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Foreign Language Anxiety Among Prospective Language Teachers

Öğretmen Adaylarının Yabancı Dil Kaygısı

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Abstract

Considerable research on language anxiety has accumulated over the last 30 years indicating negative correlations between language anxiety and target language performance and overall success achieved in the target language. However, very little research has been conducted on teacher language anxiety. This study investigates the causes and effects of language anxiety experienced by anxious non-native student teachers. The findings indicate the participants experience feelings of anxiety due to their fear of negative evaluation and concern over errors. Language anxiety also appears to have a number of negative impacts on foreign language instruction which have not been investigated before such as teachers' avoiding speaking the target language and teachers' reluctance to use classroom activities that require spontaneous and active target language use. Recommendations for helping student teachers overcome potential feelings of foreign language anxiety are made as well as recommendations for researchers interested in conducting future studies on teacher foreign language anxiety.

Key words: *foreign language anxiety, teacher language anxiety, non-native teachers, student teachers, pre-service teacher education*

Öz

Son otuz yılda, yabancı dil kaygısı ve hedef dil performansı ile hedef dilde elde edilen başarılar arasında negatif korelasyon olduğunu gösteren kayda değer araştırmalar yapılmıştır. Bu kaygının sebepleri ve sonuçları derinlemesine incelenmiştir. Ancak, öğretmen yabancı dil kaygısı konusunda çok az araştırma yapılmıştır. Bu çalışma, yabancı dil kaygısı yüksek ana dili İngilizce olmayan öğretmen adaylarının yaşadığı dil kaygısının nedenlerini ve etkilerini araştırmaktadır. Bulgular, katılımcıların olumsuz değerlendirme korkusu ve hatalar konusundaki endişeleri nedeniyle kaygı duygularını yaşadıklarını göstermektedir. Dil kaygısının, öğretmenlerin hedef dili ve öğretmenlerin spontane ve aktif hedef dil kullanımı gerektiren sınıf etkinliklerini kullanma konusundaki isteksizliği gibi daha önce araştırılmamış yabancı dil eğitimi üzerinde bir takım olumsuz etkileri olduğu görülmektedir. Ayrıca, yabancı dil kaygısı yüksek olan öğretmen adayları kendi sınıfların kendi öğrencilerinin dil hatalarını düzeltme

konusunda daha ısrarcı olduklarını söylemektedirler. Yabancı dil kaygısı düşük olan öğretmen adayları ise kendi sınıflarında kendi öğrencilerinin dil hataları üzerinde daha az durmakta ve daha çok öğrencilerini yabancı dilde iletişime geçme konusunda destekleyici bir tutum sergilediklerini söylemektedirler. Bu makale öğretmen adaylarının potansiyel yabancı dil kaygısını aşmalarına yardımcı olmak için öneriler yapmakta, ayrıca öğretmenlerin yabancı dil kaygısına ilişkin gelecekteki çalışmaları yürütmek isteyen araştırmacılara yönelik tavsiyeler de yapmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: *yabancı dil kaygısı, öğretmen yabancı dil kaygısı, ana dili İngilizce olmayan öğretmenler, öğretmen adayları, hizmet öncesi öğretmen eğitimi*

Introduction

For many years now, language teachers and researchers have generally accepted that language anxiety interferes with the “acquisition, retention, and production of the new language” (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991, p.86). Considerable research investigating foreign language anxiety has consistently shown language anxiety not only has a undesirable effect on target language performance but also on the overall success achieved in the target language (for reviews, see, MacIntyre and Gregersen, 2012; Horwitz, 2010). Therefore, it is not a surprise that foreign language courses may be the most anxiety-provoking for various students (Horwitz, Tallon, and Luo, 2010).

In the light of such findings, language teachers are sincerely concerned about their students’ language anxiety and have thus placed great importance on making the foreign language classroom a more comfortable and supportive environment to minimize anxiety. However, despite their concern for their students’ well-being, non-native language teachers have unfortunately not considered that they too may also experiences foreign language anxiety with similar negative effects on themselves and how they go about teaching the language in the classroom.

