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Foreign Language Anxiety: The Manifestation of Language Aptitude Differences?

Abstract: Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is generally considered one of the individual learner variables accounting for differential success in learning a second language (L2). This view of FLA, attributing a primary causal role to anxiety in language achievement, however, is not universally accepted. Some researchers have questioned whether anxiety plays an important role in language learning, suggesting that FLA is more likely to be a consequence rather than a cause of individual differences in L2 achievement. It has been proposed that unexamined language variables may be confounding the issue (Sparks and Ganschow 2007; Sparks and Patton 2013). To test this proposition, the article examines the relationship between FLA and performance on measures of FL proficiency, FL course achievement, and FL aptitude. The participants are Hungarian university students majoring in English (N = 107). The article focuses on the question whether learners with high, average, and low levels of FLA exhibit significant differences on the examined measures, with an aim to establish whether their L2-related anxiety is simply the manifestation of linguistic aptitude differences, and whether FL aptitude is confounding the anxiety-achievement relationship.

Keywords: foreign language anxiety (FLA), foreign language classroom anxiety scale (FLCAS), foreign language aptitude, language aptitude test, second language (L2) proficiency, EFL

1. Introduction

It has been long recognised in second and foreign language (L2) research that for many individuals learning and using a foreign language is an anxiety-provoking experience. The anxiety non-native speakers feel when trying to communicate in a new language has been considered as a unique type of anxiety specific to L2 contexts (Gardner 1985; Horwitz et al. 1986; MacIntyre and Gardner 1994a; MacIntyre 1999), which is thought to arise “from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Horwitz et al. 1986: 128). One of the key issues surrounding this anxiety typically referred to as language anxiety or foreign language anxiety (FLA) (Horwitz et al. 1986) is how it affects learners’ performance and whether it can account for differential success in language learning.

To address this question, researchers have sought to establish a link between learners' anxiety level and their achievement in the L2. Since the introduction of measures of anxiety specific to language learning, research in different instructional settings has consistently found a moderate negative relationship between L2-related anxiety and a wide range of outcome measures of L2 proficiency, including FL grades as well as more specific indices of proficiency (Horwitz 2010, 2001; MacIntyre 2002, 1999; Young 1999, 1994, 1991). The same negative relationship has been documented between FLA and specific L2 skills, including speaking (Cheng et al. 1999; Hewitt and Stephenson 2011; MacIntyre and Gardner 1994b; Phillips 1992; Tóth 2012; Woodrow 2006), reading (Saito et al. 1999; Sellers 2000), listening (Chen and Chang 2009; Elkhafaifi 2005; Kim 2000), and writing (Cheng et al. 1999). These findings show that higher levels of anxiety are associated with lower levels of language achievement, suggesting that learners for whom L2 learning is more anxiety-provoking receive lower grades in language courses and score lower on measures of L2 proficiency than their less anxious counterparts.

Although empirical findings on the relationship between language anxiety and achievement appear to be consistent, the interpretation of the observed negative relationship between the two constructs has triggered significant differences of opinions and to date no clear consensus has been reached (cf. Horwitz 2000, 2001; MacIntyre 1995a, 1995b, 1999, 2002, vs. Sparks and Ganschow 1995, 2007; Sparks et al. 2000; Sparks and Patton 2013). The prevailing view is that the poorer achievement of learners with high levels of anxiety is attributable to the negative effects anxiety exerts on L2 learning and performance (Horwitz 2000, 2001; MacIntyre 1995a, 1995b, 1999, 2002; MacIntyre and Gardner 1991, 1994a, 1994b). These include cognitive effects, as proposed by the cognitive interference model of anxiety, according to which anxious learners are likely to perform more poorly than relaxed ones because anxiety arousal causes a disruption in cognitive processes involved in learning and performance (Eysenck 1979; Sarason 1984; Schwarzer 1986). Anxiety arousal has been found to interfere with the ability to take in, process, and produce the L2 (MacIntyre and Gardner 1994a, 1994b). As a result of cognitive interference, anxious learners need more time to complete tasks in the FL, and the quality of their target language (TL) output is diminished by anxiety (MacIntyre 1999). Another important negative effect of foreign language anxiety is learners' reluctance to participate in L2 activities and communicative interactions. This puts anxious learners at a disadvantage compared to learners with low anxiety, as their shying away from opportunities to use the TL is counter-productive to language learning (Dörnyei 2005; Horwitz and Young 1991; MacIntyre 1999, 2002; MacIntyre and Gardner 1991).

