Sources and Consequences of Foreign Language Anxiety in Learning German: A Qualitative Approach

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Abstract

Language anxiety (LA) in foreign language (FL) learning has been recognized for more than three decades as a determinant factor affecting the language learning process. Thus, in recent years, there has been a particular emphasis on research on LA in the field of language teaching and learning. The relevant literature focuses, among other things, on defining LA and determining its sources and consequences and, on a second level, on strategies for dealing with it. However, in the field of FL learning in the Greek educational context, the relevant empirical research is still quite limited and, especially regarding German, which is the target language of our research, almost non-existent. Thus, in the context of the present article, a qualitative exploratory approach to LA in the learning of German as a FL in Greece is sought. Specifically, we attempted to qualitatively investigate LA in German through semi-structured interviews with advanced learners of German as a FL. Twelve advanced semester students at the School of German Language and Literature of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki participated in the study. The interviews with them were conducted online, via the Zoom platform, between late June and early July 2024. The content analysis of the subjects' answers showed evidence consistent with the results of other international studies on LA. For example, students' personality traits such as low self-confidence and perfectionism can be considered sources of LA, and the same is true for the classroom environment. A supportive environment and careful management of learners' mistakes on the part of the teacher may have a calming effect on students' LA, while, on the contrary, strictness and lack of support may intensify their anxiety. The consequences of LA are evident through the physical reactions and performance of the students of the research. These included intense heartbeat and dizziness before oral examinations, as well as overeating, while voice trembling during public speaking was a classic symptom. Furthermore, the study participants acknowledged that LA negatively affected their oral performance in German. The value of the present research lies in the fact that it seeks to contribute to the understanding and analysis of LA among FL (and particularly German) learners in Greece, something that is still a challenge for the Greek educational research. Its results may be useful to German and other FL teachers, students and researchers. More research is needed to understand LA as a factor in language learning and especially to come up with suggestions for its treatment based on empirical data.

Keywords: *Foreign Language Anxiety, German as a Foreign Language, Language Teaching and Learning*

1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language (FL) is considered a difficult and even painful process for many students (Wold, 2006). The FL learning process is influenced by various factors such as the learner's age, his/her aptitude for language learning, his/her cognitive and learning background, learning motivation, attitude towards the target language, the learning strategies he/she applies to master knowledge in general and a FL in particular, and various other personality traits which include stress (Khasinah, 2014: 256). Anxiety, as a factor affecting FL learning, is increasingly becoming the subject of contemporary linguistic, psychological and educational research (Khouni et al., 2022). In the context of educational psychology, anxiety is approached as one of the most important variables that indirectly influence the cognitive process of FL learning and learning in general. Particular attention to the affective factors influencing FL acquisition was given by Krashen in 1981 with his "monitor theory" (Krashen, 2002). According to this theory, which is one of the most widespread and dominant theories of FL acquisition (Baker, 2011), attitudes towards the target language, motivation, self-confidence and anxiety influence FL learning either positively or negatively. Students with negative attitudes and/or high anxiety have "high filters", which lead to the blocking of incoming messages during contact with the FL, resulting in a decrease in the rate of progress in learning it (Krashen, 2002). Three categories of anxiety are found in the relevant literature, which overlap to a certain extent: a) state anxiety, b) anxiety as a personality trait (trait anxiety) and c) anxiety exclusively related to specific factors (situation specific anxiety) (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989, 1991; Pappamihiel, 2002: 330). The situation-specific anxiety associated with learning and communicating in a FL is called "foreign language anxiety" (FLA).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Definition of language anxiety (LA)

Language anxiety (LA) was first addressed by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) in the mid-1980s. They suggested that a situation-specific anxiety construct (the foreign language anxiety – FLA) was responsible for the students' negative emotional reactions to FL learning (Horwitz, 2001: 114):

"Adults typically perceive themselves as reasonably intelligent, socially adept individuals, sensitive to different socio-cultural mores. These assumptions are rarely challenged when communicating in a native language as it is not usually difficult to understand others or to make oneself understood. However, the situation when learning a foreign language stands in marked contrast. As an individual's communication attempts will be evaluated according to uncertain or even unknown linguistic and socio-cultural standards, second language communication entails risk-taking and is necessarily problematic. Because complex and nonspontaneous mental operations are required to communicate at all, any performance in the L2 is likely to challenge an individual's self-concept as a competent communicator and lead to reticence, self-consciousness, fear, or even panic" Horwitz et al., 1986: 128).

