A Review on Foreign Language Anxiety

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Abstract. The topic of foreign language anxiety (FLA) has been discussed extensively since the introduction of language learning. Several studies have evidence that the anxiety that foreign language learners encounter during their language-learning process can negatively affect their success and performance. FLA is thought to affect most learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), and linguists nearly unanimously concur that FLA is one of the biggest challenges that EFL learners experience when learning a foreign language. This paper reviews the literature on FLA studies, focusing mostly on the definition, categorization, and prior FLA research. A unique kind of anxiety known as foreign FLA is experienced when studying a foreign language. In foreign language learning, students will encounter several types of anxiety, such as anxiety related to learning and anxiety related to listening. Though there is disagreement over whether foreign language learning anxiety has a two-dimensional or three-dimensional structure, most academics support the three dimensions of FLA. This paper also examines the origins and effects of FLA. The majority of academics think that the learning of a foreign language causes anxiety, which hinders learning a second language. This paper leads one to the conclusion that more study in this field is required to validate the findings of previous studies on anxiety related to learning a foreign language and to identify strategies for lowering such worry

Keywords: Foreign Language Anxiety; Causes of FLA; Consequences of FLA

1. Introduction

Nowadays, with the advancement of foreign language learning, foreign language anxiety (FLA) is increasingly attracting people's attention. Horwitz believes that most English learners experience varying degrees of language anxiety [1]. In addition, according to most language researchers, one of the greatest challenges that learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) may face is the anxiety created during the language acquisition process [2]. With the increased investigation, the categorization of FLA has progressively improved. Furthermore, there are a lot of factors that have been discovered that can influence the levels of FLA that learners can experience, such as individual factors, learning environment, language skills that learners need to practice, etc. Studies on anxiety related to learning a foreign language also highlight the possibility that worry may negatively affect learners' performance and accomplishment [3]. Therefore, in the process of foreign language learning, FLA is a very important obstacle. It deserves further study and exploration. This paper provides a review of the literature on FLA and discusses the definition of FLA, its classification of FLA, and previous research on FLA. Through an understanding of the ideas surrounding language anxiety, learners can make sense of the current situation of their own FLA, establish achievable goals for their language learning, and experience a reduction in anxiety as they progress. The purpose of this article is also to provide further comprehension and support to those who are interested in conducting more in-depth research on FLA.

2. Foreign Language Anxiety

2.1. Definition of FLA

In the literature, there is more than one definition of FLA. FLA is a regular and intense experience for language learners, making it worthwhile to investigate. For researchers, exploring FLA is productive and, more significantly, can continue to draw attention from academics.

Clément defined FLA as a complex structure that involves psychological factors such as learners' emotions, self-esteem, and confidence [4]. Young highlighted the uniqueness of FLA and described it as a refined psychological occurrence limited to acquiring a new language [5]. MacIntyre described language anxiety as a state of worry, emotional reactivity, stress, and tension that arises when learning a second or foreign language [3]. In a similar vein, Zhang defined anxiety as the psychological tension that students feel when performing learning tasks [6]. These important definitions have broadened the understanding of FLA.

In fact, these definitions were established around the claims that language anxiety is a unique manifestation of students' language learning in class. It is a unique combination of students' self-perceptions, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors [7]. This paper will start from this definition and provide a comprehensive review of FLA.

