An Evaluation of University Level Preparatory Class Students' Feelings In Terms of Foreign Language Anxiety

Yabancı Dil Kaygısı Açısından Üniversite Hazırlık Sınıfı Öğrencilerinin Düşüncelerinin Değerlendirmesi

Muzaffer BARIN
Atatürk Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi
İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü
mbarin@atauni.edu.tr

ÖZET

Bu çalışma, üniversite düzeyindeki hazırlık sınıfı öğrencilerinin yabancı dil sınıf kaygısı hakkındaki duygu ve düşüncelerini araştırmayı amaçlamıştır. Ayrıca, bu çalışmayla yabancı dil öğrenme kaygısı ve öğrencilerin yaşları, cinsiyetleri, bölümleri ve İngilizce seviyeleri arasındaki ilişkiyi araştırmakta da amaçlanmaktadır. Çalışma Atatürk Üniversitesi'nde Yabancı Diller Yüksek Okulu'ndan 102 öğrencinin katılımıyla gerçekleştirilmiştir. Katılımcılar iki farklı seviye sınıfından–başlangıç ve başlangıç üstü, rastgele seçilmişlerdir. Ayrıca öğrenciler, İngilizce hazırlık sınıfının ardından üniversitenin farklı bölümlerinde-Tıp, Mühendislik, Turizm ve Kimya- öğrenim göreceklerdir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yabancı diller okulu, foreign language, preparatory class students

ABSTRACT

This study investigated university level preparatory class students' feelings and perceptions about foreign language classroom anxiety. It also aimed to find out the relationship between foreign language learning anxiety and age, gender, majors, and proficiency levels of the students was also investigated. The study was conducted at Ataturk University, with the participation of 102 students from School of Foreign Languages. Subjects were randomly chosen from two different proficiency levels: elementary and pre-intermediate. The subjects are also from different departments: Medicine, Engineering, Tourism and Chemistry.

Keywords: School of Foreign Languages, yabancı dil, hazırlık sınıfı öğrencileri

1.Introduction

Learning a second language is a complex process because it requires not only learning grammar structures and acquiring vocabulary but also developing communication skills and an awareness of another culture. In addition, the elements of the affective domain are considered as important as the elements of cognitive domain (Brown, 1994). The affective domain includes the emotions or feelings of learners such as competitiveness, self-esteem, self-confidence and anxiety. Anxiety is considered as a very important affective factor in language learning.

Young (1994) emphasized the importance of anxiety in language learning by stating that:

"*… now we do know that cognitive and linguistic aspects alone do not make up a complete picture of the language learning process… If our goal is to increase student motivation and increase the effectiveness of second language learning, then understanding language anxiety will lead us closer to that goal*" (p. 50).

The relationship between foreign language learning and anxiety has been investigated and research has shown that learners can experience anxiety in language classes (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986). Anxiety experienced in language classes refers to the feelings of tension, nervousness, apprehension, and worry related with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986). Learners' feelings of anxiety, nervousness and worry may impair their language learning and performance in language classes.

Anxiety is defined by Spielberger (1976) as "the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry that are experienced by an individual" (cited in Kim, 2000, p. 25). Researchers discussed many aspects of anxiety and suggested some types of anxiety: trait anxiety vs. state anxiety. Individuals with trait anxiety are prone to become nervous in a large number of situations. When compared with trait anxiety, state anxiety is not a permanent personality feature and is experienced at a particular moment reaction to a certain situation. In another classification, researchers who believe that anxiety has also positive effects have suggested debilitative vs. facilitative types of anxiety. Facilitating anxiety is considered as "helpful" and is believed to motivate learners to achieve their goals whereas debilitating anxiety is considered as harmful and is believed to impede learners' performance. Researchers criticized state-trait measurement since the subjects are not generally asked to attribute their emotional state to any particular source and therefore they suggested a new type of anxiety: situation-specific anxiety which "is applied to a single context or situation only" (Tallon, 2009, p.114) such as state fright, math anxiety, and language learning anxiety.

This study attempts to address the following research questions:

1. What are the university level preparatory class students' feelings and perceptions about foreign language classroom anxiety?
2. Does the level of foreign language anxiety vary according to

gender?
3. Does the level of foreign language anxiety vary according to age?
4. Does the level of foreign language anxiety vary according to proficiency level?
5. Does the level of foreign language anxiety vary according to majors?