Thus, the specific work of Horwitz et al. (1986) introduces the concept of LA as a particular kind of stressful situation. They found a statistically significant negative correlation between LA and the performance of students taking Spanish courses at the University of Texas. It was evident from the research that more anxiety meant lower performance. The authors identified three types of anxiety closely related to LA, which were: a) communication apprehension, b) test anxiety, and c) fear of negative evaluation (Luo, 2012: 50). More specifically, fear of communication is a kind of shyness that the person experiences when he or she is called upon to talk to other people. When this anxiety occurs when communicating with one or more people, it is described as "oral communication anxiety", while when it occurs during public speaking it is referred to as "stage fright". Furthermore, when it describes the anxiety in understanding an auditory/verbal message, it is described as "receiver anxiety". The particular situation in a classroom or in a FL class tends to increase the anxiety of oral communication, as students are asked to produce speech in a language in which they have not developed sufficient fluency. Moreover, the difficulty in comprehension, as well as the difficulty in making oneself understood by others, leads many students to remain silent during the FL lesson (Horwitz et al., 1986). Regarding test or exam anxiety (Cassady & Johnson, 2002), it is noted that it is distinguished from the fear of failure. Students who manifest this anxiety set unrealistic expectations of themselves, which leads to frustration at the slightest failure. These individuals find it even more difficult when learning a FL, as it is common in FL classes to have many tests and quizzes. In fact, oral tests can cause both communication anxiety and test anxiety in anxiety-prone students (Horwitz et al., 1986). Finally, fear of negative evaluation (Luo, 2012: 54) is defined as fear of the evaluative judgments of others, avoidance of evaluative situations, or anxiety about the expected negative evaluation that the individual believes he or she will receive. Fear of negative evaluation, although related to fear of examinations, is a broader term, as it can arise in any social evaluative situation, such as in an interview for a job or even when producing oral discourse in the classroom (Horwitz et al., 1986).

2.2 Sources of LA

Numerous factors that enhance the development of LA have been identified and studied sporadically in the relevant literature. There are two main theories concerning the development of FLA: a) The first approach holds that FLA is a result of the learners' individual characteristics such as their self-image, beliefs, emotions and behaviour (Horwitz et al., 1986). b) The second approach considers that FLA does not depend solely on the individual characteristics of learners but is influenced and shaped by the environment and the management of the language classroom (Turula, 2002: 29-30).

According to Horwitz et al. (1986), FLA is generally related, as already noted, to the fear of negative evaluation of the individual, but also to a general anxiety that negatively affects the individual's ability to communicate authentically in the FL. LA is also related to the experiences the learner has during the learning of the FL (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). Specifically, if these experiences are mainly negative, he/she feels nervous, develops LA and consequently his/her performance decreases. It is noted that, due to language stress and the difficulty of dealing with it, many students even question the value of the language class itself (Romero, 2021: 85). Young (1991) identified a series of possible sources of LA, which are related either to students, teachers or various educational practices: a) the individual's personal and interpersonal anxieties, b) the student's attitudes and beliefs about language learning, c) the teacher's beliefs about language learning, d) the interaction between the teacher and the students, e) the processes that take place in the classroom, and f) language assessment.

Other factors that have been linked to the development of LA are the age at which the individual learns the language (the younger the individual is, the less anxiety he/she seems to manifest), the

previous relevant knowledge he/she has, the previous knowledge of the language, which may act as an inhibitor of LA, the visits he/she has had to foreign countries, which may contribute to a more healthy LA dealing with stressful situations, and his/her academic performance (Onwuegbuzie, Bailey & Daley, 1999: 228-231). Regarding the last source of LA, it is noted that a holistic view of language learning shows that it is not so easy to separate the emotional from the cognitive characteristics of the learner (Cakıcı, 2016: 190). For this reason, in the context of the present research, performance is not studied purely as a factor of language anxiety, but also as an effect of it, as anxiety and performance of the individual are constantly interacting and evolving.

2.3 Consequences of LA

LA is a particularly common emotional reaction associated with language learning, experienced by language learners at all levels of education, regardless of age and target language (e.g. Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989; Aida, 1994). It is stressed that LA and FL learning are two interrelated concepts. Consequently, the factors and consequences of LA are in constant interdependence and interaction.