Despite being higher-level target language users, many non-native teachers might have uncomfortable moments when speaking the target language. When such experiences are repeated, often, and without an accurate evaluation of target language capability, they could readily engender chronic language anxiety similar to that of novice language learners. Teacher foreign language anxiety carries several serious implications for the foreign language classroom. As Horwitz (1996) conceptualized, anxious language teachers might avoid speaking the target language in front of their students during lessons, preventing the teacher from effectively teaching the target language. Also, teachers suffering from language anxiety

will not be the best model for novice language learners to be exposed to. It is questionable how we could expect students to take risks in the target language when their own teacher is reluctant to speak the target language himself-herself. Anxious language teachers may also avoid utilizing instructional strategies and learning activities which entail intensive and free target language use in order to shield themselves from unpredictable classroom interactions in the target language. Additionally, it is quite possible that the students could sense their teacher's nervousness while speaking the foreign language. Thus, this might consequently engender comparable anxiety amongst the students, too. Yet, despite such considerable negative impacts on foreign language instruction, and although a considerable number of studies on *learner* language anxiety have accumulated during the last 25 years, *teacher* foreign language anxiety still needs further study.

However, when a number of studies on foreign language anxiety are closely analysed, it can be seen that a few studies have in fact indicated that teachers and student teachers may experience significant levels of foreign language anxiety. For example, Gregersen and Horwitz, (2002) as well as Rodriguez and Abreu (2003) did in fact include non-native student teachers as participants and recorded that they suffered from significantly high levels of language anxiety. Yet, the study merely included student teachers as participants as high-level target language users. The study did not investigate the possibility of whether such feelings of language anxiety amongst prospective teachers of the language could influence how the target language could be taught in future language classrooms. In another recent study, Bekleyen (2009) found that high levels of foreign language listening anxiety amongst non-native student teachers, but again the consequences of this anxiety on classroom instruction were not considered.

However, when the possible negative impact of teacher language anxiety is considered on the language classroom, it is clear that teacher language anxiety warrants further study. This article investigates teacher language anxiety, its sources, and whether such feelings could influence how anxious student teachers approach foreign language instruction. Specifically, the article addresses the research questions below on foreign language anxiety of non-native student teachers:

- (1) What do anxious student teachers perceive to be the sources of their feelings of language anxiety?

- (2) What effects do anxious student teachers believe their feelings of language anxiety can have on their teaching of the target language in the classroom?

Method

Participants and instruments

For this case study, eight non-native student teachers were selected from a larger group of 12 student teachers. The 12 student teachers made up a full cohort of student teachers studying in an English-medium Turkish university to become teachers of English as a foreign language. When the study was being conducted, the student teachers were in the last year of their four-year teacher education program. In other words, they were rapidly approaching the end of their education and the beginning of their active teaching careers. The sample of eight student teachers was selected according to their Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) scores. Specifically, the four student teachers with the highest FLCAS score and the four student teachers with the lowest FLCAS scores were selected as the sample under the assumption that the student teachers with the highest scores were the most anxious and the student teachers with the lowest scores were the least anxious. The FLCAS was created by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope in 1986 and is widely recognized as the most utilized instrument for measuring foreign language anxiety. Its internal reliability is an alpha coefficient of 0.93 (Horwitz, 1986). Thus, it was decided that the FLCAS would be the most efficient and reliable way to initially group the participants. All participants were informed that it was entirely voluntary to participate in the study and their anonymity would be protected if they should decide to participate in the study. In Table 1, the mean FLCAS scores for the 12 student teachers are presented as well as the individual scores for the eight student teachers who participated in the qualitative study reported here.

Table 1: Summary of FLCAS scores

FLCAS Mean Score	94.25
FLCAS Standard Deviation	26.04
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Participant	FLCAS Score
Highly Anxious Participant 1	132
Highly Anxious Participant 2	129
Highly Anxious Participant 3	117

Highly Anxious Participant 4	113
Less Anxious Participant 1	78
Less Anxious Participant 2	67
Less Anxious Participant 3	62
Less Anxious Participant 4	53

All of the participants spoke Turkish as their native language and had been begun learning English at least ten years ago, which can be seen as characteristic in the setting of the study. Each participant was preparing to be high school or middle school EFL teachers. During their studies at university, the student teachers took an extensive variety of courses in the field of language teaching including courses on teaching methodology, second language acquisition, linguistics, English literature and educational sciences. Appendix 1 breaks down the courses student teachers study by year throughout the teacher education program. In terms of gender and age, seven of the participants were female and one was male while their ages ranged from 22 to 24, consistent with the gender ratio and age-group of the general population of student teachers at the university.

After completing the FLCAS, these eight student teachers were invited to participate in one-to-one interviews with the researcher, and consequently each participant accepted to be interviewed.

