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**Anxiety. Does it make much difference in learning a second language?**

In this paper, drawbacks and useful sides of anxiety in learning a foreign language are tried to be exposed. The importance of the theme in the field of psychology and language teaching is that it may have a practical idea in the educational area for the teachers of English as a foreign language which is emphasized alongside the whole work. The authors are giving their understanding of anxiety from the works of scholars in the field of educational psychology and give some examples from their own experience. Some analyses of other researchers' findings are given throughout the article by appropriate citations from their points of view in that field, particularly, anxiety as a phenomenon as well as anxiety in learning a foreign language.

**Key words:** anxiety; psychology; language learning and teaching; hindrance; assistance.

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**Беймәзәсіздық. Екінші тілді үйренуде ол көп әсер ете ме?**

Мақалада шет тілін оқудағы беймәзәсіздіктің келтіретін жағымсыз және пайдалы жақтары қарастырылған. Ағылшын тілін шет тілі ретінде үйрететін оқытушыларға іс-тәжірибелік ой және психология саласындағы шетелдік ғалымдардың теориялық ізденістері, сонымен қатар осы мақала авторларының ағылшын тілін үйретудегі өз тәжірибелерінен мысалдар берілген, сондықтан бұл көтеріліп отырған тақырып маңызды болып табылады. Авторлар мақала оқушыларына білім беру саласындағы психологияны зерттеуші ғалымдардың еңбектері арқылы беймәзәсіздікті өздері қалай түсінетіндерін жеткізіп отыр. Осы аталмыш сала ғалымдарының ізденіс нәтижелерін сараптай отырып, олардан ретін келтіре лайықты дәйексөз ала отырып, авторлар беймәзәсіздікті адам өміріндегі психологиялық құбылыс ретінде келтіріп, сонымен бірге оның тіл үйренудегі алатын орны туралы өз көзқарастарын келтірген.

**Түйін сөздер:** беймәзәсіздық, психология, тіл үйрену, тіл үйрету, кедергі, жәрдем.

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**Состояние тревожности. Большое ли влияние оно имеет в изучении второго языка?**

В данной статье раскрываются отрицательные и положительные стороны состояния тревожности в изучении иностранного языка. Важность темы заключается в том, что работа содержит практическую идею для преподавателей английского языка как иностранного и теоретические мысли зарубежных исследователей в области психологии, а также примеры из опыта авторов в обучении английскому языку. Авторы предоставляют читателям свое понимание состояния тревожности через труды специалистов в области психологии в образовании. Анализируя и соответствующим образом цитируя результаты исследований ученых в этой области, авторы приводят свою точку зрения о самом состоянии тревожности в целом как психологическое явление в жизни человека, так же, как и состояние тревожности в изучении иностранного языка.

**Ключевые слова:** состояние тревоги; психология; изучение языка; обучение языку; препятствие; содействие.

“There is a certainty of uncertainty that, in part, defines us”.

Susan L. Smalley, Ph.D

*Introduction*

It is argued that learning a foreign language has always been one of the difficult tasks for a human being. It is learned in different ages, different situations and different conditions under some circumstances compelling someone to be integrated into a new society, to be able to have a

job or to accomplish a school programme where a foreign language is a compulsory subject. From common teaching experience, it is known that people learn a foreign language in the case of this article English with varied success. Success may depend on the age as Krashen points out that ‘children are generally superior in second-language attainment in the long run, adults, at least initially, acquire at a faster rate’ [1, 12] when one begins their first steps in the learning of a

language. It depends on the requirements of the life such as how soon, where and what level of the foreign language is demanded. It may also depend on the so-called endowment or as Dornyei and Skehan pertinently question if ‘a foreign language aptitude is a specific talent for learning foreign languages which exhibits considerable variation among learners’ [2, 590]. So, whatever the variables are, alongside with them there seem to be also many difficulties in acquiring a foreign language.

One of the constraints which learners encounter is anxiety. Arguably, this difficulty may not be only linked with a language learner’s age or one of the individual differences such as a talent. It may appear as a changeable state of the mood in a particular part of a person’s language learning period. Also, anxiety may show its occurrence not only in the language learning experience of a person but in any period of a person’s life such as during a job interview, on the first day of driving a car, or making a speech or a presentation in front of a large audience. Or, if you take an example from the practice of educators, the first day in the language classroom with twenty or twenty five teenager English learners each equipped with state-of-the-art technology is really worrying for a novice teacher. Anxiety is commonly described by psychologists as a state of apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object. Because anxiety is clearly an emotional state, it is generated through the arousal of the limbic system, the primitive, subcortical “chasis” of the cerebrum, which plays an important, though indirect, role in many kinds of human enterprises, including communication, Hilgard, Atkinson, and Atkinson [3], Lamendella [4], cited in Scovel [5, 134].

In this paper, the authors try to expose some drawbacks and possible useful sides of the anxiety in learning a second language. They will also attempt to show their understanding of anxiety from the works in this field and give some examples from their own experience for teaching implication of this phenomenon giving some analysis of the researchers’ findings.

