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Beyond Language Anxiety

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The article focuses on the relationship of language anxiety and a number of other individual difference variables. In order to understand the role of language anxiety in second language acquisition and behaviour, the author describes a study in which she tried to check the validity of five hypotheses based on findings of previous studies. She looks into the correlations of the included individual difference variables with language anxiety and with foreign language achievement and self-assessment of foreign language skills. Only one of the hypotheses was confirmed by her findings. She concludes that the impact of anxiety on language learning and use should be reconsidered and suggests some directions for future research.

Individual learner factors have been considered relevant in second language acquisition for quite some time now. There is hardly a model of language acquisition nowadays that would not include learner characteristics as one of key elements with explanatory power. Among the models that much research has been based on is the *Socio-educational model* developed by Canadian social psychologist Robert C. Gardner (1985). This model has so far been extensively interpreted and misinterpreted by experts on individual differences (especially by motivation researchers) and has undergone some elaboration by the author since its original version. For the purpose of this paper we will present one of its earlier versions, as it captures the role of individual learner variables in a transparent way (see Figure 1).



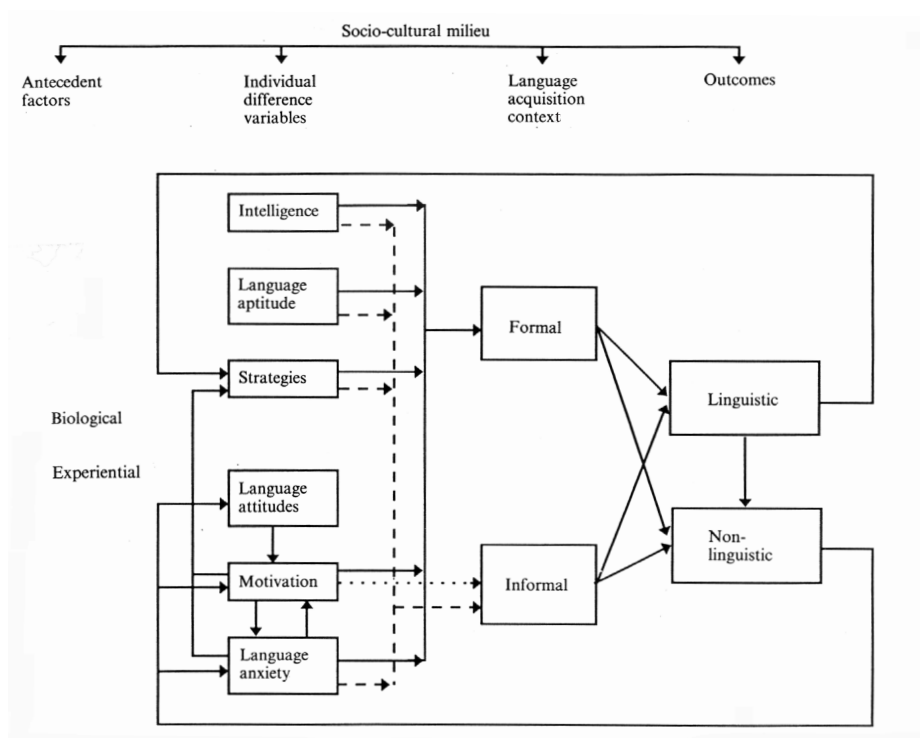


Figure 1. Gardner's socio-educational model (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993: 8)

Gardner (1985, 1988) believes that individual factors can be grouped into two categories: cognitive and affective. Among the cognitive factors he deems intelligence, language aptitude, and learning strategies as the most relevant. These variables are mutually independent (e.g., a highly intelligent person need not have high language aptitude). Affective variables in SLA are defined as the relevant emotional characteristics of the learner that determine his reactions to the language learning situation. Among the affective learner characteristics the most important ones are attitudes, motivation, and language anxiety. Attitudes influence motivation; in fact, attitudes are seen as the affective basis of motivation. Motivation and anxiety have a bi-directional relationship. They are both the cause and result to each other. Numerous studies have come up with significant negative correlations between these two variables and it is now generally accepted that high levels of motivation can lower language anxiety and that high levels of anxiety can decrease motivation.