This study mostly focuses on identifying the problem. Trying to find answers to the questions of what the negative effects and potential sources of language anxiety are is not the primary aim of this study. However, related literature is reviewed about these topics, which can create awareness of foreign language anxiety, and guide further research about this concept. Some suggestions about how to cope with foreign language classroom anxiety is given in this study to with the hope of helping researchers, language teachers, and students learning a foreign language.

As regards the practical significance of the study, it was conducted within the university students in preparatory classes, and the foreign language anxiety level of these students was measured for the first time. Based on the researcher's own experiences and discussions with her colleagues, anxiety is one of the most important factors that have a negative effect on learners' performance and success. The present study may provide an opportunity for teachers to realize the existence of language anxiety, its potential sources, negative effects on language learning process, manifestation of language anxiety, and by considering all, to develop strategies to cope with language learning anxiety in classrooms. Besides educators, the study can also provide an opportunity for students to realize and understand their own foreign language learning anxiety. Identifying their own anxiety about language learning helps them to make reflections on their learning, to develop clues and ideas how to reduce language anxiety.

2.Literature Review

This study aims to investigate the foreign language anxiety levels of prep class students, and the relationship between the foreign language anxiety and students' age, gender, departments and proficiency levels. This chapter presents the selected literature related to the topic of the study.

2.1.Language Learning and Affective Factors

Affective variables have been recognized as one of most important

factors explaining differential success among foreign language learners. Researchers mostly agree that the complex process of language learning cannot be explained merely by cognitive or non-affective factors (Samimy, 1994). Yules (2006) states that:

"*If there is a strong element of unwillingness or embarrassment in attempting to produce the different sound of another language, then it may override whatever physical and cognitive abilities there are. If this self-consciousness is accompanied by a lack of empathy with the other culture (for example, no identification with its speakers or their custom), the subtle effects of not really wanting to sound like a Russian or a German or an American may strongly inhibit the learning process*" (p.164).

Krashen (1982) suggested a hypothesis called "affective filter" to show how affective factors relate to second language acquisition. According to this hypothesis, there are a number of affective factors playing a facilitative, but non-causal, role in second language acquisition. These variables include: motivation, self-confident and anxiety. Krashen (1982) claimed that learners with high motivation, self-confident, a good self-image; and a low level of anxiety will be better at acquiring a second language successfully. Low level of motivation and self-esteem, and debilitating anxiety can cause to the affective filter raise and form a "mental block" that hinders comprehensible input from being used for acquisition. That is, if the filter is up, it impairs language acquisition.

2.2.Types of Anxiety

Researchers have viewed different aspects of anxiety and they have discussed several types of anxiety including trait and state anxiety, situation specific anxiety, debilitating and facilitating anxiety, and foreign language classroom anxiety.

2.2.1 Trait Anxiety vs State Anxiety

Spielberger et al. (1970) developed a measurement instrument called the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) and so firmly established the trait- state distinction in anxiety research. According to Spielberger (1972) trait anxiety refers to a stable tendency to become nervous in a large variety of situations. Since it is a feature of an individual's personality, people high in trait anxiety are more likely to experience anxiety more intensely and more frequently than those low in trait anxiety. Similarly, Goldberg (1993) concluded that people who have high levels of trait anxiety are generally nervous people, and they do not

have emotional determination. As a result, those who suffer from high trait anxiety are likely to feel apprehensive in any situations.

According to MacIntyre& Gardner (1991) trait anxiety is believed to impair cognitive functioning, to disturb memory, and to cause avoidance behaviour in addition to other effects. Spielberger et al. defined state anxiety as "a transitory emotional state or condition of the human organism" (Spielberger 1972, cited in cited in Jocelyn Lan, 2010, p.9). According to Tallon (2009), state anxiety "refers to the moment-to moment experience of anxiety; it is the transient emotional state of feeling nervous that can fluctuate over time vary in intensity" (p.114).

In comparison with trait anxiety, state anxiety is not a permanent personality feature and is experienced at a particular moment as a reaction to a certain situation such as job interview, giving a speech or taking an exam. Trait anxiety is "the tendency to react in an anxious manner whereas state anxiety is defined as the "reaction", it is a situation-specific trait anxiety" (Phillips, 1992, cited in Aydın, 1999, p. 15).

