

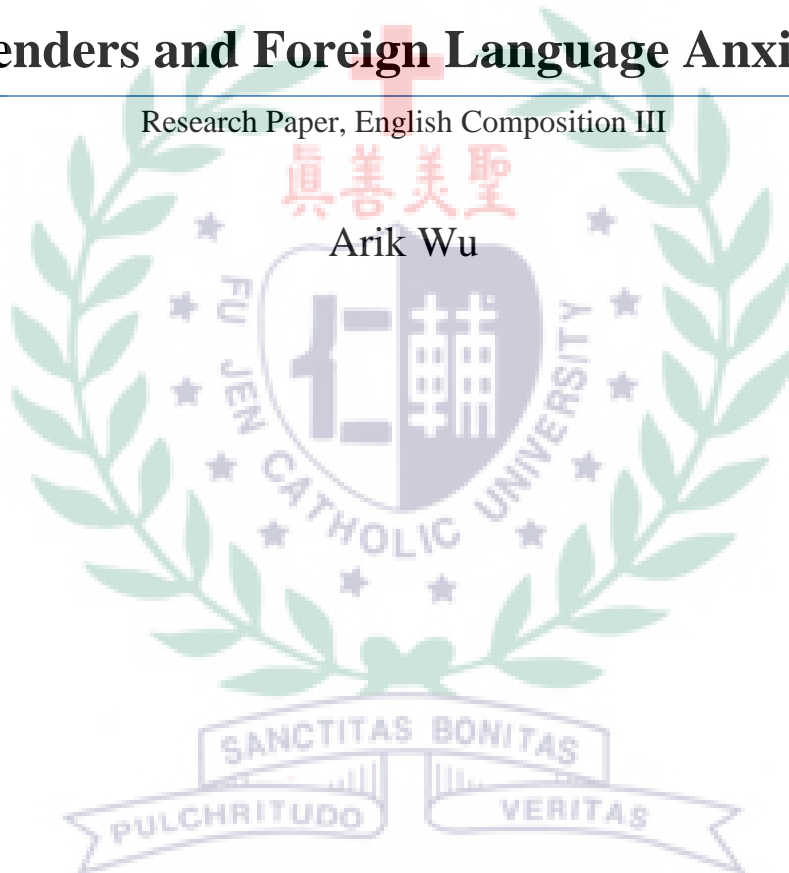
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An Investigation into the Relationship between Genders and Foreign Language Anxiety

Research Paper, English Composition III

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Outline

I. Introduction

A. Purpose of the research paper

B. Thesis Statement: Accordingly, through a questionnaire adapted from Elaine K. Horwitz's *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale* (FLCAS), this research paper seeks to ascertain if genders do play a role in deterring students from acquiring a foreign language effectively and efficiently and further unveil the mysterious veil of foreign language anxiety.

II. Body

A. Literature Review

B. Discussion about the survey

1. Methodology

2. Major finding

3. Discussion

a. Comparison with other related studies

b. Fear of negative evaluations

i. Teachers should be more aware of their comments/evaluations

c. Social factors

i. Teachers should pay more attention to their remarks and lectures

III. Conclusion

A. Restatement

B. Limitation of the paper

An Investigation into the Relationship between Genders and Foreign Language Anxiety

Introduction

I fear being called on in English class, so I have always tried to finish up every piece of assignment before each class. If my instructor said she was going to pick people up randomly to recite the textbook next time, for instance, I would definitely put Bopomofo beside each English word so that I would not forget about its pronunciation. Sadly, however hard I try or however much I prepare, I still dread going to English classes and feel extremely anxious and nervous the night before going to any English classes. (Translation of an anonymous response collected by the researcher.)

Nothing per chance illustrates how exactly people suffering from foreign language anxiety (FLA) feel better than the aforementioned quote. Many educational practitioners have long been aware of the presence of such an anxiety-provoking experience in foreign language classrooms, for it is certainly not unusual for them to hear comments or remarks quite like this quote from foreign language learners.

Horwitz and Cope (1986) defined this type of anxiety as “the feeling of uneasiness, worry, nervousness and apprehension by non-native speakers when learning or using a second or foreign language.” In other words, whenever people, even though they may be excellent learners in other subject areas, seem to be suffering from an anxiety that deters them from performing well in a foreign language class and find learning the target language extremely stressful, they can be referred to as suffering from “foreign language anxiety.”

