

Review on the Factors to Foreign Language Anxiety and Methods to Alleviate Its Intensity

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Keywords: Factors, Foreign Language Anxiety, Alleviate, Internal, External, Approaches.

Abstract: As globalization accelerates, second language acquisition has become increasingly important, yet the issue of foreign language anxiety (FLA) has also grown more prominent. While some researchers have identified multiple reasons in which significantly lead to FLA, its causes, mitigation strategies still lack comprehensive explanations. This study focuses on investigating the causes of FLA and methods to alleviate its intensity. The research methodology is literature review. The findings reveal that FLA arises from multidimensional factors, including learners' psychological traits (e.g., lack of confidence, low self-efficacy) and issues in pedagogical practices (e.g., teachers' hostile behavior, tense classroom environments). To address these causes, this study proposes strategies like fostering a relaxed classroom atmosphere, enhancing interactive activities, understanding the cultural context of the target language, and encouraging proactive anxiety management. This research provides practical guidance for foreign language education, promoting teaching innovation, quality improvement, and sustainable language learning development.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the current era of globalized economic, cultural, and technological collaboration, cross-cultural communication among nations has become increasingly frequent. As a medium of communication and a carrier of culture, the significance of foreign language learning (FLL) has become increasingly apparent, highlighting its essential role. However, early studies toward FLL predominantly focused on intelligence and linguistic aptitude while neglecting affective factors. Against this backdrop, the Affective Filter Hypothesis was first proposed in 1977, highlighting the impact of learners' emotional states on language learning outcomes (Dulay & Burt, 1977). FLA since turned to a major obstacle for many learners. Nevertheless, existing research still lacks a systematic, multidimensional analysis of the causes of FLA. To address this gap, this paper reviews existing studies on FLA, synthesizes its internal and external causes, and proposes practical methods to alleviate anxiety. The aim is to provide actionable methods of foreign language teaching and learning practices, advance research on affective factors in language acquisition, and offer effective solutions for learners struggling

with FLA, enabling teachers and students to collaboratively overcome barriers in foreign language learning.

2 RELEVANT THEORY

2.1 Trait and State Anxiety

The trait and State Anxiety theory was proposed in 1966 by Spielberger, Gorsuch, Vagg, and Jacobs to distinguish between different dimensions of anxiety. The theory categorizes anxiety in two types: trait and state anxiety. Trait anxiety is a relatively stable personality characteristic, referring to an individual's propensity to worry, experience anxiety, exhibit emotional reactivity, and activate the sympathetic nervous system in various situations. The anxiety tendency is cross-situational, that is, it manifests itself in different assessment, physical and social situations. State anxiety refers to an individual's immediate response to a specific situation and is a transient, intense emotional state that is often associated with physiological activation and conscious worry.

2.2 Situation Specific Approaches to Anxiety

This theory was proposed by David H. Barlow, and its related research and theoretical development mainly focused on the 1980s to the 2000s. Specifically, Barlow's book, *Anxiety and Its Disorders*, published in 1988, explored the nature and treatment of anxiety and its disorders in detail, including a discussion of situational trait anxiety. The theory mainly refers to the expression and handling of anxiety responses in specific situations, the emergence of intense anxiety responses, which are often seen as challenging or threatening. Based on this, foreign language anxiety is classified as situational trait anxiety. FLA is classified into different types, such as speaking anxiety, writing anxiety, teaching anxiety, classroom anxiety, cultural anxiety and so on.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Internal factors

3.1.1 Self-Confidence Levels

Research has indicated that learners who lack self-confidence are more susceptible to experiencing FLA. Learners might be concerned that their language proficiency and capabilities are inferior to those of their peers, and they may fear losing face in front of teachers and classmates. This concern often leads to anxiety and even avoidance of foreign language learning (Horwitz & Cope, 1986). Owing to the anxiety stemming from unfavorable judgments by teachers or peers, students may regard their errors as challenges to their self-image, a situation that is particularly pronounced during English-speaking activities. For high-performing oral learners, anxiety is more likely to occur when oral activities in class are used for exams or tests rather than improving their English language skills. They fear making mistakes, being ridiculed by classmates, receiving negative evaluations, or even being scolded by teachers, which may affect their status in the eyes of peers or teachers (Horwitz, 2010).