According to researchers (Horwitz et al., 1986; Maclntyre, 1999; Marwan, 2007), the consequences of LA are evident in all areas of language learning. Through a systematic review of LA (Luo, 2011; Oteir & Al-Otaibi, 2019), these consequences are classified into five distinct categories, which relate to the effects of LA: a) on students' academic success, b) in the cognitive domain, c) in the pursuit of social interactions within the language classroom, and d) on students' psychology. More specifically, many studies have examined the relationship between LA and academic success in FL. The results of these research efforts have primarily highlighted the negative relationship between LA and students' academic achievement (Horwitz, 2001: 114). In addition to the research by Horwitz et al. (1986), which was referred to earlier, there are other studies in the field that examine the effect that LA may have on FL achievement. For example, MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) identified a significantly negative relationship between LA and students' performance in French language learning in terms of lexical acquisition. The same conclusion was reached by Aida (1994), who concluded that the more anxiety students had, the more likely they were to score a B or lower. The research highlighted fear of negative evaluation and oral anxiety as important factors leading to LA. The correlation between LA and oral performance in examinations is also evident in a study in a university in China (Zhang, 2004). In a study by Marwan (2007), it was found that the majority of the participants experienced some form of LA, regardless of their gender. The negative association between LA and language performance was also found in a study by Awan, Azher, Anwar and Naz (2010). The participants in this study were taught English as a FL and were asked to complete the Horwitz et al. (1986) LA scale, where it was found that speaking in front of peers was the biggest source of anxiety. The case studies by Said and Weda (2018), as well as Onwuegbuzie, Bailey and Daley (1999) came to the same conclusion as the above studies. Finally, Chatzidimou and Sidopoulou (2023) conducted an empirical questionnaire study on 180 students of the School of German Language and Literature of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and concluded that students stated having FLA. The statistical analysis showed, among other things, that the subjects of that study: a) felt more comfortable answering in Greek than in German to a question asked by their professor in German, b) worried about the consequences that their linguistic mistakes in

German might have on their evaluation in the course, c) got palpitations when they were asked to speak in German in class and that d) panicked when they had to speak in German without having prepared what they were going to say. On the other hand, they stated that they would not mind if German was used more often in classes. This first attempt to investigate LA in German in the Greek educational context demonstrated the need for teachers to recognize their students' LA and to act pedagogically supportive towards them.

3. Materials and Methods

The present study aimed to provide a more in-depth look at the LA of students of German as a FL in Greek higher education, continuing the broader research effort we have recently started focusing on LA and German as a FL in Greece. In contrast to our previous, quantitative research (Chatzidimou & Sidopoulou, 2023), this time we used the semi-structured interview as a research tool, in order to give the research participants the opportunity to develop their views more freely and analyze their practices. Semi-structured interviews have the advantage of providing more standardized data for all respondents compared to unstructured interviews, and with more depth compared to the structured interview approach. A series of structured questions in combined with open-form questions to obtain additional information when needed (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003: 240). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews allow for an "authentic insight into people's experiences" (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006: 485). Given the nature of this research, it is not possible to generalize its results, which is not part of its objectives. As noted, the main purpose of the research was to investigate in depth the LA that the participants in the survey reported having. The focus in this study was particularly on the sources and consequences of LA in German for the students in the research.

The interviews were conducted online, via the Zoom platform, between late June and early July 2024. With the participants' permission and after they had been informed about protecting their anonymity, the online interviews with them were recorded to facilitate data processing. For the protection of students' personal data, they are referred to in the article as Student 1 (S1), S2, etc. The student interview data were analyzed following content analysis procedures (Neuendorf, 2017; Tonkiss, 2004), with the help of the qualitative research analysis software Atlas.ti.

Twelve (12) students participated in the research, with women representing the majority (10 out of 12), reflecting the reality regarding the gender of the students of the School. This fact prevents us from drawing a clear conclusion about a possible correlation between the gender of the participants and the language anxiety they manifest. In this study, the ages of the participants ranged from 20 to 51 years. All participants were in their third or fourth year of study and above.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of the research will be presented in this section based on its main research axes. Thus, the research findings are presented and discussed in relation to the sources and the consequences of FLA.

4.1 Sources of FLA according to the participants
4.1.1 The students' characteristics as a source of FLA

Lack of confidence in producing spoken German is one of the main characteristics negatively associated with students' LA. The testimonies of female students such as S1, S3 and S9 reveal that

questioning their ability to speak German correctly and comparing it with their comfort in English increases their anxiety.

"First of all [I get more nervous in speaking] because I'm afraid of making syntax mistakes and saying something that's not the way it should be. And I'm afraid of being made fun of. Not to see looks, not to see reactions from the professor, a little bit of "hmm yeah, right", let's say, "she's a senior and she doesn't know how to say this or that" (S1).

S3 admits to overanalyzing situations, resulting in more anxiety when they must speak German:

"I'm a hyper-analyzing and over-thinking type, so to say that I will speak, especially when I'm called upon to speak in German, I become extremely nervous. Whereas let's say in English, I feel more comfortable. I don't even care. Maybe it comes from how confident I am in each language" (S3).

