	83,9	78,0	43	136	24,8	221,6			
	Age 12	54	72,3	70,0	36	115	19,4	159,0			
	Age 13	63	83,6	81,0	39	145	23,9	222,2			
	Age 14	58	86,8	86,5	45	153	22,6	239,8			
	Age 15	65	105,5	112,0	40	159	36,2	325,6			
	Age 16	66	102,7	106,5	38	158	29,8	320,8			
	Age 17	58	102,9	99,5	41	161	31,3	317,3			
	Age 18	60	121,1	128,5	47	155	24,2	411,7			
	Total	544	93,9	91,0	36	161	30,1				

*p<0,05

As is seen above there was no significant difference between anxiety scores among grades statistically (p<0,05). The anxiety score of 18 year olds was significantly higher than the other grades. The 17 year olds' anxiety scores were higher than 10 and 14 year old students. The 12 year olds' anxiety scores were significantly lower than other grades. The anxiety scores of 15 and 16 year old students were significantly higher than 10, 11, 13 and 14 year old students.

3.1. Interview with Teachers

Six volunteer foreign language teachers, who were interviewed, had 5-10 year experience in foreign language classrooms. Two teachers were teaching at elementary school with students of 4th and 5th graders. The other two of them were teaching to 6th to 8th graders and 2 of them were teaching to 9th to 12th graders. The teachers were coded as T1, T2, T3 so on.

The interview started with 'Do you think you have anxious students in your class? If yes, what causes this anxiety and what do you do to decrease it?' The analyses of the interviews were stated below.

3.2. Interview with Elementary School Teachers (4th-5th Grades)

Two teachers were interviewed and they mostly pointed out that they didn't have major anxiety behaviors during the lessons and they supported this with the sample quotations as follows;

'We had only 3 hours of English lessons a week. The curriculum is not loaded and it is suitable for their age. I usually use games in the class so this attracts their attention. They really enjoy them. This may be one of the reasons of not having anxiety during language classes' (T1).

'They enjoy learning new things and a new culture. They all seem to be interested in. The tests do not seem hard to them as their scores are satisfactory enough. This is an indication that they do not experience anxiety in language classes' (T2).

Mc Donough (1989), stated that Chomsky's language acquisition device in brain never hinders children's language learning and added that children are the best examples in language learning. The students' ages were between 10 and 12 so without any barriers in their brains, learning became an easy process. When there was no hardness in learning, there wouldn't be anxiety. The world of children was very different from adults so the experts had crucial mission in foreign language teaching to young learners. A foreign language teacher should be aware of child psychology and she/he should know that inserting games, stories, songs or charades in teaching languages process accelerated children's language learning adventure (Angı 1999). It should be kept in mind that foreign language can only be constructed on native language. Foreign language learning achievement was closely connected with the maturity of native language development (Kotil 2002). Because these students were mature enough in their native language, they might not experience anxiety much.

3.3. Interview with Secondary School Teachers (6th-8th Grades)

Two teachers mentioned that they have anxious students in their classrooms and they realized that this occurs much in the exams. Some quotations from secondary school language teachers are as in the following;

'The course is 4 hours a week and the students seem that they enjoy the course book but they are sometimes unsuccessful in the exams. For me, this is an indication of anxiety' (T3).

'Whenever they watch a video related to the course topic they become more productive. Even the most silent one says something. This encourages the students and they do not experience anxiety. I also prefer pair work, in fact it is less noisy and more productive. The students rely on each other and this may be a factor decreases anxiety of learning English' (T4).

'I feel sympathy towards English culture and teaching English. I give authentic examples. I think this motivates my students and reduce their anxiety of learning a new language' (T4).

According to the obtained results secondary school students didn't have anxiety as much as high school students. The methods used in the classroom, the attitude of the teacher towards the students or as their ages were between 12-14 which was the very beginning of adolescent age, were factors decreases anxiety in the class. The adolescent age was still under discussion. Biologically it began at 10 but some social factors could affect this so it could be

accepted as 12. In contrast to critical age hypothesis it seemed that although the students were at the adolescent period they didn't have much difficulty in learning a foreign language in accordance with that their anxiety level was low.

The teachers mentioned that their students were motivated enough in learning a new language and they saw this as a positive factor in decreasing anxiety. This view overlapped with Krashen and Terrell (1983) affective filter hypothesis. According to them students with high motivation could generally learn better. The ones with high confidence were more successful and the learners with low anxiety level learn a foreign language easier than the ones with high anxiety.