Spielberger (1972) identified these two distinct anxiety types as:

"An anxiety state (A-state) is evoked whenever a person perceives a particular stimulus or situation as potentially harmful, dangerous or threatening to him. A-states vary in intensity and fluctuate over time as a function of the amount of stress that impinges upon an individual. The term anxiety is also used to refer to relatively stable individual differences in anxiety proneness as a personality trait. Trait anxiety (A-trait) is not directly manifested in behaviour, but may be inferred from the frequency and the intensity of an individual's elevations in A-state over time. Persons who are high in A-trait... are disposed to perceive the world as more dangerous or threatening than low A-trait individuals" (p.248).

Spielberger (1983) found a strong correlation between trait and state anxiety. Therefore, high levels of trait anxiety are related with higher state anxiety. He also suggested that anxiety-trait level only affects some anxiety-state responses, depending on the stressfulness of the situation.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) criticized state-trait distinction and claimed that traits are meaningless if they are not considered in interaction with situations because behaviour occurs with a person in a context. According to trait anxiety approach people need to consider their reactions over many different situations, yet the situations causing anxiety may be different within a group of people; it may also differ

among people who show similar trait anxiety scores".

2.3.2. Situation-Specific Anxiety

MacIntyre and Gardner's (1991) criticized state-trait measurement since the subjects are not generally asked to attribute their emotional state to any particular source. Therefore a new type of anxiety was suggested in order to overcome these defects in defining anxiety: situation-specific anxiety. According to Tallon (2009) "situation-specific anxiety is like trait anxiety except that it is applied to a single context or situation only. It is stable over time but not necessarily consistent across situations. Examples include math anxiety, test anxiety, stage fright, and language anxiety"(p.114).

Similarly, Chiang (2006) states that "Interactionists' views alerted anxiety scholars to the awareness that the interaction between individuals' trait anxiety and situational characteristics of a particular occasion should not be underestimated, and have led to the development of situation-specific anxiety inventories such as test anxiety measures and second language anxiety scales" (p.15). MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) asserted that "situation-specific scales would relate more strongly to behaviour in particular situations than general anxiety measures" (cited in Chiang, 2006, p.16).

2.3.3. Facilitating vs. Debilitating Anxiety

Anxiety can be experienced at different levels in a particular situation such as communication in a foreign language, interview, or doing a test. It is believed that anxiety is not always harmful but sometimes it may have positive effect on subjects. Hashima (2007) states that " the benefits of moderate levels of anxiety should not be ignored as it can provide an impetus to performing a task or achieving an objective" (p.6).

McLellan (1986) emphasized the importance of different levels of anxiety and their potential effects on a particular situation:

"Anxiety is usually a warning that alerts a person to the fact that something is wrong and prepares him or her to face the anxiety producing situation. A lack of anxiety may result in an "I-don't-care" attitude that, in fact, may increase the potential for failure. Moderate levels of anxiety, however are beneficial. The supply motivation and added energy and increase one's ability to focus on the task at hand. On the other hand, too much anxiety can be damaging, causing "hyped-up" and jittery feelings so intense that effective use of energies towards achieving a goal becomes

impossible (cited in Hashima, 2007, p.6)."

Since anxiety has different effects in a particular situation researchers have classified anxiety into two types: helpful or facilitating anxiety, harmful or debilitating anxiety (Alport & Haber, 1960; Scovel, 1978). The "helpful" and "mild" type of anxiety is called "facilitating anxiety" which motivates individual to achieve their goals. Considering language learning Scovel (1991) states "facilitating anxiety motivates the learner to "fight" the learning task; it gears the learner emotionally for approach behaviour" (p.22). According to Krashen while facilitating anxiety has a positive effect on language learning, on tasks that require conscious learning it does not have the same effect on language acquisition because he believes that language acquisition works best when anxiety level is zero, when it is directed somewhere else, not on language. That is, a learner has to assume that s/he will be successful in order to acquire a language.

Horwitz (1986), on the other hand, believes that while facilitating anxiety can be helpful for very simple learning tasks, it cannot be helpful for more complicated tasks. So, for him, there's no such thing as facilitating anxiety. The term anxiety can only be used to refer to debilitating anxiety since it has negative connotations

Debilitating anxiety is defined by Scovel (1978) as "a drive which motivates learner to "flee" the new learning task: it stimulates the individual emotionally to adopt avoidance behaviour" (p.139). Lan (2010) considers the causes for debilitating anxiety and states that:

"*One's dissatisfaction with performance can lead to a decreased self-efficacy and also result in a low motivation; it can also cause anxiety that might stop learners from learning. Students feel anxious while performing an effortless task in class where the teacher is strict, serious and unpredictable, or when the teacher gives a harsh correction in front of the whole class. These conditions can occur in an EFL classroom, and EFL learners who feel anxious and repressed and reject learning English*" (p.10).