3.1.2 Self-Efficacy

It has a inverse correlation with FLA. In other words, as anxiety levels rise, self-efficacy tends to decrease. Learners with low self-efficacy often question their capacity to effectively acquire a foreign language.

When faced with difficulties, they cannot focus on overcoming challenges, are more likely to doubt themselves, and have low persistence and endurance, often giving up halfway (Li, 2004).

3.1.3 Perceptions of the Target Language

According to Riasati (2012), students' ability to acquire a second language is not only influenced by their linguistic and psychological states but also by their perceptions of the target language. Some learners may overemphasize the accuracy of pronunciation, believing that only with a native-like accent can they master a foreign language. However, when they find it difficult to achieve this ideal state, anxiety may arise. In addition, some learners may hold unrealistic expectations, such as believing they can master a foreign language in a short period. When reality does not match their expectations, they may experience stress and anxiety (Horwitz, 2010).

3.1.4 Differences in Fields of Study

Studies have indicated that students in the humanities experience considerably greater degrees of FLA compared to those in the sciences. This may be related to their different academic characteristics, life philosophies, and ways of thinking (Von, 2003). The study of humanities requires more imaginative thinking and emotional investment, while the study of science requires more abstract thinking and rational logical reasoning. This results in different ways of thinking between humanities and science students. Humanities students tend to be more imaginative and emotional, which may lead to higher levels of FLA (Horwitz & Cope, 1986).

3.1.5 Autonomous Learning Ability

Foreign language anxiety is also associated with learners' use of learning strategies and autonomous learning abilities. Anxious learners may be more inclined to use avoidance strategies, such as skipping oral practice or avoiding complex tasks (Oxford, 1999).

3.2 External Factors

3.2.1 Teachers' Behavior

Teachers are vital in learners' foreign language learning. Teachers' teaching methods, teacher-student relationship and feedback methods all affect students' foreign language anxiety. Educators ought to refrain from engaging in detrimental conduct

towards pupils, such as delivering severe reprimands, implementing excessive corrections, or assigning blame when errors occur, instigating competition among students, and publicly contrasting the performance or academic results of different individuals. Concurrently, teachers should encourage collaborative learning among students rather than fostering a competitive atmosphere. Teachers should also give students confidence in their ability to succeed, using encouraging expressions. Teachers should give students positive feedback and evaluation, empower students to exercise greater autonomy over their learning journey, and involve them in the decision-making process. If teachers lack such positive guidance to students, learners' foreign language anxiety will be caused (Horwitz, 2010).

3.2.2 Classroom Environment

Classroom environment is the main place of foreign language learning, and its atmosphere and activity design directly affect students' anxiety level. A tense and depressed classroom atmosphere can increase students' anxiety, while a relaxed and cheerful atmosphere can help reduce anxiety (Horwitz, 2010). The learning environment within the classroom ought to be student-oriented, inspiring and encouraging. Students should be made to understand that committing errors is not a significant issue and that they are not the sole individuals who err while acquiring a foreign language. In addition, a quiet class can also raise the level of learners' anxiety, because in a quiet class, all the students are focused on the speaker, which can make learners fearful, and under some background noise, students will speak English in a higher voice, while a quiet class will make them speak less confident and their voice will be weakened. Finally, classroom humor and peers' laughter also have an impact on learners' anxiety. Studies have shown that students' active participation in classroom activities and willingness to take the initiative to speak in humorous classes increase, and their anxiety will decrease.

3.2.3 Social Culture

Learners in different cultural backgrounds may face different pressures and challenges in language learning. For example, in the research analysis of Chinese individuals as samples, it is concluded that in a society that emphasizes collectivism and competition, learners may be more worried about their language performance being evaluated and compared by others, thus increasing anxiety (Li, 2004). In addition, cultural differences may also lead

to confusion and anxiety when learners adapt to a new language and cultural environment.