S9 highlights that more confidence in the language would improve her confidence and her performance in class:

"Yes, if I had more confidence about the language, German in particular, well I think yes, I would do better, I would have more confidence to speak, let's say in class" (S9).

Furthermore, S4 shows signs of perfectionism, wanting her speech to be perfect, which increases her anxiety and prevents her from actively participating in the lesson:

"That's the anxiety I have, that I don't want to be heard, to talk like that [with mistakes)], I'm ashamed [...] In speech yes, I want what I say to be perfect" (S4).

Overall, low self-confidence and perfectionism contribute to avoiding participation in class to avoid criticism or mistakes, exacerbating LA.

4.1.2 The classroom environment as a source of FLA

Students largely associate LA with the language classroom environment and the role of teachers, as can be seen from their statements during the interviews.

S1 reported that her German teacher helped her to manage her negative emotions with subtle corrections and positive reinforcement, creating a supportive climate:

"I liked German better [than English]. Now, it may have been the teacher's approach. I say again, because how she taught us played a role [...] I remember that she never criticized us. She let us express ourselves as we wanted and corrected us in a very nice way e.g., 'let's go over this again a bit'. Then she always put stickers on our spellings; she had a very nice approach, something that the other teachers at our school didn't have, so it was very new to me" (S1).

S3 stressed the importance of a friendly classroom atmosphere, as well as the teachers' acceptance of mistakes, which helped to reduce anxiety:

"With their behaviour, yes [teachers have helped us to manage stress]. For example, making us feel more comfortable about our mistakes, as they were treated as acceptable and they helped with language learning and solving the language; because, if we don't speak, we will obviously get even more stuck" (S3).

S4 reported that strict teachers discourage her from speaking up, while relaxed teachers reduce her anxiety:

"There are professors who have a strict style, and they want everything to be perfect, so to speak. There are also professors who are more relaxed and cause you less stress. They show you that there is no question that you can speak as you like, not that others judge you, but that when the demands are too high you lose it and say: I can't speak now" (S4).

S6 noted that friendly teachers help him to relax, as opposed to strict teachers who increase his anxiety. Moreover, he noted that teachers who provide extra material and focus on positive feedback help reduce his anxiety:

"There were both cases [teachers who helped me deal with my anxiety and others who reinforced it]. At university there were professors who helped me with my stress, with giving me material, with doing some orals, but okay, there are some other professors, not at university, who created stress and anxiety with how to speak, how to write, because they didn't know how to teach properly. [...] [When does a teacher stress you?] When, for example, a paper is corrected at that time. And he/she starts, 'not right this, not right that, not right the other', without any real feedback on your mistakes, but just pointing out the mistakes. A good teacher will guide you through your mistakes. He/She will help you learn through them and reduce them" (S6).

S8 highlighted the importance of emotional connection with teachers and the need for a common code of communication to reduce students' anxiety:

"[...] I get emotionally attached; if I don't get emotionally attached, I can't learn. Yeah, it's a problem, I'm a little crooked. So, if I get used to the presence of a teacher, we find a code of communication, then it means that my anxiety goes down, let alone the moment I'm struggling for whatever reason, a little bit if they smile at me, I'll feel good. [...] It plays a role. I mean, we're not robots, we're not machines. In language learning, emotion and how comfortable we feel with someone, how comfortable we can express ourselves and speak [is very important] and it is very important that the teachers are careful in the way they correct, although I want the remarks, that is, when I make a mistake, I want to be told at that moment so that I can connect it and I want the voice to be a little more strict and the tone to rise so that I can remember it, because I only remember it in combination. [...] I mean, back in school, I remember that if I was reprimanded for something, then I wouldn't raise my hand or participate. It's something that has stuck with me and now of course I've worked on it differently, but it's the way someone will make a remark to you a lot of times, so it affects both anxiety and the way you express yourself" (S8).

S9 reported that teachers who encourage her to speak, even with mistakes, help to reduce her anxiety:

"Yes, it relaxes me, so to speak, when a teacher says 'answer, even if it's wrong'. Someone who pushes you to, say, speak up. A teacher who doesn't wait for the same people to answer again and again, because there are some people who have the eloquence of speech, and you don't even have time to think about the answer. [...] Whereas, if the professor gave the other people space and time to think, say, to answer, it would be somewhat better" (S9).

S10 was strongly convinced that teachers can reduce anxiety and stressed the importance of accepting mistakes from the first semesters:

"I think that this [helping the student to reduce his/her anxiety] must start very early, that is, at university, for example, in the first semesters. The professor himself/herself, if he/she points out that mistakes are acceptable because we are human and for many

reasons they can happen and support this throughout the lectures and so on, I think it can help a lot" (S10).