3.4. Interview with High School Teachers (9^{th} to 12^{th} Grades)

In Turkey, at high schools there are foreign language lessons 9 hours a week for 9^{th} grades and for 10^{th} to 12^{th} graders lessons are 4 hours a week. Two teachers who were teaching to 15-18 year olds asserted that they observed students who had the feeling of anxiety in their classrooms. They put forward their point of views about foreign language learning anxiety as follows;

'Although I try hard I sometimes cannot reach calling their attention. They think that English is the course that should be put aside as there are others that are more important. As they do not deal much with this course they cannot achieve in the exams so this leads to failure anxiety. Especially 11^{th} and 12^{th} graders' university entrance exam anxiety reflects on not only English lessons but rest of all courses' (T5).

'9^{th} graders are more interested in English than others. It is the only time with the biggest amount of time for language classes, 10 hours a week. It should be the same for every grade, otherwise they forget English gradually they pass classes. Forgetting could be a reason of experiencing anxiety in language classrooms' (T5).

'The students always want me to ask simple questions in the exam. This is an evidence of exam anxiety. This arises from their lack of knowledge and leads to anxiety. Although they seem they like English, they do not give importance to English courses' (T6).

According to the results, the highest level of anxiety was experienced by high school students. Anxiety was accepted destructive in language learning (Abu-Rabia 2004; Matsuda and Gobel 2004; Spielmann and Radnofsky 2001). Bailey (1983) asserted that students with anxiety were in tendency of not contributing to the lessons, coming to the class without any preparation and avoiding making eye contact with the teacher. Oxford (1999) defined anxiety as the source of failure not the result. Negative effects of language anxiety would decrease when language level rises with less undesirable experience. The researchers put forward the reasons of anxiety which were similar to the teachers' opinions. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) argued that, the increase in anxiety would result in with a negative effect on student's performance and language learning.

The students' ages were between 15 and 18, which was the age of adolescence. According to Krashen and Terrell (1983) it was the time when the effective filter process started and the time when critical age Littlewood (1988) finished when brain lost its plasticity and learning a foreign language became harder.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Young learners in language classes are considered to be more successful learners of foreign languages than adolescents. It is believed that since young learners have lower level of affective filter and thus their anxiety level should be lower as well (Krashen and Terrell 1983, Krashen 1985). However it is also believed that culture is one of the most influential

factors in the educational procedure (Gollnick and Chinn 2002, Bennett 2003. However, the results of the study show that the culture of the Turkish children did not have any influence in their English classes in that as they get older their level of anxiety rises too just like in any other educational settings in different parts of the world.

The results also showed that high school students between 15 and 18 showed higher anxiety level than secondary and elementary school students. The critical age period might be the reason of high anxiety level as with the beginning of adolescence language learning became harder and this led to anxiety in language classroom. For teachers the course hours of language lessons should be the same for every level. They thought it was an important component in providing motivation to language learning. The higher motivation was, the least anxiety was. Another point was that when the course hour was less in 10^{th} to 12^{th} grades, this was perceived as an unimportant course among students and this led them study languages less than other courses. As a result of this, when they felt that they would fail they had exam anxiety which reflected on the whole course as foreign language learning anxiety. At this point, for the policy makers it could be suggested that from elementary till the end of high school, the foreign language course hours should be stabilized in order not to lose the attention of the students towards foreign languages.

The secondary school students' anxiety scores were as low as elementary school students. Although these students' ages were between 12 and 14 which was the period of adolescence they didn't have anxiety level as much as high school students. There was a contradiction with literature as they were at the age of puberty when learning became somewhat an artificial process, they enjoyed learning and didn't experience anxiety. Secondary school students' anxiety scores were as low as elementary students. This could be accepted as a pleasing result which should be turned into an advantage. With students with low anxiety level, teachers could enrich their learning. Teachers could perform better in classes with low anxiety level. They should make their classes attractive for the learners by making a well-organized lesson plan, by choosing the most appropriate method, technique or strategy, by using proper materials and by applying the suitable activities. They may arrange learning environments which were suitable for the learners' ages. Teachers' awareness of the developmental stages and psychology of their students was another crucial point. Their positive attitude towards foreign language learning could also facilitate learning.

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