Language learners who experience a high level of anxiety might at the same time experience feelings such as apprehension, worry, and dread. Other than that, they find it difficult to concentrate, and become forgetful. Many times they will exhibit

avoidance behavior and skip class or not turn in homework. In testing situations students suffering from FLA "freeze" and are unable to answer questions they actually know. Physically, they may even sweat and have palpitations (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986). Worse still, Krashen (1986) proposed five hypotheses that seek to ascertain the factors aiding and hindering second language acquisition. Of these hypotheses, the Affective Filter hypothesis suggests that anxiety might be a huge hindrance for language learners to maximize their learning outcomes because few people are able to learn when struck by such debilitating anxiety.

In Taiwan, English education is highly valued in all walks of life, for it is the benchmark for most well-paid job positions and prestigious schools. Therefore, students in Taiwan presently are required to take English from the age of eight all the way to eighteen, which means students need to study English for at least ten years during compulsory education. Hence, since English education is so crucial here in Taiwan, how teachers and instructors render foreign language classrooms more welcoming and less nerve-racking has become a topic of significance and worth further discussion.

Nonetheless, if they are to help render foreign language classrooms more of a pleasant place for students, they have to understand the causes of FLA first. Therefore, many researchers sought to probe into the correlations between FLA and certain variables to better understand their confounding relationships; however, among these researches, the issue of genders is rarely addressed. Even if it is, the results are usually confusing and contrasting. As a consequence, further investigation into the relationship between FLA and genders is definitely requisite, for it will lead us to better understand FLA as a distinctive phenomenon.

Accordingly, through a questionnaire adapted from Elaine K. Horwitz's *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale* (FLCAS), this research paper seeks to ascertain if

genders do play a role in deterring students from acquiring a foreign language effectively and efficiently and further unveil the mysterious veil of foreign language anxiety.

Literature Review

As foreign language learning becomes a world-wide trend, many teachers of foreign languages start to investigate into the factors that might deter language learners from acquiring foreign languages effectively. Of all the factors, they discovered that learning foreign languages could sometimes be a traumatic experience for many learners. Thomas Scovel (1978) first identified the experience as anxiety that appears when a specific situation requires the use of a second language in which the individual is not fully proficient. Unlike facilitating anxiety that aids students learn better, the previously mentioned anxiety debilitates students to a degree where they may start avoiding tasks and may not learn efficiently.

Horwitz and Cope (1986) further conceptualized and defined FLA as “the feeling of uneasiness, worry, nervousness and apprehension by non-native speakers when learning or using a second or foreign language.” The causes of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), according to Horwitz and Cope, are as follows: 1) *communication apprehension*, 2) *test anxiety* and 3) *fear of negative evaluation*.

Horwitz and Young (1991) then described communication apprehension as a fear of getting into real communication with others, owing to one’s lack of sufficient communication skills although they might have mature ideas and thoughts in mind. Test anxiety, on the other hand, is an apprehension towards academic evaluation, which could be defined as a fear of failing in tests and an unpleasant experience held either consciously or unconsciously by learners in many situations. Finally, fear of negative evaluations occurs when foreign language learners dread being evaluated by others because they are incapable of performing to a certain standard.

However, apart from these factors, Mary Lou Price (1991) also pointed out there might be a correlation between FLA and genders. In his study, Price interviewed ten students regarding the stressors that made them anxious in foreign language classes, and eight of whom were females. Having said that, there are, in effect, three parties of assertions concerning the relationship between FLA and genders, some researchers claimed that males may have higher anxiety level in foreign language classrooms, while others argued females. Sun, Cui, and Tian (2010), for example, stated that males are more prone to feel anxious in foreign language classrooms, and Park (2013) claimed that female students have higher anxiety level. As for the third party, some researchers even asserted that there may be no significant difference between gender and FLA. Bell and McCallum (2012) and Voorhees (1994), for example, said that they did not find significant discrepancy between genders and FLA in their findings. Since there are opinion collisions, it has become interesting which gender may have higher anxiety level.

Therefore, with the aforementioned knowledge in mind, this research paper seeks to answer the following two questions: is there a significant difference between females and males in terms of their foreign language anxiety levels? Why?