2.2. Classification of FLA

To understand the classification of FLA, it is essential to talk about the aspects of anxiety initially, namely trait, state and situation-specific anxiety. Scovel recognized that personality traits can cause trait anxiety which is stable [8]. Some people may be more sensitive than others, so they can be easier to feel nervous when encountering some situations. Others who are active and willing to talk with others can be less nervous in communicating contexts. For example, speaking in a group or in public can cause anxiety for introverted people, but an opportunity to show ideas and make friends for extroverted people. Personality traits can imply people's behaviors, emotions, verbal expressions and thinking. Personalities are stable and can be hard to change in the short term. Trait anxiety depends on people's personalities, so it is stable. State anxiety is a kind of anxiety arising from feelings of discomfort and nervousness, which is unstable and can fluctuate over time [9]. It is common for people to feel anxious when approaching the date of deadline or examinations and before performing in public or competing in a contest. This kind of anxiety can be caused before and during a particular event and disappear after the event. State anxiety can relatively be possible to change. Situation-specific anxiety is defined as an emotional reaction occurring when people encounter some situations, such as solving math problems and communicating in a foreign language [10]. In other words, people who are trying to leave their comfort zone and to learn and explore a new thing can experience situation-specific anxiety. This means that this kind of anxiety is mainly and frequently triggered by a particular situation and is hard to adjust.

Maclntyre and Gardner believe that FLA is a kind of situation-specific anxiety as it can happen in some situations of foreign language learning [11]. When people learn a foreign language, they need to practice listening, reading, writing and speaking skills. The process of practising these skills can lead to anxiety related to foreign languages because learners may find it difficult to master these skills. Thus, foreign language classroom anxiety can be divided into classroom anxiety, listening anxiety, writing anxiety, speaking anxiety, reading anxiety and so on. Some students can experience speaking anxiety when communicating in a foreign language. Less proficiency in a foreign language can lead to anxiety in communication, such as making grammatical mistakes, insufficient vocabulary, and misunderstanding. Others can experience FLCA when learning a foreign language in a classroom context. For example, learners can feel anxious when teachers require individual students to answer questions in class. This is because students are afraid of making mistakes when answering questions, afraid of being laughed at by classmates and afraid of being criticized by teachers. This general anxiety deriving from a foreign language classroom context can be seen as FLCA.

Horwitz et al. proposed that the components of FLCA are apprehensions about communication, anxiety about test, and fear of negative evaluation [7]. Communication apprehension refers to interpersonal fear of communicating with others. People can experience communication anxiety particularly when using a foreign language, who are worried about embarrassment and silence during the communication, fear of being disliked and fear of talking with foreigners. Text anxiety is a kind of anxiety arising from fear of poor academic performance. The definition of fear of negative judgment can be the fear of negative comments given by teachers and peers. Although there is a consensus that the structure of FLCA is three-dimensional, some researchers disagree with this. For example, Aida and MacIntyre and Gardner argued that the structure of FLCA should be two-dimensional, including fear of communicating and fear of getting judged [12, 13]. Test anxiety could be generalized and unrelated to FLCA [13]. Aida also found that test fear should not be a part of FLCA [12]. The reasons for these arguments can be that test is a small section of foreign language classes. Interaction and answering questions can often happen in lessons but tests can be relatively uncommon. Some researchers, therefore, suggested that FLCA may consist of communication anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. In addition, some researchers have different opinions on the leading factors of FLCA. Cheng et al. suggested that the primary predictor of levels of anxiety in the foreign language classroom can be communication fear [14]. However, He et al. and Sellers argued that fear of negative feedback plays a more important role in language learners' anxiety levels [15].

