

Foreign Language Anxiety in Different Stages of the FL Learning Process and Achievement in Speaking Skill of Monolingual and Bilingual EFL Learners

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Abstract

The paper discusses the results of a research study focusing on foreign language anxiety in different stages of the foreign language learning process and speaking in learning English as a foreign language (EFL). The study was carried out on a sample of 71 monolingual and 57 bilingual Croatian learners of EFL. At the time of the study the participants were about 14 years old. The results point to significantly higher levels of language anxiety among monolingual than among bilingual learners in all three stages of the foreign language learning process, and significantly higher achievement in speaking skill of bilingual learners compared to monolingual learners. A significant negative relationship between language anxiety in all three stages of the foreign language learning process and achievement in speaking EFL was established in both of the studied groups.

Keywords

FL anxiety; different stages of the FL learning process; achievement in speaking skill; monolingual and bilingual EFL learners

Introduction

Since the 4th quarter of the 20th century foreign language (FL) learning is no longer linked exclusively to the learners' cognitive abilities. It is commonly accepted that during the FL learning process both cognitive and affective learner qualities are activated [18], [12]. The role of affective factors in FL learning gained prominence through Gardner's socioeducational model of FL learning [5]. It consists of four sets of variables. Social milieu, individual differences, language acquisition contexts and outcomes. Gardner and MacIntyre [7] later redefined that model and included language anxiety (LA) among the group of individual differences besides intelligence, aptitude, strategies, attitudes and motivation. Since then Gardner has always included LA into the socioeducational model and its importance was emphasized again in his 2010 book on motivation and second language acquisition [6]. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope [9] examined LA that appears in FL classrooms. Although it can sometimes have a facilitative effect [2], most

authors stress the debilitating effect of LA [1], [17], [20]. Elkhafaifi mentions that [3] it can manifest itself in altered performance and lower test scores and final grades. According to Young [21], Price [15] and Riasati [16] speaking skill is extremely anxiety provoking among the four language skills. Until mid-1990s, most researchers treated LA as a one-dimensional construct. A crucial change appeared when, by applying Tobias' [19] model of the effects of anxiety on learning, MacIntyre and Gardner [11] began to theorize that LA occurs at each of the following three stages of the FL learning process: input, processing and output. FL anxiety at the input stage represents the fear that FL learners experience when they are initially presented with a new word, phrase or sentence in the FL. Anxiety at this stage may reduce the efficacy of input. Anxiety at the processing stage refers to apprehension that learners experience when performing cognitive operations. Anxiety at this stage may reduce a learner's ability to understand messages or to learn new vocabulary items in the FL. Anxiety at the output stage denotes the anxiety experienced by learners when they are required to produce previously learned material. High levels of anxiety at this stage might hinder a learner's ability to speak or to write in the FL. MacIntyre and Gardner developed three scales to measure anxiety at the input, processing and output stages. In this study, the author is concerned with Input Anxiety, Processing Anxiety and Output Anxiety as it appears in FL classrooms and its relationship to speaking skill in EFL. Since the second half of the 20th century and early 21st century scholars have started to emphasize indications for possible advantages of bilingual children over monolingual children. According to Hamers and Blanc [8] bilingual children show advanced metalinguistic ability in their control of language processing. Jessner [10] pointed out that this metalinguistic awareness is a key element that makes it possible for bilingual students to learn easier a new FL than monolingual students.

The study (aim, methodology, results and discussion)

The aim of this study was to explore FL anxiety in different stages of the FL learning process as well as achievement in speaking skill of monolingual and bilingual EFL learners. The author was also interested in analyzing the relationship between FL anxiety and achievement in speaking skill. He tested the following three hypotheses:

H1: FL anxiety of bilingual EFL learners will be lower than FL anxiety of monolingual EFL learners in all three stages of the EFL learning process.

H2: Achievement in EFL speaking skill will be higher for bilingual than monolingual learners.

H3: A negative relationship exists between FL anxiety and achievement in speaking skill for both monolingual and bilingual EFL learners.