Methodology

Participants

Participants were sixty-four college students in two Freshman English classes at Fu Jen Catholic University. Four responses were invalid (empty or incomplete), and the rest were valid. Data were collected amidst the spring semester, 2015. Thirty (50%) participants were female and the remaining thirty (50%) were male. All of them are students of liberal arts, and Chinese was the native language for all of them. Their ages were not recorded, but students taking Freshman English classes are supposedly 18 to 20 years old. The two Freshman English classes were selected randomly.

Instrument & Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire employed to investigate into the relationship between genders and Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) was adapted from Dr. Elaine Horwitz's Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). It consists of twenty statements, each to be rated by the respondent on a 1 (no anxiety) to 5 (high anxiety) Likert scale. These statements determine one's level of anxiety through requiring respondents to respond to specific language learning situations and are divided into four categories based on the causes of FLA: 1) communication apprehension, 2) test anxiety, 3) fear of negative evaluation, and 4) general questions. Some of the repetitive and overlapping statements from the original scale were removed for the sake of clarity. In addition, the phrase "foreign language" in the original scale was replaced with the word "English."

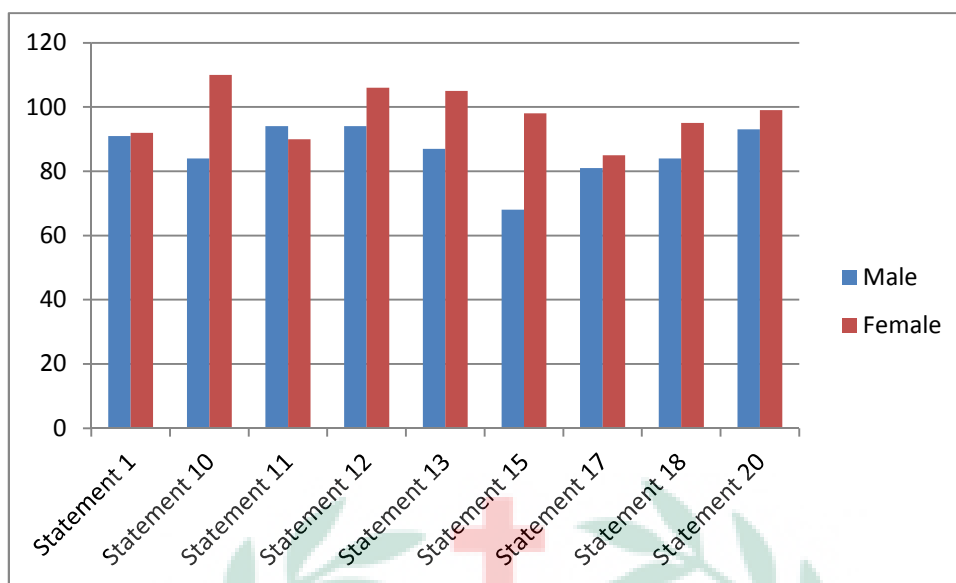
Procedure

The researcher borrowed approximately ten minutes from two Freshman English classes, respectively, and the students in both classes were asked to complete a copy of the questionnaire on their own. Their participation was completely voluntary.

Results

Table 1 presents the scores of the items (Statement 1, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 17, 18, 20) that are related to one's level of communication apprehension.

Table 1: Distributions of male and female participants' scores in terms of communication apprehension. (Statement 1, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 17, 18, 20)



As is clear in table 1, male participants tend to feel less anxious when they have to speak up in a foreign language classroom than female ones. Except for statements 1 and 11 where the differences are too insignificant to be taken seriously, female participants scored higher than their male counterparts on all the statements. Apart from that, the sum of males' scores is 776 and females' 880, which means female participants scored 104 points higher in terms of communication apprehension.

Table 2 presents the scores of the items (Statement 3, 4, 6, 7, 8) that are related to one's level of test anxiety.