Language anxiety has attracted a lot of research during the past decades. The fact that some of the first studies on the effect of anxiety on SLA brought conflicting results prompted a need to distinguish between different types of anxiety. After some time it was noticed that studies that came up with a lack of or, even, a positive correlation between anxiety and achievement (e.g., Chastain 1975; Kleinmann 1977) generally used an approach that considered anxiety as a stable personality characteristic. Different results were obtained in studies where anxiety was conceptualised as a transient response to an anxiety-inducing stimulus, that is where 'state anxiety' was measured (see, for example, Horwitz 1986, Gardner, Moorcroft and MacIntyre 1987, Mihaljević Djigunović 2000; 2002). Soon, the concept of situation-specific anxiety emerged and now language anxiety is considered to belong to this type, which is supposed to reflect the probability of becoming anxious in a particular type of situation.

MacIntyre and Gardner stressed that it is necessary to distinguish language anxiety from other types of anxiety and they showed in their 1989 study that foreign language anxiety is separable from general anxiety. They define language anxiety as 'the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening and learning' (MacIntyre and Gardner 1994: 284).

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986:128) define language anxiety as 'a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process'. Using *FLCAS* (*Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale*), the instrument they designed to measure language anxiety, they found that language anxiety is to a large extent independent of other types of anxiety, basing their conclusion on non-significant correlations of *FLCAS* and fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension and significant but low correlation between *FLCAS* and trait anxiety, and only moderate correlation with test anxiety.

The consistent negative relationship between language anxiety and language achievement in numerous studies has been explained as pervasive effects of language anxiety on cognitive processing. Anxiety arousal is thought to be associated with self-related thoughts that compete with task-related thoughts for cognitive resources. Due to the fact that information processing capacity in humans is limited, the self-related cognition emerges as distracter or hindrance during cognitive performance. This may be happening at any of the three stages: input, processing, or output stage (Tobias 1978).

A different approach to the effect of language anxiety, one that comes from the area of learning disability (*LD*) research, is championed by Sparks and Ganschow

(1991, 1993, 1995), who have proposed the *LCDH (Language Coding Deficit/Difference Hypothesis)* as an explanation of the negative relationship between language anxiety and achievement. They postulate that anxiety has no explanatory power and that it is merely, in MacIntyre's words, an unfortunate byproduct or side effect. In their opinion, language aptitude is the primary source of individual differences in language learning. It causes difficulties in linguistic coding in the first language (particularly in the coding of its phonological and syntactic aspects), which cause difficulties in SLA, which then give rise to anxiety. According to Sparks and Ganschow, anxiety, like other affective variables, is the consequence and not the cause of poor performance in the second language.

The debate between proponents of these two approaches has been quite lively and has resulted with several interesting rejoinders (e.g.: MacIntyre 1995; Sparks and Ganschow 1995; Saito, Horwitz and Garza 1999; Sparks and Javorsky 2000).

The study

In the present study we tried to look into the relationship of language anxiety and a number of other individual difference variables and thus get insights that might be instrumental in interpreting its impact on SLA. Starting from the findings in the major relevant studies and following suggestions in the literature we focused on the following variables: trait anxiety, communication apprehension, language use anxiety, willingness to communicate, second language achievement, and self-assessment of second language skill.

The following hypotheses were put forth:

Hypothesis 1: Individuals with high language use anxiety will also have high trait anxiety.

Hypothesis 2: Individuals with high language use anxiety will also have high communication apprehension.

Hypothesis 3: Individuals with high language use anxiety will have low willingness to communicate.

Hypothesis 4: Individuals with high language use anxiety will be low language achievers.

Hypothesis 5: Individuals with high language use anxiety will have low self-assessment of language skills.

The following instruments were used to measure the included variables:

STAI-M (Spielberger 1983) – a 20-item self-report inventory assessing trait anxiety as a stable tendency to respond with state anxiety in threatening situations. Participants were supposed to assess on a 4-point scale how often they generally felt, for example, happy or unsuccessful.

PRCA-24 (*Personal Report of Communication Apprehension*, McCroskey 1982) - measure of communication apprehension, a 24-item questionnaire describing feelings one might have in general (not foreign language-related) communication situations (e.g., *When I talk to someone new I feel totally relaxed / I don't like to take part in group discussions*). Each statement was accompanied by a Likert 5-point scale of agreement.