This view of FLA, attributing a primary causal role to anxiety in L2 achievement, has been criticised by researchers such as Sparks, Ganschow, and their fellow researchers, who have questioned the claims about the importance of anxiety in language learning and suggested that unexamined language variables, such as

native language (L1) learning skills and foreign language aptitude, may be confounding the issue (Sparks and Ganschow 1991, 2007; Sparks and Patton 2013). In their view, lower L2 achievement is not the consequence of anxiety effects, as “the learning of a FL is not contingent on the presence or absence of anxiety” (Sparks and Ganschow 1995: 240), but rather of poor L1 skills and low foreign language aptitude, i.e. success or failure in L2 learning is primarily dependent on one’s language learning ability (i.e. cognitive linguistic skills) rather than affective differences such as anxiety (Linguistic Coding Differences Hypothesis).

On the basis of their findings that learners with weaker native language skills and lower FL aptitude in their studies tended to score higher on anxiety than learners with stronger L1 skills and higher FL aptitude they have speculated that anxiety about FL learning may be a result of a relatively low language ability (i.e. poorer competence in the phonological, syntactic, semantic codes of language) and resulting learning difficulties; that is, language ability is an intervening variable in the anxiety-achievement relationship. Consequently, rather than a causal factor in L2 performance, anxiety, in their view, is merely a side-effect (Sparks et al. 2000; Sparks and Ganschow 2007; Sparks and Patton 2013).

In several studies, Sparks, Ganschow, and their fellow researchers have found that learners with low levels of FLA performed significantly better than their peers with high anxiety not only on various L2 but also on L1 measures and on the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) as well. They have reported medium size negative correlations ($r = -.43, -.42, -.45$) between FLA and MLAT scores (Ganschow et al. 1994; Ganschow and Sparks 1996; Sparks and Ganschow 2007; Sparks and Patton 2013). Basing their evidence on these results, they have proposed that performance on self-report measures of anxiety “may reflect students’ level of native language skill and foreign language aptitude” and have even suggested that “a language aptitude instrument such as the MLAT might predict anxiety about language learning just as well as an affective instrument such as the FLCAS [i.e., Horwitz et al.’s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale]” (Ganschow and Sparks 1996: 208). In a recent study Sparks and Patton (2013: 891) have once again urged researchers “to measure and control for their participants’ L1 skills *and/or* L2 aptitude to be more forthcoming about the role that anxiety might play in L2 proficiency and achievement” (emphasis mine).

Therefore, to test the aforementioned propositions questioning the existence of FLA independent of language ability differences, my research examines the relationship between FLA and performance on measures of FL proficiency, FL course achievement, and FL aptitude. It explores to what extent learners’ performance with high, average, and low levels of anxiety differs on the examined measures, and my aim is to establish whether FLA is merely a reflection of linguistic aptitude differences, and whether FL aptitude is confounding the anxiety-achievement relationship. In the present article I seek to address the following research questions:

1. Will there be significant differences in the FL proficiency and FL course achievement of learners with high, average, and low levels of FLA?
2. Will there be significant differences in the FL aptitude of learners with high, average, and low levels of FLA?
3. Will the relationship between FLA and language performance remain significant with the potential confounding effect of FL aptitude controlled for?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were first-year EFL major students in the English Studies program at a Hungarian university ($N = 107$). The majority of these students were women, with a male-female ratio of 24:83. Their ages ranged from 18 to 24, with an average age of 19.37 ($SD = 1.17$). They had studied English for an average of 8.41 years ($SD = 2.66$) before entering the university, and they were preparing to become English teachers or other EFL professionals.