Thus, in the last phase of the study, a semi-structured interview was carried out to gain more detailed data on their feelings of foreign language anxiety. The interview questions can be seen in Appendix 2. All interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis by the researcher and each interview was also audio recorded. The consent of each participant was obtained before the audio recording began. Each interview lasted approximately six to seven minutes. In order for the participants to feel at ease, the interviews were carried out in Turkish (the participants' native language). After the interviews, the researcher transcribed each interview and then translated the transcription into English. All translations were later verified by an experienced bilingual EFL instructor.

Analysis of the interview data

In order to analyse the interview data, themes were identified in the interview data on the participants' experiences of foreign language anxiety. When analyzing the interview data,

the author first fully transcribed each interview. Subsequently, a content analysis (Creswell, 2003) was conducted in order to obtain codes. These codes were then ordered into themes from the statements made by the interviewees. This article discusses the themes which are related to the research questions stated above.

Findings

Fear of errors and consequent negative evaluation

For each of the anxious student teachers, target language errors were a source of significant concern. All of them were highly sensitive towards target language errors and each explained how they routinely find themselves scanning their target language productions for any possible errors. Importantly, when explaining their concern over errors, all four of the high anxious student teachers traced their anxiety to their apprehension of being undesirably evaluated by people they speak with and, interestingly also, their students. The fear of negative evaluation and the subsequent possibility of appearing foolish are trademarks of *learner* foreign language anxiety (Horwitz, 2001). When describing the anxiety he felt when using the target language with his peers, high anxious student teacher No 4 commented, “I really worry about what my friends think of my English. I don’t want them to think that I don’t know English well, so I really worry about making errors in front of them.” Similarly, high anxious student teacher No 2 worried:

“I really worry about making errors in front of my students. It happened a couple of times during practice teachings. I used to get really nervous before the lesson and that feeling wouldn’t go away during the lesson either. I constantly worried about making errors and worried what the students would think. I made quite a few errors while speaking. I felt really embarrassed when it happened and worried that the students had noticed. I just wanted the lesson to end when I felt like that.”

Furthermore, highly anxious participant No. 1 worried:

“I always worry about errors when speaking. I think they make me appear stupid. As a teacher, I shouldn’t be making simple errors when speaking. That’s why I worry about errors. I constantly listen to my language while I am speaking and I worry what people will think if I make errors.”

Importantly, the FLCAS responses of the anxious student teachers also corroborated their interview responses. In the FLCAS, all of the high anxious student teachers also agreed or strongly agreed with items reflecting a concern over errors and negative evaluation such as “I always feel like others speak the foreign language better than I do”, “I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of others”, and “I am afraid that the others will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language”. Thus, their FLCAS responses were also in line with the statements they made during interviews.

On the other hand, the low anxious student teachers did not appear to be that concerned with making errors. They did not appear to fear errors like their anxious counterparts did. For the low anxious student teachers, being able to effectively and efficiently communicate in the target language appeared to be more important, as can be seen in the comments of Low Anxious Participant No.1 below:

“Everyone makes errors while speaking. No one is perfect. Even in your native language, it is natural to have slips of the tongue and inconsistencies. In English, I focus on being able to speak fluently and effectively. I think that this is more important than simple verb errors.”

Moreover, not even one of the low anxious student teachers commented on perceived evaluation by peers or future students. These student teachers’ FLCAS responses also substantiated this as all of the low anxious student teachers disagreed with the items “I always feel like others speak the foreign language better than I do,” “I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of others,” and “I am afraid that the others will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language”. Thus, while the possibility of appearing foolish seems to remain a source of noteworthy worry for anxious student teachers, it does not appear to be a concern for student teachers not facing anxiety, making the fear of evaluation and subsequent apprehension of appearing foolish a factor clearly distinguishing high anxious and low anxious student teachers.

Potential impacts of teacher language anxiety on foreign language instruction

Teacher target language avoidance

The last question under investigation was whether teacher language anxiety affects anxious

student teachers' approach to teaching the target language. As was conceptualized by Horwitz (1996), the student teachers experiencing feelings of foreign language anxiety in the present study explained their intention to avoid speaking limits the amount of time they actually spend speaking the target language in the classroom in order to be able to cope with their anxiety. Based on her findings, Horwitz hypothesized that anxious language teachers would avoid speaking the foreign language in the presence of their students as much as possible, which could significantly hinder their teaching skills.