The hypotheses were grounded on the possible advantages of bilingual persons based on their experience with two languages mentioned in the Introduction. The author also expected that the results of this study would confirm the debilitating effect of FL anxiety on FL learning [7], [9], [1].

The following variables were included in the study: FL anxiety in three stages of the FL learning process (input, processing and output) and achievement in speaking skill. They were tested on two groups of participants: monolingual and bilingual learners.

A total of 128 Croatian EFL learners took part in the study. The participants were assigned to one of the two groups: monolingual (71 learners) and bilingual (57 learners). They were all about 14 years old and were finishing Grade 7. Learners whose both parents were native speakers of Croatian and if Croatian was the only and exclusive language of communication at home as well as the only and exclusive language of instruction in school for all subject except EFL were assigned to the monolingual group.

The criterion followed in assigning learners to the bilingual group was the knowledge of two languages (Croatian and an additional one; Czech or Italian) provided that the child had learned the two languages at home, or one language at home and the other either in school, where it was offered as a minority language, or abroad.

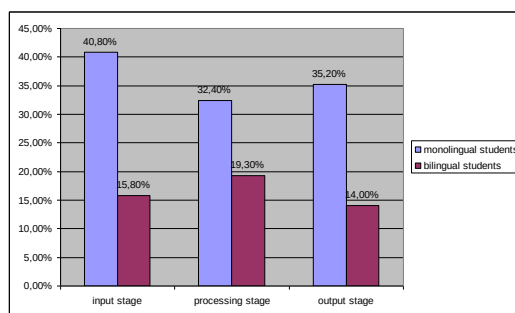
Two instruments were used in this study: MacIntyre and Gardner's 1994 Anxiety Scales [11] and an adapted test from Cambridge Preliminary English Test [4] and [14]. The first instrument contains 18 5-point Likert-type items. Items 2, 4, 7, 10, 14 & 18 refer to the input stage, items 1, 5, 9, 12, 15 & 16 to the processing and items 3, 6, 8, 11, 13 & 17 to the output stage. Scores were added for each stage (Negatively worded items were recoded). Theoretical range for each stage was 6 to 30. Sums of scores higher than 20 indicate a high intensity of FL anxiety in that stage. The second instrument consisted of an oral interview with four different tasks: general conversation (tasks 1 & 4), simulated situation (task 2) and a picture description. Students would do it in pairs and the interviews were recorded. The recordings and transcribed texts were given to three independent graders for scoring on five criteria: relevance and appropriateness, fluency, vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation and intonation. Grades were 1-5 for each task. Mean was calculated for each of the five criteria for each task. Theoretical range was 5-25 for each task or 20-100 for the whole test. Data collection was in May 2011.

Results and discussion

The data were analyzed using the statistical package SPSS 13.0 for Windows.

It can be seen from Figure 1 that high intensity FL anxiety was on average twice more present in all the three stages of the FL learning process among monolingual than among bilingual students.

Figure 1: Percentages of presence of high intensity FL anxiety in different stages of FL learning process in monolingual and bilingual learners



By comparing measures of central tendency in the two groups of participants (see Table 1) we notice that bilingual participants experienced lower anxiety because of the following important differences: bilingual learners had lower FL anxiety means than monolingual learners in all three stages. In the input stage (monolinguals: 19.48, SD = 6.99; bilinguals: 14.79, SD = 6.51), processing stage (monolinguals: 17.99, SD = 7.24; bilinguals: 14.33, SD = 6.39), and in the output stage (monolinguals: 18.33, SD = 7.01; bilinguals: 14.91, SD = 6.21). The median shows that the upper half of the scores is on a higher anxiety level in all three stages among monolingual learners: input stage (monolinguals: 19; bilinguals: 16), processing stage (monolinguals: 17; bilinguals: 15), output stage (monolinguals: 17; bilinguals: 16). The mode is at the lowest possible point in all the three stages (6). In the monolingual group it is at a very high point in all three stages (input stage: 30, processing stage: 28 and output stage: 29). Measures of variability show that there is no difference in case of the minimum score, but maximum is at the highest point in all the three stages in the monolingual group, whereas in the bilingual groups it is little lower in two stages (input: 28, and processing: 26).