In the curriculum of first-year students the emphasis is put on language development. Therefore they have more language practice classes than upper level students, specifically, three 90 minute classes per week devoted to (1) Advanced English Grammar, (2) Vocabulary, Listening, Speaking, Reading, and (3) Composition Writing. The aim of these seminars is to develop students' overall English language competence and prepare them for the end-of-year comprehensive language exam (see under the measures of course achievement). Besides language classes, the studied first-year students also attend introductory courses in English linguistics, literature, and culture in the target language, i.e. in all classes English is the language of instruction.

2.2. Instruments

The anxiety measure

Anxiety was measured on the Hungarian language validated version of Horwitz et al.'s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, adapted for use in the university EFL classroom. The Hungarian FLCAS (*HFLCAS*), checked through back translation, tested for response and construct validity as well as reliability, has shown to be both reliable ($\alpha = .93$) and valid (Tóth 2008). The *HFLCAS* is a 33-item Likert-type scale with five possible responses ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." It is meant to assess the degree of FLA in the EFL classroom and in conversation with native speakers of English as evidenced by

negative performance expectancies and social comparisons, psycho-physiological symptoms, and avoidance behaviours. The items of the scale are reflective of the three anxieties that are regarded as conceptually important aspects of FLA according to Horwitz et al.'s (1986) theory: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety.

The proficiency measure

A practice test for the paper-based version of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL-PBT) was used to measure the participants' FL proficiency. It consists of three parts: Listening Comprehension, Structure and Written Expression, and Reading Comprehension, which test listening, structure and grammar, and reading skills, respectively.

Measures of FL course achievement

Two measures of course achievement were used:

(1) Grades achieved on the comprehensive language exam for English majors at the end of the first year of their studies. The exam is designed to test students' command of English at B2+ level, as defined in the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference standards. It is comprised of the following components: Use of English and Reading Comprehension, Composition Writing, and Speaking.

(2) Language class grade averages, indicative of achievement in English classes over the first year of English majors' studies. The averages of grades achieved in three language development classes focusing on different skills and competencies (Advanced Grammar; Vocabulary, Speaking, Listening, Reading; Composition Writing) were calculated for the 1st as well as for the 2nd term.

The language aptitude measure

To measure the language aptitude of the participants, the *Hungarian Language Aptitude Test* was used (*HUNLAT*) (Ottó 2002). The *HUNLAT* is based on Carroll's four-component theory of language aptitude and his Modern Language Aptitude Test (Carroll and Sapon 2000). However, unlike the MLAT, it is made up of only four subtests, which are designed to measure (1) phonetic coding ability, i.e. "the ability to identify distinct sounds, to form association between those sounds and symbols representing them, and to retain these associations" (*Hidden Sounds*), (2) inductive language learning ability, i.e. "the ability to infer or induce the rules governing a set of language materials, given sample language materials that permit such inferences" (*Language Analysis*), (3) grammatical sensitivity, i.e. "the ability to recognise the grammatical functions of words in sentence structures" (*Words in Sentences*), and (4) rote learning ability, i.e. "the ability to learn associations between sounds and meanings rapidly and efficiently, and to retain these associations" (*Vocabulary Learning*) (Carroll 1981: 105, cited in Ottó 1996).

2.3. Data analysis

For each participant an anxiety score was derived by summing up his/her ratings of the 33 items of the anxiety scale. The responses were quantified as follows: “strongly disagree” = 1, “disagree” = 2, “neither agree nor disagree” = 3, “agree” = 4, “strongly agree” = 5. The nine items of the scale worded in such a way as to reveal a lack of anxiety were reverse scored before calculating the total score, so that in all instances, a high score represented high anxiety. To determine anxiety level, participants were classified into three groups — highly-anxious, average/mid-anxious, and low-anxious — based on their scores on the *HFLCAS*. Those who scored one standard deviation or more above the sample mean were classified as high-anxious; those who scored one standard deviation or more below the mean as low-anxious; and the rest was categorised as average/mid-anxious.