According to Oxford (1999) most researchers consider anxiety as debilitating since anxiety impedes learner's performance. For instance, anxious learners may have difficulty with understanding materials due to the short-term memory loss caused by anxiety. These learners may also have difficulty with producing what they have learnt since anxiety causes problem with the long-term memory retrieval process. Similarly,

Scarcella and Oxford (1992) believes that debilitating anxiety impedes learners' performances in many ways both indirectly through self-doubt and worry and directly by decreasing participation and creating obvious avoidance of the language.

Scovel (1991) believes that an individual can have both facilitating and debilitating anxiety and they simultaneously serve to inspire or to alert as the individual understand new things about language learning environment. A good performance on a task is based on enough anxiety arousal to reach the most suitable levels of performance, but not so much that the required skills are undermined.

Eysenck (1979) argues that anxious learners will compensate for the increased cognitive demands by increased effort and that "the extent to which anxiety either facilitates or impairs performance is determined by the extent to which high-anxiety subjects compensate for reduced processing effectiveness by enhanced effort (cited in MacIntyre, 1995, p.92). Therefore anxiety arousal can affect not only the quality of performance but also the amount of effort invested in it.

These two effects of anxiety on performance were characterized as an inverted U-curve model, the Yerkes-Dodson Law. This "law" characterize a curvilinear relationship between performance and anxiety as a function of task difficulty. MacIntyre (1995) states that according to the Yerkes-Dodson Law,

"To the extent that a given task is relatively simple anxiety seems to have little negative effect and may actually improve performance through increased effort. However, as the demands on the system increase, the extra effort may not fully compensate for the cognitive interference, and anxiety will begin to have a negative effect. As demand further exceeds ability, the impairment caused by anxiety arousal worsens. Thus, those who do not experience anxiety, will be able to process the information more quickly, more effectively, or both compared to those, who are distracted by task-irrelevant cognition" (p.92).

Similar to this study, Bailey (1983) examined facilitating and debilitating anxiety through analysis of diary studies. This study revealed the relationship between competitiveness and anxiety seemed to result in either an unsuccessful or successful self-image. In this study (see Figure 1), the successful self-image and the unsuccessful self-image who were subjected to facilitating anxiety go into a cycle of enhanced learning and positive rewards whereas the unsuccessful self-image who

was subjected to debilitating anxiety goes into a different cycle of perceived failure, which can be broken by future facilitating anxiety (if the learners goes on attending the language course).

Bailey(1983) characterized the competitive self-image as originating from some factors:

1. Overt self-comparison of language learning.
2. Emotive responses to the comparisons in 1.
3. A desire to out-perform other language learners.
4. Emphasis on or concern with tests and grades.
5. A desire to gain the teacher's approval.
6. Anxiety experienced during the language lesson.
7. Withdrawal from the language-learning experience. (p.93).
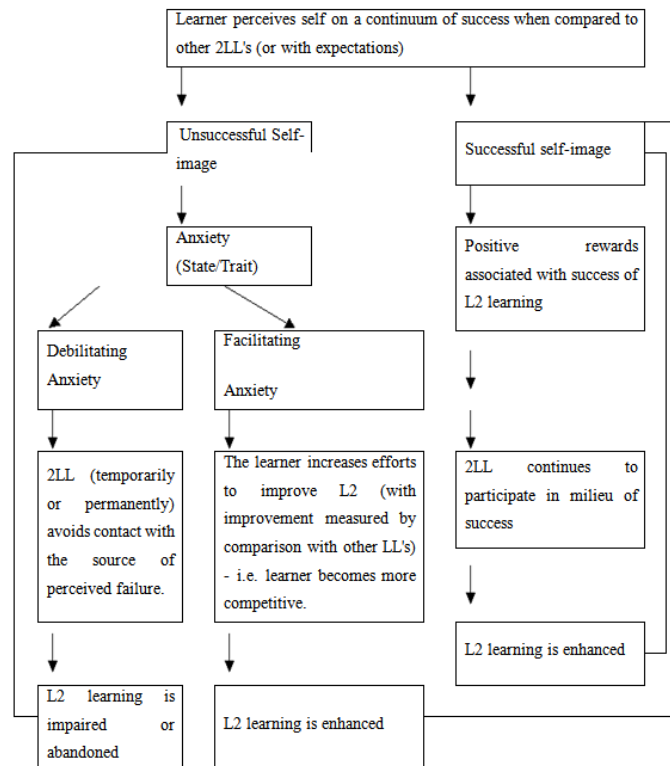
Competitive Second Language Learner (2LL)

Figure 2.1: Competitiveness and the Second Language Learner (Bailey, 1983, p.97).