LANGUAGE USE ANXIETY (Gardner & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2003) - a questionnaire consisting of ten statements describing how a person would feel in various situations requiring them to use English. The statements were accompanied by 5-point Likert scales of agreement. Five statements were positively worded and five were negatively worded.

WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE (*WTC*, McCroskey & Richmond, 1987) - a 20-item questionnaire requiring participants to estimate the probability of initiating a conversation in a number of situations. Participants expressed their estimations in percentages.

SELF-ASSESSMENT OF ENGLISH SKILL (Gardner & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2003) - a 12-item questionnaire focusing on how well a person can function in English at both the comprehension and production levels. Examples: *I can read a book in English without using a dictionary / can write a composition about my summer holidays in English / describe something funny that happened to a friend / understand a conversation on the radio*. Participants could assess their English skills on a 6-point scale (very difficult - very easy).

English language achievement measure – a cloze test of 46 items developed specifically for the purpose of this study.

This battery of instruments was administered to a sample of 41 participants in a group session. They were undergraduate students from two faculties of the University of Zagreb: 14 students of political science and 23 students of psychology. Nine were males and 22 were females.

Results

First the reliability of the applied instruments was checked. The reliability α proved to be satisfactory (see Table 1).

Table 1: Reliability of scales used

	N	k-№ of items	Alpha
Trait anxiety	41	20	.87
Language use anxiety	41	10	.89
Willingness to communicate scale	41	20	.86
Communication apprehension	41	24	.92
Self-assessment of English skill	41	12	.89

In order to see the relationships among the included variables we computed Pearson correlation coefficients. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Correlations between the included variables

		WilToCom	ComAnx	LaUseAnx	TrAnx
WilToCom	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.294	.127	-.229
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.062	.428	.150
	N	41	41	41	41
ComAnx	Pearson Correlation	.294	1.000	.347*	-.204
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.062	.	.026	.200
	N	41	41	41	41
LaUseAnx	Pearson Correlation	.127	.347*	1.000	-.441**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.428	.026	.	.004
	N	41	41	41	41
TrAnx	Pearson Correlation	-.229	-.204	-.441**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.150	.200	.004	.
	N	41	41	41	41

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

WilToCom = willingness to communicate; ComAnx = communication apprehension; LaUseAnx = language use anxiety; TrAnx = trait anxiety;

As the correlation coefficients show, significant correlations were established between language use anxiety, communication apprehension and trait anxiety. While the correlation with communication anxiety was positive, the one with trait anxiety was negative. As a possible source of insights that would help us interpret the obtained correlations we computed correlations of the included variables with a measure of the participants' English achievement (measured by means of a cloze test) and with their self-assessment of English skills. The correlations with these two variables are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Correlations of individual difference variables with English achievement and self-assessment of English skills

		WilToCom	ComAnx	LaUseAnx	TrAnx
EngAchiev	Pearson Correlation	.054	-.087	.605**	-.223
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.735	.629	.000	.162
	N	41	41	41	41
SlfAssmnt	Pearson Correlation	.164	.131	.696**	-.281
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.305	.413	.000	.075
	N	41	41	41	41

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

WilToCom = willingness to communicate; ComAnx = communication apprehension; LaUseAnx = language use anxiety; TrAnx = trait anxiety; EngAchiev = English achievement; SlfAssmnt = self-assessment of English skill

As can be seen in Table 3, both English achievement and self-assessment of English skills correlated significantly with language use anxiety. The correlations were, unexpectedly, positive.

Discussion

It is no surprise that language use anxiety is correlated with communication apprehension. Communication apprehension is defined as the feeling of fear or anxiety caused by real or anticipated communication with others. Language use implies communication by definition, and individuals who are prone to feel

anxious at the prospect of having to communicate with other people or during real communication can be expected to feel even more anxious while communicating in a second or foreign language. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) stress that communication apprehension is a component of foreign language anxiety, just like fear of negative social evaluation and test anxiety. It is important to add, though, that foreign language anxiety is not a mere sum of the three but a specific type of anxiety in its own right. Our findings, thus, confirm *Hypothesis 2* (individuals with high language use anxiety will also have high communication apprehension).