In order to determine whether there were significant differences in FL proficiency, FL course achievement, and FL aptitude among high-, average-, and low-anxious students, one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were used. To reduce the possibility of Type 1 error, the Scheffe test was used in comparing between-group differences on each measure.

To assess how strongly FLA was related to L2 performance and FL aptitude, Pearson correlations were computed between participants’ anxiety scores and their scores on the proficiency, course achievement, and language aptitude measures. To control for the possible confounding effect of students’ FL aptitude, partial correlations were computed between FLA and L2 performance with FL aptitude as the control variable.

3. Results

3.1. FLA and FL proficiency

Table 1 reports correlations between FLA and proficiency operationalised as performance on the TOEFL.

Table 1. Pearson correlations between FLA and FL proficiency

Proficiency Measure	FLA	<i>p</i> <
Listening Comprehension	.494	.0005
Structure & Written Expression	-.501	.0005
Reading Comprehension	-.391	.0005
Proficiency Total Test	-.529	.0005

A moderate inverse relationship was established between the degree of FLA displayed by English major participants and their performance on the proficiency

total test as well as the three subtests testing learners’ skills in three areas: listening comprehension, structure & written expression, and reading comprehension. These results indicate that the higher participants scored on anxiety, the lower they performed on the proficiency measures.

Table 2 shows the mean scores of participants with low, average, and high levels of FLA on the three subtests and the proficiency total test.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of low, average, and high anxiety groups on the FL proficiency measures

	Low-Anx M (SD)	Ave-Anx M (SD)	High-Anx M (SD)
Listening (max. 50)	37.09 (6.42)	28.87 (7.61)	24.93 (7.69)
Str. & Wr. Expr. (max. 40)	31.91 (5.77)	26.99 (4.27)	23.86 (4.85)
Reading (max. 50)	38.22 (5.39)	33.21 (5.54)	29.57 (6.33)
TOEFL Total (max. 140)	107.22 (15.85)	89.07 (14.23)	78.36 (16.81)

Results of the ANOVA procedure showed that the three anxiety groups exhibited significant differences on the FL proficiency measures ($F_{\text{Listening}} = 14.688$, $F_{\text{Str. \& Wr. Expr.}} = 14.737$, $F_{\text{Reading}} = 11.460$, $F_{\text{Proficiency total}} = 19.103$, $p < .0005$). The Scheffe test showed that students carrying low levels of anxiety achieved significantly higher proficiency total scores than their peers displaying average, or high levels of FLA, and the same applied to achievement on all three subtests. At the same time, no significant differences were found between the performance of students in the mid- and high-anxiety groups.

3.2. FLA and FL course achievement

Table 3 reports correlations between English major participants’ FLA scores and the grades they achieved on the end of year comprehensive language exam and in their English classes over the first year of their studies.

Table 3. Pearson correlations between FLA and course achievement

	FLA	<i>p</i>
Language Exam		
Use of English	-.464	< .0005
Composition	-.289	.025
Oral	-.403	.001
Overall Exam Grade	-.441	< .0005
Language Class Grades		
1st term	-.331	< .0005
2nd term	-.290	.006
1st and 2nd term combined	-.321	.002

As shown, medium-size negative correlation coefficients were obtained between FLA and performance on all three subtests of the language exam, including written — Use of English, Composition — and oral measures of proficiency in English. The correlations between anxiety and language class grades were somewhat weaker but significant. These results show that students with higher levels of FLA tended to receive poorer grades both on the language exam and in their language classes than those whose anxiety level was lower.

Table 4 shows the mean grades of participants with high, average, and low levels of FLA on the comprehensive language exam and in language classes.