The research bases on the secondary data analysis, and as such deals with the definition of anxiety as a psychological phenomenon and its different types. Particularly, emphasis is put on searching for language anxiety, especially in the process of learning a foreign language, and whether it may exert a negative or positive influence on foreign language learners.

### *Anxiety as a hindrance*

According to Seligman et al [6], anxiety is a psychological and physiological state characterized by cognitive, somatic, emotional and behavioral components. These components of anxiety may create a combination of unpleasant feelings such as uneasiness, apprehension, fear, or worry. Anxiety seems to be a condition of a person’s general mood. It can often occur without an identifiable triggering stimulus. However, Ohman [7] distinguishes anxiety from fear by saying that fear occurs in the presence of an observed threat. Additionally, fear is related to the specific behaviors of escape and avoidance, whereas anxiety is the result of threats that are perceived to be uncontrollable or unavoidable. The latter view from Ohman [7] is worth for us to agree. For example, if a teacher trying to mobilize the students to the forthcoming exams exaggerates the requirements for the exam procedure, the students may take the severe instruction as a threat of non-pass possibility. As a result there might appear the anxiety in the learners’ minds which in its turn may disrupt the knowledge obtained during a term or a year and lead to a low performance at the exam in one of the language skills either, to make things worse, in all four skills. That is what we would call a fault of us, teachers at the beginning of our teaching career just after three or four-year initial training as a teacher at a pedagogic institution. Reflecting back to our experience, we understand that this mistake might come from the teachers’ wrong beliefs that a teacher is the only authority in the classroom which may also sound as ‘the severer – the better’.

As Gardner and MacIntyre [8] define, language anxiety can be in the form of the apprehension experienced when a situation requires the use of a second language with which the individual is not fully proficient. Therefore, they argue that it is seen as a stable personality trait referring to the propensity for an individual to react in a nervous manner when speaking, listening, reading, or writing in the second language. It could be arguably said that being prone to nervousness a student has never been in such a situation or has purposefully been avoiding similar situations because of the original shy feature of the character. Some of our students would justify their low performance in listening by a sort of being unmusical which might be a very rare case to see and which we assume may not have much ground to prove.

Researchers in the field of language acquisition

psychology such as Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope [9] discriminate anxiety as a complex experience of a person, who may have several categories, first, in communication in the second (foreign) language and, second, with social evaluation which is expressed in the language use with limited knowledge attainment. In the communication (reading, writing, listening and speaking) in target language in a class, students experiencing an anxiety-producing condition may differ towards a negative side of language perception from their classmates who are in more relaxed conditions. What is known from our teaching experience, students who are more anxious try not to speak much, instead, they give shorter answers avoiding the teacher's and the peers' attention. The same behavior could be noticed in the way how they produce writing tasks in the classroom, which is Daly and Miller's [10] finding as on time corroboration to the life experience of a teacher. They have found that students with higher levels of writing anxiety write shorter compositions and qualify their writing less than their calmer counterparts do.

As for the second category, the social evaluation, it may be closely connected with the interaction of a student with his peers and the teacher which is also supposed to involve the appraisal for the student from aside that may not be a participant of classroom activities. The evaluator may appear as anyone in the society, either an employer conducting a short-listing among the job applicants, or an interlocutor taking the speaking part in the process of TOEFL/UCLES examinations. As such, the social evaluation anxiety may have in itself the fear of negative evaluation during testing, communication. Therefore, it seems to be broader than just conversation or language use anxiety but it is the fear of evaluation from aside in the society.

The third category of anxiety Horwitz et al [9] differentiate is test anxiety. In their opinion, students who encounter this component of anxiety deal with fear of failure that is their poor performance during the exams be it an oral or written test. According to our teaching experience, the student who is usually brilliant in doing everyday classroom activities may literally get "stuck" under the influence of anxiety in doing the exercises which they know for sure, i.e. the student may be thinking about the result of the exam in general instead of thinking over how to resolve the specific task he is doing. This type of anxiety should be familiar to all experienced teachers. Test anxiety in this case plays a negative

role against the student's overall knowledge performance.

Another detrimental type of anxiety is 'overstudying' which as Horwitz et al define that 'students who are overly concerned about their performance may become so anxious when they make errors, they attempt to compensate by studying even more' [9, 127]. It is understandable that the student may be concentrating on how he is going to perform at the exam instead of thinking of what must be performed. It may also be explained by the student's incorrect choice of learning strategy due to lack of the young age. It could also be said that he has not received enough help from his parents and the teacher in reducing the anxiety. It would be relevant to give an example from the experience when one of the article authors was chosen by the Kazakhstani Ministry of Education as one of four invigilators for the Unified National Testing for secondary school graduates in 2005 in the region of Karagandy (Kazakhstan). The importance of this testing for the graduates is so high that it determines the final graduate school grades and at the same time defines whether a graduate wins a right to participate in the contest to enter a higher education institution. One school-girl had had excellent marks in all subjects including English as a foreign language and had been expected to finish the secondary school with honours. She was dreaming of entering one of the prestigious universities with special invitation. She was so obsessed with that idea and was so afraid of her village men's public opinion that she had been studying whole night till late morning having only a two-hour rest before the testing. As a result, her exhausted organism did not help her to achieve the goal. She only got good marks.