3.3 The Approaches to Relieve Foreign Language Anxiety

3.3.1 Creating a relaxed classroom atmosphere or environment

Cultivating a stress-free learning environment is crucial for alleviating anxiety. This can be influenced by the teacher's individual character and their approach to language instruction and student interaction. Studies have shown that when educators infuse lessons with enjoyment, stress levels tend to drop. Along the same lines, incorporating subject matter that resonates with students' personal experiences and interests not only eases anxiety but also boosts their drive to learn. Fostering a sense of belonging within the classroom is vital in creating this relaxed setting. When students feel surrounded by peers who are more like friends, their anxiety typically subsides, along with their fear of making errors. Educators can either actively cultivate a welcoming and amicable atmosphere or encourage students to take the initiative in shaping such an environment. Moreover, engaging in extracurricular activities that promote group cohesion and mutual support can further reduce in-class anxiety. For example, students can view films and videos in the target language, share meals, form study groups, or join language clubs. These out-of-class group activities help bridge the gap between students, fostering strong emotional bonds. This, in turn, enhances in-class interaction and participation, contributing to a more relaxed learning environment (Alrabai, 2015).

3.3.2 Boosting Students' Enthusiasm for Foreign Language and Their Culture

Gardner discovered that students' internal drive and passion for foreign languages and their cultures are key factors positively influencing their English-learning outcomes. Elevating students' fascination with English and its cultural nuances is crucial for advancing their language acquisition. Armed with a deeper understanding of the language and its cultural context, learners are less likely to perceive the language as alien and daunting. Consequently, they experience reduced anxiety and restlessness. Moreover, this approach significantly bolsters their overall drive to master the target language. To heighten students' perception of English's

significance, cultivate their enthusiasm for the language, build their self-confidence, and foster a positive outlook towards English, educators can offer praise and constructive feedback. Analyzing the factors behind their English performance, encouraging them to delve into English literature, and watch English-language films are effective strategies. Additionally, befriending international students on campus is a powerful way to nurture their intrinsic drive to learn English. With heightened motivation, students are more inclined to actively employ the language in diverse settings, potentially leading to a reduction in English-learning anxiety (Liu & Huang, 2011).

3.3.3 Emphasis on Student Progress

Currently, students' foreign language achievement is measured through annual paper-based classroom assessments and exams, as well as broader assessments (pairing/group work, classroom exercises, role playing, etc.), (Young, 1991). There is also a culture in China of publishing a child's individual test scores to the class, or publicly ranking students. These inherent quantitative indicators pay more attention to students' learning outcomes rather than learning processes, and these practices can lead to increased levels of learners' foreign language anxiety. Finally, it is essential for educators to pinpoint and candidly recognize students' competencies and aspects that require enhancement, subsequently motivating them. For instance, a student might encounter difficulties with pronunciation yet possess strong grammatical skills; in such cases, teachers should focus on both the student's strengths and the areas that need further development (Hu, Zhang & McGeown, 2021).

3.3.4 Learners Overcome Anxiety Themselves

Learners themselves can overcome anxiety through cognitive strategies and emotional strategies. Cognitive strategies emphasize learners' self-cognition regulation, including meta-cognitive strategies, self-reflection and self-regulation. By setting reasonable learning goals, developing a learning plan, monitoring the learning process, and evaluating learning outcomes, learners can better manage their learning and reduce anxiety. For example, using the "step-by-step approach" to break down learning tasks into small goals and complete them step by step helps to enhance learners' self-confidence and sense of control (Oxford, 1999). Affective strategies focus on learners' emotional

regulation, such as relaxation training, self-suggestion and emotional expression. Through relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, and yoga, learners can stay calm and focused during the learning process and reduce anxiety. In addition, positive self-talk and positive thinking are also effective means of emotional regulation, which can help learners maintain a positive learning attitude (Liu & Huang, 2011).

4 CONCLUSION

Through a comprehensive study involving foreign language learners, it has been discovered that the origins of foreign language anxiety are diverse and complex, including learners' own psychological characteristics (such as lack of self-confidence), and problems in the teaching process (such as teachers' hostile behavior toward students, tense classroom environment). In view of these causes, this study proposed a variety of mitigation strategies, such as creating a relaxed classroom atmosphere, enhancing classroom interaction, understanding the cultural background of the language and overcoming the anxiety of learners themselves. This study provides useful enlightenment for foreign language teaching practice, suggesting that teachers should concern FLA and adjust teaching strategies flexibly to foster a more positive learning environment. At the same time, the study also emphasizes the important role of learners themselves in relieving anxiety and encourages their learning ability, psychological adjustment ability. This study is to provide support for foreign language education, help promote the improvement and development of foreign language teaching, create a more efficient and pleasant learning experience for learners, and promote the overall quality of foreign language education.

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