Similarly, all four high anxious student teachers in the present study explained they actively avoid using the target language with their students because of anxiety in the target language. High anxious student teacher No 2 explained how she thinks "speaking English in front of the students everyday is a nightmare turned into a reality"; and thus, intends to rely much more on written classroom materials when teaching while high anxious student teacher No 3 offered:

"I'm always very careful when planning my lessons. I don't enjoy speaking English. I find it makes me very nervous. For my practice teachings, I always try to design the lessons so that the focus isn't always on me. I don't want to speak English that much because I think I feel even more nervous when speaking in front of my students."

Likewise, anxious student teacher No 1 offered:

"I really don't want to speak English in front of my students. Especially if I've got a class full of chatterboxes. I can give them instructions and tell them how to do the activity, but apart from that, I really don't want to speak a lot."

Avoiding target language-intensive instructional strategies

Each of the high anxious student teachers in this study explained avoiding using linguistically-demanding foreign language teaching activities because of their anxiety. For instance, high anxious student teacher No 1 explained how she decided against using an activity in a recent practice teaching as she felt she "wouldn't be able to control what the students might say and that was enough to decide not to use that activity" while high anxious student teacher No 4 commented:

“There are some things I don’t feel confident doing in lessons. Things like whole class discussions and free writing. I want to be able to answer the questions my students might ask me. In free situations like that, they could ask me anything. They could use words I’m not familiar with or they might suddenly ask me how to say something in English and I might not know what to say. When I’m nervous, I can hardly remember anything anyway. These are definitely situations I want to avoid. What would they think if I can’t answer their questions? So, I think I’ll focus more on straightforward activities that I can prepare well for beforehand. I don’t think I’d be able to live under so much pressure otherwise and I don’t trust myself to be able to stay calm when I’m pressured like that.”

Similarly, high anxious student teacher No 2 explained:

“When getting ready for my practice teachings this year, I had a lot of ideas that I wanted to try out in the classroom. I wanted to do things that the students would find fun, but were also effective in teaching the point that I wanted to cover. While I was planning the lessons, I didn’t have any trouble coming up with ideas like that. I think they were really effective lesson plans. However, I couldn’t bring myself to actually use them in the classroom. I just felt too worried to use them. Things like role-plays and interesting games which really got the students to practice the grammatical rule I had to teach. Even though I think the students would enjoy them and they would be effective, I didn’t use them because I know myself and it would just be too much.”

Discussion and implications

The results show non-native student teachers do indeed suffer from foreign language anxiety, which is noteworthy because it validates the intuition that non-native teachers may struggle with foreign language anxiety. The responses of the student teachers also point to a significant difference in how high anxious and low anxious student teachers are different in the way they react to errors. In terms of error recognition, consistent with past findings on *learner* foreign language anxiety indicating that highly anxious learners tend to negatively rate their target language proficiency and performance (see, Dewaele, Petrides, and Furnham, 2008; Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993; Gregersen, 2003; MacIntyre, Noels, and Clement, 1997; Perales and Cenoz, 2002), the high anxious student teachers in the present study in fact appear

to exaggerate the imperfections in their target language productions. Specifically, the high anxious student teachers exhibited much more concern over their errors than the low anxious participants. While the high anxious student teachers appeared to be quite disturbed by the errors that they made, the low anxious student teachers appear to take these errors in their stride and instead of dwelling over their errors, and focus on fluency and being able to continue to communicate. Anxious student teachers may readily subscribe to the notion that only flawless target language performance is acceptable, especially if their previous educational experiences emphasizing accuracy and perfect pronunciation. Teacher trainers and educators must convey to both preservice and in-service teachers that errors are both natural and acceptable even for language professionals and help them recognize and appreciate their current achievements and levels of success in the target language while helping them to set realistic goals for continual target language development throughout their teaching careers.

In addition, one of the main variances between anxious and low anxious student teachers was the fear of evaluation and subsequent apprehension of appearing foolish which was brought up consistently by the high anxious student teachers. Each of the high anxious student teachers traced their concern over errors to their apprehension of losing face in the presence of others, especially their peers and future students. Conversely, the low anxious student teachers tended to evaluate their overall performance positively and not even one of the low anxious participants brought up the topic of concern over the perceived evaluation of others.

Trial and error has been recognized as expected in learning in the foreign language classroom for some time now and students are encouraged to engage in communication as frequently as possible about topics they find relevant and interesting (Gregersen, 2003; Hendrickson, 1987; Phillips, 1999). Thus, risk-taking, experimenting, and readiness to face errors need to be viewed seen as vital aspects of learning foreign languages (Wilson, 2001).

