Language Anxiety and German as a Foreign Language: an Empirical Investigation in Greek Higher Education

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Abstract

In the context of foreign language acquisition and educational psychology, anxiety is approached as one of the most important variables that indirectly influence the cognitive process of L2 learning. There are three main categories of anxiety found in the relevant literature: a) state anxiety, b) anxiety as a personality trait (trait anxiety) and c) anxiety associated exclusively with specific factors (situation specific anxiety). The situation specific anxiety associated with L2 learning and communicating in L2 is called "foreign language anxiety" or "language anxiety". Adapting the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to our research sample, we conducted a questionnaire survey among 180 students at the School of German Language and Literature of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki to examine language anxiety in relatively advanced learners of German as a foreign language. The data were processed using SPSS, version 28.0. The 33 questionnaire statements reflect communication anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, test-anxiety, and anxiety in the classroom. The questionnaire demonstrated internal consistency, as the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.965. The statistical analysis indicates, among others, that the subjects of the research: a) feel more comfortable answering in Greek than in German a question asked by the teacher in German, b) are concerned about the consequences that their language mistakes in German may have for their assessment in the course, c) get palpitations when they are about to be asked to speak in German in class, and that they d) panic when they need to speak in German without having prepared what they are going to say. On the other hand, they stated that they wouldn't mind if German were used more often in lessons. This first attempt to investigate language anxiety in German in the Greek educational context demonstrates the need for educators to recognize their students' language anxiety and to act in a pedagogically supportive way towards them.

Keywords: *Second/Foreign Language Learning; Language Education; Foreign Language Education; German as a Foreign Language; Foreign Language Anxiety*

1. Introduction

Anxiety has been often associated with second/foreign language (FL) learning [1: 125]. There are three main categories of anxiety found in the relevant literature: a) state anxiety, b) anxiety as a personality trait (trait anxiety), and c) anxiety associated exclusively with specific factors (situation specific anxiety) [2: 49]. The situation specific anxiety associated with FL learning and communicating in a FL is called "foreign language anxiety" (FLA) or "language anxiety". FLA is thus considered as one of the emotional factors that are part of the individual learner differences that affect FL learning [3: 1591].

In the context of FLA investigation, various theoretical models of its interpretation have been proposed, its sources have been analysed [a] individual characteristics of students such as self-esteem, competitiveness and/or perfectionism, b) the classroom environment - this includes the role of the teacher, teaching practices and interpersonal relationships, c) the language learning process itself], as well as its consequences (in terms of cognitive, social, personal/psychological and academic success), and strategies have been proposed to address it [4].

2. The Study

Adapting the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) [1] to our research sample, we conducted a questionnaire survey among 180 students at the School of German Language and Literature of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki to examine FLA in relatively advanced learners of German as a foreign language (GFL).

2.1 Participants

The learner population investigated in our study was undergraduate students at the School of German Language and Literature of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (Greece). A total of 180 students who were in their final year of study participated in the survey, 128 of the sample taken in 2021-2022 and 52 in 2022-2023; 88.9% were women. Concerning their competence in FLs other than German, 67.2% spoke one additional FL, and 32.8% spoke two or more additional FLs. These languages were mainly: English (97.2%), Russian (19.4%), Spanish (7.8%), Italian (6.7%), and French (3.3%). The finding that Russian is in second place is due to the fact that the Chair of Russian Language and Culture forms part of the School of German Language and Literature at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, which is why several of the School's students attend Russian language courses. Regarding their level of competence in German, according to their self-assessment, 25.0% of them placed themselves at a B2-level, 58.5% at C1 and 14.6% at C2. Hence, it seems that they rated themselves quite highly in terms of their level of German.

2.2 Instrument

As far as the research instrument is concerned, the FLCAS [1] was used, adapted to the circumstances and the population of the present study. The first part of the questionnaire concerned students' individual data. The second part contained 33 five-point Likert scale items, and the students ticked the number from 1 to 5, depending on the degree to which each statement applied to their personal habits. The following aspects were reflected in the questionnaire: a) communication anxiety (statements 1-5), b) fear of negative evaluation (statements 6-13), c) test anxiety (statements 14-18), d) anxiety in the classroom (statements 19-33).