Hypothesis 1 (individuals with high language use anxiety will also have high trait anxiety), however, was not confirmed. The significant negative correlation, the one between language use anxiety and trait anxiety, seems rather difficult to interpret. It indicates the following relationships: the higher the trait anxiety of a person, the lower their language use anxiety, and vice versa. In order to interpret such an unexpected result, we first analyzed Spielberger's (1983) STAI-M inventory. A closer look at the 20 items comprising this measure led us to the conclusion that high scores on more than half of the items would, in fact, indicate a certain extent of pathology that might impact on behaviour. It is possible that such individuals would tend to be low achievers in general and in the foreign language as well. We are prompted to think so because of the significant positive correlation that was established between English achievement and language use anxiety ($R = .67$) (another unexpected finding!). In our opinion, high achievers in English may be individuals who monitor their language comprehension and production and who have highly developed language awareness. Such foreign language users are more critical of their own performance as their expectations (in terms of accuracy, for example) are higher than the expectations of low achievers. All this leads to higher language use anxiety in high achievers. This seems like a plausible explanation of why *Hypothesis 4* (individuals with high language use anxiety will be low language achievers) was refuted by the findings of the present study.

It seems that language learners and users are, generally, objective assessors of their own skills. In our study the correlation between English achievement and self-assessment of English skills ($R = .67$) was significant at the 0.01 level. The same was true for the relationship of language use anxiety and self-assessment of English skill ($R = .70$, $p < .01$), which refuted *Hypothesis 5* (individuals with high language use anxiety will have low self-assessment of language skill).

The last hypothesis to be discussed, *Hypothesis 3* (individuals with high language use anxiety will have low willingness to communicate), was not

confirmed either. The correlation between willingness to communicate and language use anxiety was not significant. It is not easy to interpret this finding, but a possible explanation may lie in the positive connection between language use anxiety and communication apprehension, which may be taken as a consequence (or, possibly, a cause) of unwillingness to communicate.

Conclusion

Although research on language anxiety is still a developing field, it is often felt that answers to most questions that might be asked about its role in second language acquisition are known. The present study warns that the true role of language anxiety warrants further research. Out of the five hypotheses that were put forward on the basis of studies to date, only one was confirmed by our findings. It seems that anxiety research should, in a sense, focus beyond anxiety in order to get a deeper and more informative look into this important individual variable in second language acquisition.

Implications for further study

This study has drawn attention to the need to re-examine the impact of language anxiety on SLA and behaviour. The rather unexpected findings obtained here should be verified in other contexts (both socio-cultural and language contexts) and on larger samples.

It may be necessary to re-consider the use of STAI-M (Spielberger 1983) as a measure of trait anxiety. It is possible to assume that the significant negative correlation obtained in the present study is an artifact of the measuring instrument. Therefore, think aloud protocol should be applied to explore what it actually taps into. A parallel use of STAI-M and another measure of trait anxiety may help to conclude about the true relationship between trait anxiety and language anxiety.

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POVEZANOST STRAHA OD JEZIKA S DRUGIM INDIVIDUALNIM FAKTORIMA

Članak se bavi odnosom straha od jezika i niza drugih individualnih faktora u usvajanju drugoga jezika. Kako bi se bolje razumjela uloga straha od jezika u jezičnom usvajanju i ponašanju, autorica opisuje istraživanje u kojem je pokušala provjeriti valjanost pet hipoteza koje je formirala na temelju nalaza u dosadašnjim istraživanjima. Razmatra korelacije između uključenih varijabli i straha od jezika te uspjeha u usvajanju jezika i samoprocjene kompetencije u drugom jeziku. Njezini su nalazi potvrdili samo jednu od pet hipoteza. Autorica zaključuje da je potrebno ponovno razmotriti utjecaj straha od jezika na jezično usvajanje i uporabu te sugerira mogući smjer novih istraživanja.

Key words: language use anxiety, trait anxiety, communication apprehension, self-assessment, willingness to communicate

Ključne riječi: strah od uporabe jezika, strah kao crta ličnosti, strah od komunikacije, samovrednovanje, spremnost na komunikaciju

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