Although students are not expected to produce perfect sentences, the literature on foreign language anxiety experienced by beginning language learners indicates that learners facing anxiety appear to lack error tolerance as they seem to feel constantly tested when using the target language and perceive making errors as a threat and error correction as a failure (Horwitz, Tallon, and Luo, 2010). Interestingly, this study's high anxious student teachers also described their desire to avoid target language errors just as novice language learners do. While worry over target language errors is one reason why learners abstain from classroom

participation or even for avoiding foreign languages all together (Young, 1991; 1999), the high anxious student teachers described that they restrict the amount of time they spend both speaking the target language and also using linguistically free and demanding classroom activities requiring spontaneous target language usage as much as possible due to language anxiety. Thus, teacher language anxiety may be one of the reasons the native language is used frequently in classrooms throughout EFL contexts and could restrict not only the amount but also the quality of target language exposure future generations of language learners receive especially in EFL contexts where the students have little to no exposure to the target language outside of the classroom.

Furthermore, it is unrealistic to expect learners to be willing to take risks in the target language and develop confidence in their target language competence while their teacher is uncomfortable in using the language. The high anxious student teachers in the present study were clearly reticent to use the target language freely and to take risks in the foreign language classroom. Learners could easily sense the teacher's reluctance to speak the target language, which may, in time, engender anxiety among students, too.

Although foreign language anxiety has been a much researched topic for the last four decades, teacher language anxiety presents a new window of research opportunity for researchers interested in language anxiety. Similar future studies could be conducted in different contexts or with more experienced teachers to see whether the findings reported here hold true.

Steps towards helping student teachers overcome feelings of language anxiety

In light of these findings, teacher trainers could consider the following steps in aiding student teachers beat, or as a minimum, manage their language anxiety. As a first measure, teacher educators and trainers may try to express to student teachers that we all experience feelings of anxiety in the target language every now and then, and that this is quite understandable and normal. For student teachers, these feelings may be even more frequent and severe – especially as they draw nearer the completion of the training program and the start of their active teaching careers. According to Philips (1992), merely realizing that one is not alone in experiencing anxiety can help in coping with and ultimately overcoming feelings of anxiety. Additionally, teacher trainers may need to help student teachers react to their anxiety more effectively and appropriately. The most distinguishing difference between the high and low anxious student teachers in this study was the way they reacted to target

language errors. As teacher trainers, we could try to get student teachers to value their existing achievements in the target language while identifying their weak areas in the target language that need to be improved. Thus, teacher trainers can work with student teachers in developing a lasting plan for continual target language development for after graduation and help them to establish accurate hopes and aims in terms of target language performance. In addition, student teachers may need to know that as foreign language teachers. Lastly, it goes without saying that as teacher trainers we must be as supportive of our student teachers as possible so that they may develop confidence both in their proficiency in the target language and their ability to beat their overcome their language anxiety and have long and productive teaching careers.

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Appendix 1: Breakdown of teacher training courses according to year of study

Year of Study	Courses Studied
Year One	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Contextual Grammar ○ Advanced Reading and Writing ○ Listening and Pronunciation ○ Oral Communication Skills ○ Effective Communication Skills ○ Introduction to Educational Sciences ○ Educational Psychology ○ Computer
Year Two	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ English Literature ○ Linguistics

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Approaches to English Language Teaching ○ Presentation Skills ○ Principles and Methods of Instruction ○ Language Acquisition ○ Instructional Technology and Materials Design ○ Research Methods in English Language Teaching
Year Three	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Teaching Language Skills ○ Classroom Management ○ Teaching Methodology ○ Teaching English to Young Learners ○ Measurement and Evaluation ○ Literature and Language Teaching ○ Language and Society ○ Turkish-English Translation
Year Four	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Materials Development and Adaptation ○ School Experience ○ Counseling ○ Special Education ○ Testing and Evaluation in English ○ Language Teaching ○ Comparative Education ○ History of Turkish Reforms

Appendix 2: Interview questions for student teachers

1. Do you enjoy speaking English?

2. How do you feel when speaking English? / Do you generally feel confident or nervous?
3. (If the answer to the previous question is “I feel nervous”) Do you think your feelings of nervousness or anxiety may affect your teaching of the target language? If so, how?
4. How do you normally plan your lessons? What do you consider to be important when planning your lessons?
5. What are your opinions of error correction?