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection took place in two academic years (2021-2022, 2022-2023). Students in their final year of study participated in each sampling. Their participation was voluntary, and the survey was anonymous. Students whose first language was German were excluded from the survey. The questionnaire data were processed using SPSS, version 28.0.

2.4 Results

Due to space limitations, only the main results of the statistical analysis of the data are presented below. Table 1 presents a comprehensive summary of the results concerning the index for internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha), the mean values and the standard deviation of the four general aspects which were mentioned above and form the four basic axes of the questionnaire. It is noted here in relation to the mean values presented below in the present paper, that in the scale from 1 to 5, according to what was applied in the data processing, "1" indicates "no FLA at all" and "5" designates "FLA to a very high degree".

Table 1. Internal consistency and mean values of the four axes of the questionnaire

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	Mean	Std. Deviation
Communication anxiety (statements 1-5)	0.857	2.88	1.03
Fear of negative evaluation (statements 6-13)	0.909	2.62	1.04
Test anxiety (statements 14-18)	0.673	2.63	0.79
Anxiety in the classroom (statements 19-33)	0.932	2.67	0.95

The Cronbach's alpha internal consistency reliability coefficient rendered very satisfactory levels for three of the four questionnaire axes. Only one aspect (test anxiety) did not reach the recommended 0.70 threshold, the difference being a few points. Thus, it could be argued that the questionnaire has delivered data of very satisfactory consistency. The Cronbach's alpha value for all the questions in the questionnaire was 0.965.

The subjects of the research seemed generally afraid to speak in German, as items indicating speech anxiety scored among the highest averages in terms of FLA: "I get palpitations when I'm about to be given the floor to speak in German in class" (statement 6, $\mu=3.13$), "I panic when I need to speak in German without having previously prepared what I'm going to say" (statement 3, $\mu=3.11$), "Even when

I have well prepared an answer that I am going to give in German in class, I feel anxious" (statement 24, μ=3.11), "I am ashamed to ask to speak in German in class" (statement 8, μ=2.99). The results regarding the students' fear of speaking in the FL are in line with those of previous studies [1: 129].

Statements showing anxiety as part of their assessment in the course were also quite high in terms of FLA: "I am concerned with the consequences that my linguistic mistakes in German may have on my assessment in the course" (statement 16, μ=3.27), "Making mistakes in German in the classroom worries me" (statement 14, μ=3.00), and "I feel uncomfortable during an examination which takes place in German" (statement 15, μ=2.97).

The results of the correlation analysis between the independent and the dependent variables revealed the following:

- Female students seemed to be at higher levels of FLA compared to their male counterparts in terms of communication anxiety (t=2.344, df=178, p=0.020) and fear of negative evaluation (t=2.493, df=178, p=0.014). A similar survey on language anxiety in German in Turkey, that also used FLCAS and in which 61 students participated, also showed that "male students experience anxiety at a lower rate than females" [5: 79].
- Participants who knew two or more FLs (in addition to German) seemed to be more concerned than those who knew only one additional language other than German that the "teacher is ready to correct any mistake they make in German" (t=-3.060, df=178, p=0.003). No other statistically significant relationship was found with this independent variable.

Multiple comparisons also showed that the lower the level at which the students of the research self-assessed their level of German proficiency, the higher the level of FLA in all four parameters: communication anxiety (p<0.001), fear of negative evaluation (p<0.001), test anxiety (p=0.004) and anxiety in the classroom (p<0.001).

3. Conclusion

This research was considered important, as no other research had been conducted so far in the Greek educational context which investigated the language anxiety of learners of German as a FL (GFL). One key remark in relation to language anxiety in GFL is that the teachers of GFL should primarily acknowledge the presence of language anxiety in their students. Then they need to help them cope with this anxiety and try to make the learning procedure less stressful [1: 131]. Efforts should be made, and techniques and strategies should be applied from teachers to make German learners feel more comfortable to answer a question in German in the classroom and not to panic or get palpitations when they are asked to speak in German. Moreover, it is important to regard learners' mistakes as a valuable tool in the procedure of GFL learning, that could and should be used as a means of learning. This way, German learners might be less concerned about the consequences their language mistakes have for their assessment. Creating a friendly school climate and good interpersonal relationships in the classroom could also help in this direction. Learners on the other hand could benefit from acquainting themselves with strategies to reduce their anxiety. Finally, it would be interesting to investigate possible links between factors such as motivation [6] and FLA in German.

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