2.3. Causes of FLA

The original Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was developed by Horwitz et al [7]. They discovered that the FLA is situation-specific and differentiable from general anxiety. FLA might be interpreted as test anxiety, reading, writing, listening, or speaking anxiety according to the situation. Three factors were considered for identifying potential causes of language anxiety: students, teachers, and instructional strategies. According to learners, personality traits such as extraversion, trait neuroticism, low self-esteem, and increased perfectionism are some of the major causes of FLA [16]. According to Sabir et al., there are five factors that contribute to increased anxiety in English classes. The first is the fear of failure or personal failure; the second is the discomfort learners experience when talking to native English speakers; the third is learners' low self-esteem; the fourth is learners' language anxiety; the fifth is learners' negative attitude towards learning English in class [17]. Students with high anxiety levels are usually not well motivated to learn and are often unprepared for English lessons. These problems may lead to a vicious cycle of a significant increase in anxiety levels in the first few minutes of each English lesson, which in turn affects learning. This shows that students' motivation and preparation for class also have an effect on anxiety levels. Additionally, Pan and Zhang hypothesized that extraverted students could have reduced levels of linguistic anxiety [16]. Higher (or lower) levels of learner anxiety are typically correlated with teacher support for students, and FLA can also be predicted by instructors' attitudes and personalities [18]. Supportive teachers can decrease the anxiety levels of students. Teachers with patience and tolerance can make students less nervous and encouragement given by teachers can also enable students to feel more willing to engage in foreign language classes. According to Luo's observations in the classroom, he thinks that the classroom environment, the target language, and the actual learning of the foreign language are the key contributors to learning anxiety [19]. For instance, a low FLA concentration was discovered in a foreign language-welcoming school setting [16]. Teaching strategies can also affect learning anxiety. For example, most students are dependent on their teachers for their learning styles, and teacher-dependent learning styles increase all kinds of anxiety in learners and do not provide opportunities for learners to implement decision-making strategies. Eliminating students' dependency and allowing them to make decisions accordingly is also one of the ways to eliminate students' anxiety in foreign language learning. If all students can inclusively participate in classroom activities, they can pay more attention to the activity instead of anxiety.

2.4. Consequences of FLA

Anxiety in relation to foreign language learning has been linked to detrimental effects on language acquisition [3, 7]. There are five major groups into which these effects can be divided.

Firstly, academic performance can be negatively impacted by high levels of FLA, which is connected with language proficiency. Studies have also revealed a detrimental relationship between academic achievement and anxiety related to learning a foreign language [1]. Students with high levels of FLA can perform poorly in foreign language tests in terms of listening, speaking, writing and reading skills. In other words, FLA can make students' brains go blank during tests and students can forget the knowledge they've already known. Thus, students' academic achievement will get lower, particularly scores on foreign language examinations.

Secondly, school dropout is another issue that has an impact on academic success. For instance, pupils with high levels of anxiety are more likely to drop out than those without.

Thirdly, FLA may function as an emotional filter in the student's cognitive processing system, preventing information from getting through [13]. It has been demonstrated that these elements affect how they feel about learning.

Fourthly, in terms of social interactions, students who score highly on anxiety surveys find it difficult to socialize. Extroverted learners tended to be less anxious. Compared to their less nervous colleagues, anxious students also frequently forget previously taught content, participate less willingly in-class activities, and exhibit a greater tendency toward passivity. Communication apprehension, which makes people more reserved and reluctant to speak up, may also be associated with high levels of language anxiety. Students' unwillingness to speak in English is a result of language anxiety. In other words, high levels of FLA can make students worry about making grammatical errors, lack of vocabulary and misinterpretation. Students can, therefore, be afraid of talking with others in a foreign language. Compared to people who are less reserved, individuals who exhibit this communicative reticence might also be seen as less reliable, less competent, less socially and physically attractive, jitterier, less stable and less powerful.

Lastly, students experiencing anxiety related to foreign languages may display restlessness, anxiety, forgetfulness, and perspiration on an individual basis.

3. Conclusion

In studies on second language acquisition, FLA is a hot topic. A review of the research related to FLA reveals that foreign language learners can be struggling with FLA. To find solutions to lessen this issue, it could be helpful to have a thorough awareness of the reasons behind FLA. According to some researchers, FLA is a kind of unique anxiety originating from the process of foreign language learning. Students can experience different types of FLA when learning a foreign language, such as FLCA, FL listening anxiety and so on. Although there is controversy on the three-dimensional and two-dimensional structures of FLCA, most researchers believe in the three-dimensional structure of FLCA. In addition, this research reviews the causes and influences of FLA. The causes of FLA can be learners themselves, teachers and teaching practice and lots of research discovered negative correlations between FLA and foreign language learning. Based on this paper, more research is still needed in this field to confirm previous findings on FLA and find solutions for the reduction of FLA levels.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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