S12 highlighted the importance of collaborative behaviour of teachers in reducing anxiety.

In conclusion, the classroom environment plays a crucial role in managing students' anxiety. A supportive, friendly and encouraging classroom environment, where students feel comfortable and are not afraid to make mistakes, helps to reduce LA and to learn the target language more effectively. In contrast, strictness, high expectations and lack of personal support can increase anxiety and hinder students' progress.

4.1.3 The uniqueness of language learning as a source of FLA

The German language is a challenge for the students in our research, with vocabulary, grammar and syntax being difficult for all students to varying degrees.

The exception is S11, who reported that she has consolidated grammar, syntax and vocabulary, while oral speech is more stressful for her:

"The oral speech makes me nervous. The grammar, the syntax, the vocabulary, I've got it all figured out" (S11).

S9 revealed that at times she finds grammar more difficult and at other times vocabulary more difficult. For S1, S4, S5, S8 and S12, the biggest difficulty in German is the vocabulary. S1 stated that she does not have as developed a vocabulary as she would like, while S8 attributed her vocabulary deficiency to insufficient engagement with German-language literature. S2 considers that the difficulty of German lies in the grammatical rules, which she only applies empirically, having learned the language at home from her mother. S3 has difficulty with grammar, vocabulary and syntax in order of priority, while S9 mentions grammar exclusively. German syntactic norms bother S6 and S9 more than vocabulary and grammar.

The difficulty in learning the target language and its positive correlation with increased LA is also confirmed by other studies (Luo, 2011, 2012). Students, due to incomplete vocabulary and difficulties in grammar and syntax, become discouraged and frustrated resulting in reduced participation in the course.

In summary, increased LA in our research is linked to several factors including learners' characteristics, such as low self-confidence and perfectionism, previous negative experiences in the German language class, as well as difficulty learning the lexical, grammatical and syntactic rules of the target language. Our students revealed that FL teachers play a key role in shaping their anxiety. The supportive attitude and understanding behavior of teachers is key to reducing stress and enhancing positive learning behavior of students. A friendly and understanding classroom environment, where mistakes are considered part of the learning process, can help reduce students' LA, improve their self-image and ultimately successfully master the German language.

4.2 Consequences of FLA according to the participants

The consequences of FLA are evident through the physical reactions and performance of the students. S4, for example, describes intense symptoms of anxiety, such as rapid heartbeat and dizziness before oral tests. S5 experiences overeating as a result of her anxiety, particularly before exams, while S12 reports that his voice trembles during oral assessment, having difficulty expressing himself. The negative effect of FLA on performance is confirmed by the research participants. S1 points out that stress reduces her

performance in oral exams, while S3 observes that stress negatively affects her performance in oral exams, in contrast to written exams, where her performance is better. S6 admits that his anxiety negatively affects his performance, while S8 estimates that her anxiety costs her exam credits. S9 believes that more confidence would increase her grades, and S10 states that with more composure in oral assessments she would score higher. S11 acknowledges that FLA has negatively affected her speech development, and S12 states that a lack of anxiety would have improved his grades on both written and oral exams. S4 notes that its poor performance is mainly due to poor preparation, with stress less important.

Overall, the findings of the research confirm that FLA negatively affects students' academic performance, class participation, social interaction, and psychological state, confirming the findings in the relevant literature (Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre, Noels & Clément, 1997; Young, 1991).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, we can summarize by noting that all the participants in the survey stated that they suffered from FLA. Fear of communication and anxiety of oral exams were a common phenomenon among them. Furthermore, it was found that lack of self-confidence and an unpleasant classroom climate contribute significantly to the reinforcement of FLA. In fact, all students reported that their anxiety was significantly reduced when teachers were friendly and supportive. On the contrary, their anxiety increases when teachers are strict and focus only on mistakes, which in the opinion of the students should be treated as a normal and integral part of the learning process. To sum up, the present qualitative research highlights the importance of supportive teaching during the process of learning a FL, as well as the strong influence of the individual's mentality on the final acquisition of the target language. As noted in the relevant literature, FLA is a complex component of various factors – psychological, sociobiographical, and situational ones (Dewaele, 2007) and it can have a negative effect on learners' attitudes and motivation toward language study (Luo, 2012: 50). Therefore, further empirical research in this field is needed to better understand it as a phenomenon and to facilitate the work of FL teachers and make the FL learning procedure more effective and more enjoyable for FL learners.

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