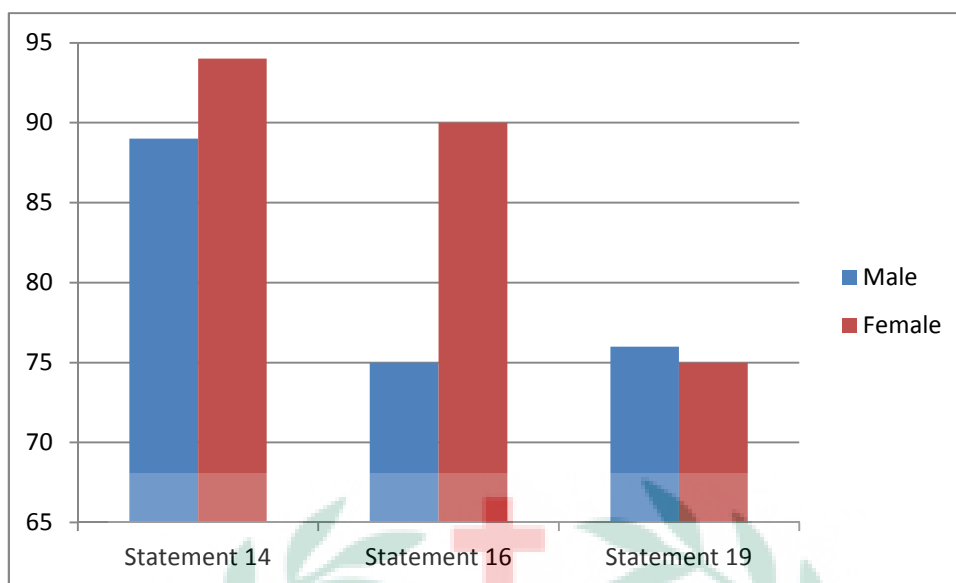
Table 2: Distributions of male and female participants' scores in terms of test anxiety. (Statement 3, 4, 6, 7, 8)



As is clear in table 2, male participants seem to feel less anxious when they have to take tests in a foreign language classroom than female ones. Except for statement 8 where two genders had the exact same score, female participants scored higher than their male counterparts on all the statements. Moreover, the sum of males' scores is 365 and females' 402, which means female participants outscored male participants by 37 points in terms of test anxiety.

Table 3 presents the scores of the items (Statement 14, 16, 19) that are related to one's level of fear of negative evaluations.

Table 3: Distributions of male and female participants' scores in terms of their fear of negative evaluations. (Statement 14, 16, 19)



As is clear in table 3, the scores recorded for both male and female participants were fairly close in statement 19; however, the female participants apparently outscored the male ones by fifteen points in statement 16 and five points in statement 14, which is a proof that the female participants are more likely to feel anxious when being evaluated negatively.

Nonetheless, data shown in table 1, 2, 3 are not yet able to prove that there are significant relations between genders and foreign language anxiety. Hence, the researcher did a T-test to further ascertain the tangling relationship between the two. Please proceed to see table 4.

Table 4: T-test

	Anxiety level (Female)	Anxiety level (Male)
Means	60.16666667	53.7
Variances	148.1436782	152.0103448
Observations	30	30
Hypothetical Mean Difference	0	
Degree of Freedom	58	

T-value	2.044414809	
P(T<=t) One-tailed Test	0.022730431	
Critical Region : One-tailed Test	1.671552762	
P(T<=t) Two-tailed Test	0.045460862	
Critical Region : Two-tailed Test	2.001717484	

The statistics shown in table 4 prove that, under the significant level of 0.05, the testing result rejects the null hypothesis. In other words, based on the data collected, female participants' overall anxiety level is proven to be statistically higher than male participants'.

Discussion

Such a finding is consistent with some of the researches regarding the relationship between genders and FLA, but also contradicts the conclusions drawn by several researchers who claimed that there is no significant difference between genders and foreign language anxiety or it is males who tend to feel more anxious than female ones. Bell and McCallum (2012) and Voorhees (1994), for example, stated that there is no significant difference between genders and FLA based on the data they collected. Sun, Cui, and Tian (2010), on the other hand, argued that males are more prone to feel anxious when it comes to foreign language learning.

Also, the difference between males and females in terms of their levels of communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluations, as is shown in table 1, 2, and 3, too are consistent with some of the previous studies

concerning genders. Frantz, Marlow, and Wathen (2014), for example, claimed that females are more communicatively anxious than males, for they tend to compare themselves with other people and to feel as though their communicative skills are not perfect enough. Likewise, Zaheri, Shahoei, Zaheri (2012) also reported females are more test-anxious than males, for they are inclined to see testing situations as a threat, while males view them more as a challenge. Lastly, Dweck (1975) found that females are more fearful of negative evaluations than males are.

However, although it is clear that females have higher anxiety levels in terms of communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluations, the reason as to why it is this way still remains largely unknown. In addition to the possibility that males may be less willing to admit their anxiety, another possibility might be the fact that girls are more prone to fear negative evaluations.