Table 4. Mean language exam/language class grades and standard deviations of low, average, and high anxiety group

	Low-Anx M (SD)	Ave-Anx M (SD)	High-Anx M (SD)
Language Exam			
Use of English	3.06 (.73)	2.41 (.64)	2.20 (.45)
Composition	4.44 (.70)	3.51 (1.12)	3.00 (1.22)
Oral	4.28 (1.13)	3.16 (1.12)	2.40 (1.34)
Overall Exam Grade	3.57 (1.33)	2.36 (1.12)	1.63 (.92)
Language Class Grades			
1st term	3.76 (.64)	3.01 (.72)	2.73 (.60)
2nd term	3.77 (.81)	3.32 (.68)	3.20 (.65)
1st and 2nd term combined	3.76 (.66)	3.29 (.59)	3.11 (.55)

The one-way ANOVA revealed significant differences in participants’ performance according to anxiety level on all measures of course achievement ($F_{\text{use}} = 6.841, p = .002$; $F_{\text{comp}} = 6.476, p = .003$; $F_{\text{oral}} = 8.065, p = .001$; $F_{\text{overall}} = 11.228, p < .0005$; $F_{\text{1st term}} = 13.651, p < .0005$; $F_{\text{2nd term}} = 3.753, p = .027$; $F_{\text{1st \& 2nd combined}} = 5.874, p = .004$). The Scheffé procedure indicated that students reporting the lowest levels of anxiety achieved significantly better grades both on the language exam and in their language classes than their peers in the average and high anxiety groups, but no significant differences were found between the mean grades of students in the latter two groups.

3.3. FLA and FL aptitude

Table 5 reports correlations between FLA and FL aptitude as measured by performance on the *Hungarian Language Aptitude Test*. A weak negative relationship was revealed between participants’ anxiety scores and their performance on the language aptitude measure. Low negative correlation coefficients were obtained for all subtests as well as for the language aptitude total test; however, none of them were significant. These results show that English major participants’ FL aptitude was not significantly related to how much anxiety they experienced about learning or using the target language.

Table 5. Pearson correlations between FLA and foreign language aptitude

	FLA	<i>p</i>
Hidden Sounds	-.086	.379
Language Analysis	-.173	.074
Words in Sentences	-.092	.344
Vocabulary Learning	-.053	.587
FL aptitude total score	-.143	.141

Table 6 reports participants’ mean scores in the three anxiety groups on the language aptitude test.

Table 6. Means and standard deviations of low, average, and high anxiety groups on the language aptitude measure

	Low-Anx M (SD)	Ave-Anx M (SD)	High-Anx M (SD)
Hidden sounds (max. 20)	15.91 (2.87)	15.56 (3.38)	15.00 (3.92)
Language analysis (20)	19.13 (1.22)	18.36 (1.65)	17.79 (1.72)
Words in sentences (20)	15.22 (3.50)	13.04 (3.94)	11.79 (4.42)
Vocab. Learning (20)	17.17 (3.30)	16.36 (3.36)	17.43 (2.10)
FL aptitude total (80)	67.43 (6.98)	63.31 (7.74)	62.00 (7.85)

As shown, it was learners reporting low anxiety who scored highest, and their highly anxious peers who scored lowest, with the average-anxious group scoring in between the two. However, the ANOVA procedure showed that the differences between high-, average-, and low-anxious participants’ mean scores were not significant ($F = 3.116, p = .051$).

3.4. Is FL aptitude confounding the anxiety-achievement relationship?

Table 7 reports the results of Pearson and partial correlations between participants’ FLA scores and their achievement on the examined measures of L2 performance, specifically (1) the FL proficiency test (TOEFL), (2) language exam grades, and (3) language class grades. As shown, after the removal of the possible confounding effect of students’ FL aptitude on the anxiety-achievement relationship, all the correlations between anxiety and L2 performance remained significant.