The results of t-test show that the differences between the means of the two studied groups are statistically significant in all the three stages (input stage: $t=3.88$, $p<0.001$; processing stage: $t=2.99$, $p<0.003$; output stage: $t=2.88$, $p<0.005$) and this confirms that the two groups belong to two different populations.

Table 1: Measures of central tendency and variability for different stages of the FL learning process: Input Anxiety, Processing Anxiety and Output Anxiety

	Monolingual learners			Bilingual learners		
	Input Anxiety	Processing Anxiety	Output Anxiety	Input Anxiety	Processing Anxiety	Output Anxiety
N	71			57		
Mean	19.48	17.99	18.33	14.79	14.33	14.91
Median	19	17	17	16	15	16
Mode	30	28	29	6	6	6
SD	6.99	7.24	7.01	6.51	6.39	6.21
Minimum	6	6	6	6	6	6
Maximum	30	30	30	28	26	30

Results of the speaking test show that bilingual learners outperformed their monolingual counterparts on all five criteria (see Figure 2). According to Cronbach alpha the reliability of the graders was .978. An analysis of the values of all the measures of central tendency and variability (see Table 2) show a much higher achievement of bilingual learners than their monolingual peers (mean: monolinguals – 64.24, SD – 20.84, bilinguals – 79.68, SD – 20.45; median: monolinguals – 64, bilinguals – 86; mode: monolinguals – 55 and 81, bilinguals – 99; minimum: monolinguals – 20, bilinguals – 34, maximum: monolinguals – 99, bilinguals – 100). The results of t-test show that the differences between the means of the two studied groups are statistically significant ($t=4.2$, $p<0.001$)

Figure 2: Percentages of scores for each of the 5 criteria of the speaking test in monolingual and bilingual learners

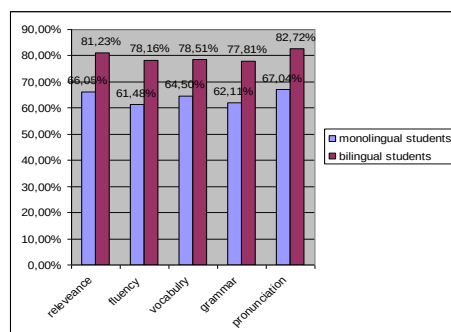


Table 2: Measures of central tendency and variability in the speaking test

	Monolingual learners	Bilingual learners
N	71	57
Mean	64.24	79.68
Median	64	86
Mode	55 & 81	99
SD	20.84	20.45
Minimum	20	34
Maximum	99	100

It is interesting to note that all the coefficients are higher for the bilingual group. Although the bilingual learners experienced significantly lower levels of anxiety than the monolingual ones, their speaking achievement seemed to be more strongly related to anxiety than was the case with their monolingual counterparts. Another interesting observation is that in both groups the strongest association of speaking achievement with LA was found in case of Processing Anxiety. The same association was found between LA and achievement in listening comprehension by Mihaljević Djigunović and Legac [13].

Table 3: Correlation coefficients between FL anxiety in the three stages of the EFL learning process and speaking skill

	Speaking skill	
	Monolingual learners	Bilingual learners
Input Anxiety	-.52*	-.58*
Processing Anxiety	-.60*	-.61*
Output Anxiety	-.55*	-.60*

* $p < 0.01$

Conclusion

The results of this study have confirmed the author's three starting hypotheses. Bilingual learners experienced lower levels of FL anxiety than monolingual learners. Their speaking skill was at a higher level than that of monolingual learners. Achievement in speaking skill correlated negatively with FL anxiety. One might conclude that bilingual learners, compared to monolinguals, are at an advantage thanks to being exposed to more languages. If no other factors

have considerably contributed to the results of the present study, bilingualism may be considered as facilitating the learning of FLs. Therefore, wherever and whenever possible, parents and education authorities should allow children to grow up as bilinguals.

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