3.Methodology

This chapter presents detailed information about the design of the study, subjects, data collection, and analysis procedures. This chapter will give the readers an insight into the nature of the study and help them better understand the procedure used in the present study.

3.1. Research Design

This study implemented quantitative research design. Quantitative research is defined as "a type of educational research in which the researcher decides what to study, ask specific, narrow questions, collects numeric (numbered) data from subjects, analysing these numbers using statistics, and conducts the inquiry in an unbiased, objective manner". In other words, quantitative research was utilised for providing numerical values about the answers given, by the help of descriptive statistics.

The relevant data were collected through the questionnaire –the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). The subjects were distributed the questionnaires and asked to fill out them. They were asked to write their ages, genders, majors, and the name of their classrooms which refers to their proficiency level. To analyze the data quantitatively, the means of each student were computed. The collected data were analyzed through the Statistic Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 16.00.

3.2. Subjects

The subjects were chosen from School of Foreign Languages at Ataturk University. The subjects attend the preparatory classes at School of Foreign Languages. Upon entering the school, the students take the placement test at the beginning of the semester and in accordance with the results of this test they are divided into different proficiency levels: elementary, and pre-intermediate. At the end of the academic year, they are expected to reach upper-intermediate level. Each classroom has approximately 28 students. Of the subjects, 53 were elementary level students, and 49 were pre-intermediate level students as shown in Figure 3.1.
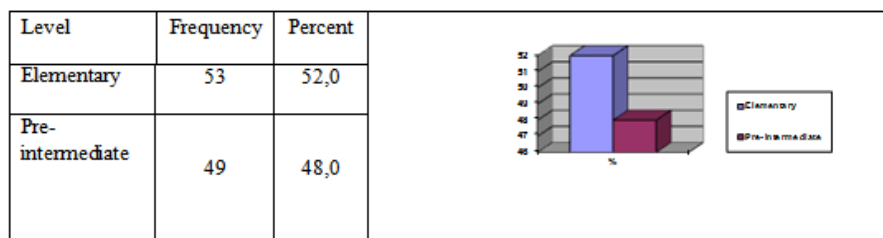
Level	Frequency	Percent	
Elementary	53	52,0	
Pre-intermediate	49	48,0	

Figure 3.1 Numbers of elementary and pre-intermediate level students

3.3. Data collection procedures

The relevant data for this study were collected in the fall term in 2009-2010 academic year. The number of students and classes that would be included in the study was reported and the permission was received from Ataturk University, School of Foreign Languages to carry out the study. In the third week of December, 106 students from different departments and two proficiency levels (elementary and pre-intermediate) were given the questionnaire (FLCAS) by the researcher during their class time. Permission was received from the teachers, and the students were explained the aim of the study. At the beginning of the questionnaires, students were expected to state their names, genders, departments, and names of their classes presenting their proficiency levels. Students were given about 15-20 minutes to fill out the questionnaire and while the questionnaire was being administered in the classes, the researcher checked all the classes in order to prevent any misunderstanding about the questionnaire. The students' questions about the questionnaire and the study were answered in detail by the researcher. The objective of administrating this questionnaire was to gather quantitative data to investigate students' foreign language anxiety levels.

3.4. Data Analysis

In this study, the Statistic Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 16.00 was used to quantitatively analyze the data collected through the questionnaire. To analyze the data, the means of each student were computed. When entering the data into SPSS, nine items in the FLCAS were reverse-scored. Five different statistical techniques were used in order to analyze the data: Arithmetic mean, Standard deviation, t-test, Kruskal-Wallis Analysis, and Bonferroni Post Hoc test. Significance level was determined as $p = 0.05$. Arithmetic mean and standard deviation were used to determine the learners' thoughts and practices in learning

a foreign language, t test was used to examine gender factor and proficiency levels, Kruskal-Wallis test was used to examine the age and major factor.