Table 7. Pearson and partial correlations for FLA scores and measures of L2 performance controlled for FL aptitude

	FL Proficiency Total Test	Language Exam Total Grade	Language Class Grade Average
Pearson Correlation	-.529 $p < .0005$	-.441 $p < .0005$	-.321 $p = .002$
Partial Correlation	-.514 $p < .0005$	-.417 $p < .0005$	-.284 $p = .007$

4. Discussion

In this study English major participants were administered a measure of FLA (the Hungarian FLCAS) and measures of (1) FL proficiency (TOEFL), (2) FL course achievement (language exam and language class grades), and (3) FL aptitude (HUNLAT). The aim was to examine how strongly FLA related to L2 performance and FL aptitude and whether students with different levels of anxiety exhibited significant differences on these measures. The study set out to investigate whether participants' FLA was merely a reflection or manifestation of differences in their FL aptitude, furthermore, whether FL aptitude was confounding the anxiety-achievement relationship.

The first research question concerns the relationship between FLA and L2 performance. The results are consistent with those of previous research in other instructional settings (cf. Horwitz 2001, 2010; MacIntyre 1999, 2002; Young 1991, 1994, 1999) in that a consistent moderate negative relationship was found between participants' anxiety scores and their achievement on all the examined language measures, including FL proficiency and course achievement. The higher students scored on FLA, the lower they scored on the standardized proficiency test (TOEFL) and the lower grades they received both in their language classes and on the university comprehensive language exam. Results showed that students with high, average, and low levels of FLA exhibited significant differences both in FL proficiency and course achievement. The analysis of between-group differences revealed that students with low levels of FLA scored significantly higher than their highly anxious and average anxious peers on the proficiency measures and they achieved higher language exam and language class grades. No significant differences were found, however, between the average- and high-anxiety groups' performance. The latter finding shows that learners with the same level of FL proficiency and course achievement experienced differing levels of FLA, which indicates that the differences in their anxiety level cannot be explained by the differences in their proficiency and course performance.

The second research question inquired into the relationship between FLA and FL aptitude, with an aim to test Sparks, Ganschow, and their fellow researchers' hypothesis that higher levels of anxiety would be associated with lower levels of aptitude for FL learning. The results are not consistent with those of previous investigations. In contrast with the medium size negative correlations reported by Sparks, Ganschow, and their fellow researchers between FLA and MLAT scores (Ganschow et al. 1994; Ganschow and Sparks 1996; Sparks and Ganschow 2007; Sparks and Patton 2013), in the present study no significant correlations were found between English major participants' scores on the Hungarian FLCAS and their achievement on the Hungarian Language Aptitude Test. Although it was the low-anxiety group who scored highest, and the high-anxiety group who scored lowest on the language aptitude measure, with the average-anxiety group scoring in

between the two, as in prior studies, the ANOVA procedure showed no significant differences in the FL aptitude of students in the three anxiety groups. Therefore the examined hypothesis was not confirmed. These results show that the differences in participants' anxiety level cannot be attributed to differences in their aptitude for FL learning.

The findings of the present study, therefore, do not support the idea that "a language aptitude instrument such as the MLAT might predict anxiety about language learning just as well as an affective instrument such as the FLCAS," nor the proposition that performance on self-report measures of anxiety "may reflect students' level of native language skill and foreign language aptitude" (Ganschow and Sparks 1996: 208; Sparks and Ganschow 2007; Sparks and Patton 2013). L1 skills are not examined here, but the level of FLA as measured on the Hungarian FLCAS in the examined sample of EFL majors did not reflect learners' level of FL aptitude. Consequently, the hypothesis that foreign language anxiety, as measured on self-report instruments like the FLCAS, is the manifestation of linguistic aptitude differences is not confirmed by this study.