#### *Anxiety as an assistance*

"Language anxiety refers to students' anxiety reactions to situations in which they might make use of the target language. Depending on the language-learning context, it could be possible to identify many possible situations: language classroom anxiety and language use anxiety" [8, 8].

The former refers to anxiety aroused specifically in the classroom, while the latter refers to feelings of anxiety that individuals experience in any context where they are called upon to speak the target language. For example, in a Kazakhstani classroom, again going back to our experience, students are reluctant to show their ability in speaking believing that, first, they will not say

anything until they learn much of the language, secondly, they feel embarrassed to be judged by the group mates. This behavior of individuals is more specific to the English language learners of the beginning and low intermediate levels especially among the students of older age. The speaking and listening anxiety can be strongly felt in a mixed-ages group of general English learners where an elderly student has to show his ability in front of the students who are much younger than him. However, there is a way out from such an embarrassing situation for that adult student. Assuming that at an articulatory level, the vocal cords and the muscles participating in the production of a speech have had a certain shape and forms of one's first language sounds, they can be reshaped and reformed as any other athletic skills which will be ready to fulfill special neuromuscular tasks of speaking in a foreign language as it was suggested in 1973 by Scovel [5] in his "Language learning as a sport". As we see, Scovel [5] talks about how to remove anxiety, or, rather, paraphrasing him we would say how to use the anxiety in a positive direction.

As far as the usefulness of anxiety is concerned, it should be noted that there were moments when anxiety was noticed to have helped students at the definite parts of testing process. For example, Chastain [11] while testing two different language groups of students found out two different results, negative and positive impact of anxiety. One group had been taught with audio-lingual method, the other one had been taught with traditional method. Chastain was looking for the correlation between student scores on tests and anxiety. The audio-lingual method group showed a negative correlation with anxiety but the traditional method group got a positive correlation. He assumes that a little anxiety might be helpful during a test, but if it is too much, it may lead to a low performance. Facilitating anxiety was also found in Kleinmann's [12] research where he wanted to find the relationship between the avoidance behaviour of students and anxiety. The assumption was that the helping anxiety would inspire the students during the test to use the certain English language structure which they would not use in their native language because of its complexity in the usage. Kleinmann's [12] hypothesis came proved true as the Arabic and Spanish students equipped with some anxiety had used the particular structures in the English language which they were not supposed to use due to their difficulty in their mother tongue.

Another view which takes the positive influence of anxiety, apart from the above mentioned situations from general psychology, in the applied psychology is that anxiety is "a future-oriented mood state in which one is ready or prepared to attempt to cope with upcoming negative events" [13, 1249] suggesting that it is a distinction between future dangers in relation to present time that separates anxiety from fear. Here, anxiety is considered to be a normal reaction to stress. It may help a person to deal with a difficult situation, for example at work or at school, by prompting one to cope with it. It could be also assumed that anxiety may help one in the situations when a high concentration is needed provided that a person's or a whole group of people's life or something very important depends on his or her action being taken at that moment. It may be argued that in this case, anxiety can border with a high responsibility and be confused to be clearly differentiated. Therefore, this positive occurrence of anxiety could be considered to be useful affecting the owner of the action on an emotional level.

#### *Teaching implications*

As an implication of anxiety in the classroom it could be proposed that anxiety may be two – folded: helpful and harmful. It can lead to a success if it is in small portions, but if it overflows, it may be disruptive or even take a form of an illness. In order to be able to inspire students towards successful learning of a foreign language teachers may take guidance from Schwartz's [14, 73] classification of motivational factors of learning and Chastain's [11, 105] suggestion in which he differentiates two influential learner variables: intrinsic and extrinsic. Among intrinsic motivational variables, he includes the motivators such as anxiety, need to achieve, self – concepts and aspirations. And, socio – cultural influences and social reinforcers are referred to the extrinsic motivational factors in learning a language.

Another important part of the educational process is evaluation of the student's foreign language skills. Sometimes we, teachers overlook the psychological side of the life of students at school. While evaluating their students' English language level, teachers should be careful in differentiating the lack of knowledge of a student from the anxiety which the same student is experiencing. Simplifying the situation, teachers should be able to observe, notice and if possible to

reveal anxiety and differentiate it from such human beings' weaknesses like laziness or under-studying.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, it can be said that there seem to have been a large amount of research undertaken in educational psychology which attempts to assess the impact of anxiety on foreign language learning as a unique process. In this article, there has been taken an attempt to explore and conceive, finally to understand that anxiety is not only a phenomenon belonging to the field of

general research in psychology but it has also to do with linguistics and be even narrowed into foreign language anxiety. This phenomenon turns out to be a whole complex of behaviours, beliefs, feelings and people's perceptions which are related to classroom language learning as well as beyond classroom activities. The space does not allow us to look into other more interesting impacts of the anxiety such as socio-cultural background of the students. For example, research on discriminating foreign language anxiety from Asian way of education of timidity or natural shyness would be the continuation of this article.

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