4.Results

The results revealed that the foreign language classroom anxiety level of the preparatory class students was moderate level in this study. When analyzed in terms of gender, it was found that male students slightly anxious than females in English lessons. The students' age did not play an important role in their foreign language classroom anxiety level. However, foreign language anxiety level differed according to the proficiency levels of the students; pre-intermediate level students were found to be more anxious than elementary level students. The study also investigated the major differences in foreign language anxiety and found that the students who will study Medicine is more anxious than those who will study Chemistry, Tourism, and Engineering after preparatory class. In the next chapter the results of the present study will be discussed in detail, then, pedagogical implications and suggestions for further research will be presented.

5.Conclusion

The present study has provided some information about the foreign language anxiety level of preparatory class students. The preparatory class students at Ataturk University were found to be low anxious and moderately anxious but not highly anxious. Furthermore, it was revealed that the foreign language anxiety level of the students slightly differed in terms of gender, proficiency level and departments of the students. The results showed that male students were slightly more anxious than female students; pre-intermediate level students were anxious than elementary students; and the students whose major is medicine were more anxious than the students whose majors were Chemistry, Engineering and Tourism. However, foreign language anxiety level of these students did not differ according to their age.

The study also revealed that the students generally feel anxious when they volunteer to answer a question or speak in front of the class. The responses they gave to the questionnaire showed that the sources of their anxiety for speaking in front of the class were fear of negative evaluation and teachers' manner towards the students such as error correction. In the light of these findings and the pedagogical implications presented in this chapter, students might be assisted in

reducing their foreign language anxiety.

References

Aydın B. (1999). *A study of sources of FLCA in speaking and writing classes*. (Doctoral Dissertation), Anadolu University.

Bailey, K.M. (1983). Competitiveness and anxiety in adult second language acquisition: Looking at and through the diary studies. In H. W. Seliger & M. H. Long, (Eds.), *Classroom oriented research in second language acquisition* (pp. 67-103). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Brown, H. D. (1994). *Principles of language learning and teaching*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Regents.

Hashima N. (2007). *ESL students' perspectives on language anxiety*. (Doctoral Dissertation). University Putra Malaysia.

Horwitz, E. K, Horwitz, M. B .& Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety, *The Modern Language Journal*, 70, 125-132

Krashen, S.D. (1982). *Principle and practice in second language acquisition*. Permagon Press Inc., Oxford.

Lan Y. J. (2010). *A study of Taiwanese 7th graders' foreign language anxiety, beliefs about language learning and its relationship with their English achievement*, Master's thesis, Ming Chuan University.

MacIntyre, P.D. & Gardner, R.C, (1991). Methods and results in the study of anxiety and language learning: A review of literature review. *Language Learning*, 41 (1), 85-117.

MacIntyre, P.D. (1995). How does anxiety affect second language learning? A reply to Sparks and Ganschow. *The Modern Language Journal,* 79 (1), 90-99.

Philips, E. M. (1991), Anxiety and oral competence: Classroom dilemma, *The French Review*, 65 (1), 1-14.

Samimy K. K. (1994). Teaching Japanese consideration of learners' affective variables. *Theory into Practice*, 33 (1), 29-33.

Scovel, T. (1978). The effect of affect on foreign language learning: A review of anxiety research. *Language Learning*, 28, 129-142.

Spielberger C. D & Gorsuch R. L. (1970). *Manual for the state-trait anxiety inventory*. Palo Alto: Consulting Psychologists Press.

Spielberger, C. D. (1976). The nature and measurement of anxiety. In C. C. Spielberger & R. Diaz-Guerrero (Eds.) *Cross-cultural anxiety,* 1 (pp. 3-12) Washington, DC: Hemisphere.

Spielberger, C. D. (1983). *Manual for the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI)*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologist Press.

Tallon M. (2009). Foreign language anxiety and heritage students of Spanish: A quantitative study. *Foreign Language Annals*, 42 (1), 2009, 112-137.

Young D. J, (1991). The relationship between anxiety and foreign language oral proficiency ratings. In Horwitz, E. K & Young, D. J., *Language Anxiety* (pp. 57-

63). London: Prentice Hall International (UK).

Young, D. J. (1994). New directions in language anxiety research. In Klee, C. A., *Faces in a Crowd: The individual learners in multisection courses*. Issues in Language Program Direction: A series of Annual Volumes. ERIC Document Reproduction Service no: ED 482 487.

Yule, G. (2006). *The study of language*. Cambridge University Press, New York, 3rd Edition.