Finally, the third research question, conceptually related to the second one, is to test the proposition that the observed negative relationship between language anxiety and achievement might be a spurious one and unexamined language variables are likely to be confounding the issue (Sparks and Ganschow 1995, 2007; Sparks and Patton 2013). In response to Sparks and Patton's (2013: 891) recommendation that in studies using self-report measures of anxiety like the FLCAS "it is important for researchers to measure and control for their participants' L1 skills and/or L2 aptitude to be more forthcoming about the role that anxiety might play in L2 proficiency and achievement," this investigation examined participants' FL aptitude as a potential confounding variable in the anxiety-achievement relationship. The results showed that the moderate negative relationship between English major participants' FLA and their performance on measures of FL proficiency and course achievement remained significant when the possible confounding effect of FL aptitude was controlled for. Therefore, this study has not confirmed the hypothesis that FL aptitude confounds the anxiety-achievement relationship.

However, when discussing the findings of this study, its limitations must also be noted. The most important limitation lies in the sample used. The participants consisted of EFL majors only, who in many respects might be different from an average language learner. They are learners with long years of commitment to learning the TL, who have chosen to specialise in FL study and achieved a relatively high level of proficiency. It is likely that they should also have higher levels of FL aptitude than the average, i.e. non-language-specialist learner, which may explain why FL aptitude did not play a significant role in their FLA. It is also possible that aptitude for FL learning plays a more important part in anxiety at the earlier stages of learning a new language than at more advanced levels. To get a

better understanding of what role FL aptitude plays in L2-related anxiety, therefore, further empirical investigations are needed with less homogeneous samples of learners at various stages of L2 learning, with different levels of L2 proficiency, from different instructional contexts. This is imperative as to date relatively few studies have examined the relationship between FLA and FL aptitude. Furthermore, the relatively small sample size in these investigations, including the present one, may also limit the generalisability of the findings.

5. Conclusion

The role of anxiety in L2 proficiency is a controversial and much disputed subject within the field of second and foreign language learning research. Although empirical findings, showing a consistent negative relationship between FLA and L2 performance, appear to lend support to learners' and teachers' intuition that anxiety has a negative influence on learning and using a foreign language, and this idea is also supported by cognitive theories of the effects of anxiety; opposing views questioning the importance of anxiety in L2 learning have also been voiced, calling research attention to the possibility of confounding effects by unexamined language variables, such as native language skills and foreign language aptitude.

This investigation in a Hungarian EFL setting examined FL aptitude as one of the proposed language variables with such confounding effects. The study has provided empirical evidence that FLA is not necessarily related to language learning ability. English major participants displayed differing levels of FLA regardless of the fact that learners identified as high, average, or low anxious showed no significant differences in their FL aptitude. Therefore, the results do not confirm the hypothesis questioning the existence of FLA independent of language aptitude differences.

Poor language ability may be a possible, but by no means a general or the only, cause of FLA. As evidenced by the high-anxious participants in this study, learners may experience high levels of anxiety about learning or using the TL even if their aptitude for L2 learning is not any weaker than that of their peers and their L2 skills not necessarily poorer than those of other learners. The ego-threatening nature of the language learning experience itself, self-presentation concerns, instructional practices, requirements and expectations, competition with peers, personality, etc., could all be potential reasons why a learner may experience high anxiety about learning or using a FL, even at a relatively high level of L2 competence, as documented by research into the sources of L2-related anxiety (e.g., Bailey 1983; Cohen and Norst 1989; Gregersen and Horwitz 2002; Koch and Terrel 1991; Price 1991; Tóth 2009, 2011; Young 1990).

If FLA, as measured on self-report measures of anxiety like the one used in this study, is not simply the reflection or manifestation of linguistic aptitude

differences and thereby the anxiety-achievement relationship is not confounded by language ability, L2 researchers should not disregard FLA as a potential explanation for differential success in language learning. They should continue to explore how anxiety, in conjunction with other variables, affects and what relative contribution it makes to language learning success. For the same reason, teachers of foreign languages should continue to make every effort to reduce unnecessary anxiety in the language classroom in order to increase learners' willingness to communicate and prevent the potential negative effects of anxiety arousal from affecting their L2 performance.

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