To begin with, through close scrutiny of the three causes of FLA, the first two causes 1) *communication apprehension* and 2) *test anxiety* can actually be deemed the results of the last cause, *fear of negative evaluations*. Communication apprehension, for example, stems from students constantly being evaluated and corrected by both instructors and classmates due to their inability to reach a satisfactory level of speaking. All these frustrations and anxieties generated by instructors' and peers' corrections and evaluations will one day break these students down to a point where they are going to feel apprehensive whenever asked to speak up in foreign language classrooms. Similarly, test anxiety too may be related to evaluations. Students who constantly fail their tests owing to their lack of sufficient language proficiency may be ridiculed and thus lose their confidence and find themselves exceedingly nervous before and/or during tests.

Since there are strong linkages between communication apprehension, test anxiety and one's fear of negative evaluations, it is necessary for the researcher to

ascertain which gender is more fearful of negative evaluations. Dweck (1975) asserted that females tend to find negative evaluations unbearable because they indicate failures, while males are more open to challenges and less apprehensive about their failures, for they usually do not associate their past failures or negative evaluations with their competences. In other words, if a female student is evaluated negatively by her instructor on a certain assignment, she is very likely to turn away the next time when a similar task is presented to her.

The data shown in table 3 can serve as evidence that females do feel more fearful of negative evaluations than males and are consistent with the aforementioned argument that females are more fearful of negative evaluations than males. (For table 3, please go to page 6.)

Nevertheless, it is nearly impossible for one to acquire a new language without being evaluated or corrected. As a consequence, many language learners might have to deal with such anxiety-provoking experiences and thus become anxious, nervous, and uneasy whenever they have to attend foreign language classes.

Hence, since teachers and students often have disparate perceptions toward the classroom environment, it is very important for teachers to be aware of such a phenomenon. Horwitz (1989), for instance, stated, "Classroom realities are often perceived differently by students and teachers. Because language students are not sophisticated language learners, they are likely to view class activities in ways their teachers do not; for this reason many classroom requirements make them feel nervous." For instance, some language instructors may not be conscious of the fact that their remarks and comments will lead student to feel anxious. They tend to view their acts of evaluating and correcting students' performances and errors as necessities, without taking notice of the anxieties glimmering in their students' eyes.

It is doubtless that the language instructors should not cease evaluating students'

performance, for it is indeed very effective for them to learn through making mistakes. However, it is also doubtless that the instructors should evaluate mildly or provide students with feedback with concrete examples from their assignments or performances. Indeed, it might be difficult to discriminate between mild evaluations and negative evaluations because what pushes one student to work harder might deter another student from moving forward and onward. The best way, therefore, may consist in educators' efforts in having their students understand the teachers are there to help and to facilitate, instead of judging and debilitating.

Additionally, one thing to be noted here is that all the aforementioned differences between females and males are more likely to be relevant to social factors, instead of to their inherent, intrinsic traits. In reality, males and females are often taught to behave in a certain way. Females, for example, are often taught to have higher self-concepts and expected to surpass males in language learning, which might cause them to set higher, or sometimes unrealistic, goals and standards, even though D. A. Cole et al., (2001) and Herbert and Stipek (2005) have found that there is actually no significant discrepancy between female and male in terms of their academic competences. Therefore, if they find themselves unable to reach these standards and meet their expectations, anxiety and a sense of incompetence will then thrive as results of failures (Huberty, 2014). Thus, to alleviate female students' anxiety in foreign language classrooms, it is also advised that teachers should not implant any gender-biased ideas, such as the idea that girls are better at language learning and males at science, in their students' minds, for they might lead students into believing false concepts.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the result of this research paper indicates that females are more likely to be suffering from FLA. The possible causes may be correlated to their fear of

negative evaluations and other social factors. All educational practitioners should be aware of such a phenomenon and pay extra attention to rendering their classroom environment less nerve-racking and their remarks and lectures less gender-stereotypical. Nonetheless, one limitation of this study must be noted. Only sixty responses were received and analyzed, which does not make the generalizability of the findings possible, for it is entirely possible that other researchers who received the same number of responses from another sixty people could come up with disparate results. Therefore, it is advised that the researchers to come should collect as many responses as possible to ensure the credibility and generalizability.



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