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Foreign Language Anxiety and Listening Comprehension of Monolingual and Bilingual EFL Learners

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This paper discusses the results of a research study focusing on foreign language anxiety and listening comprehension in learning English as a foreign language (EFL). The study was carried out on a sample of 56 monolingual and 56 bilingual Croatian learners of EFL. 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 levels of listening comprehension of bilingual learners compared to monolingual learners. A significant negative relationship between language anxiety and achievement in EFL listening comprehension was established in both of the studied groups.

1 Introduction

The second half of the 20th century brought three important changes in the way of thinking and attitudes towards foreign language (FL) learning and bilingualism that are important for the focus of this study.

1. 1. Acceptance of the role of affective factors in FL learning

The first change appeared in the last three decades of the century and concerns the importance of the role of affective factors in FL learning. As





a consequence, FL learning is no longer linked exclusively to the learner's cognitive abilities, but it is commonly accepted that during the FL learning process both cognitive and affective learner qualities are activated (Stern 1983; Mihaljević Djigunović 2006). The role of affective factors in FL learning gained prominence through Gardner's socioeducational model of FL learning (Gardner 1985). That model consists of four sets of variables: social milieu, individual differences, language acquisition contexts, and outcomes. Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) later redefined the model. The redefined model emphasises the importance of language anxiety among the group of individual differences (also including intelligence, aptitude, strategies, attitudes, and motivation).

1.1.1 Approaches to language anxiety

There are different approaches to the phenomenon of language anxiety (Scovel 1991). It can be seen as a manifestation of several types of anxiety, such as communication apprehension, test anxiety, or apprehensiveness as a personality trait. From a different approach, language anxiety is seen as a distinct type of situation-specific anxiety. Thus MacIntyre and Gardner (1994: 284) define language anxiety as "the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning". Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) examined language anxiety that appears in foreign language classrooms. They define FL classroom anxiety as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz et al. 1986: 128). Although it can sometimes have a facilitative effect (Alpert & Haber 1960), most authors stress the debilitating effect of language anxiety (Young 1991; Price 1991; Spielmann & Radnofsky 2001; Mihaljević Djigunović 2002). Elkhafaifi (2005) mentions that it can manifest itself in altered performance, and lower test scores and final grades. Until the mid-1990s, most researchers treated FL anxiety as a one-dimensional construct. A crucial change appeared when, by applying Tobias' (1986) model of the effects of anxiety on learning, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) began to theorize that FL anxiety occurs at each of the following three stages of the FL learning process: input, processing,





and output. According to these Canadian researchers, 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 denotes the apprehension experienced when cognitive operations are performed. 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 implies the anxiety experienced when learners are required to demonstrate their ability 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, we are concerned with Input Anxiety, Processing Anxiety and Output Anxiety as it appears in foreign language classrooms and its relationship to listening comprehension in English as a foreign language (EFL). There is a consensus among researchers that anxiety impedes listening comprehension (Bacon 1989; Gardner *et al* 1992; Lund 1991; Vogely 1999). Of the three anxiety types, Processing Anxiety may be the most important in listening comprehension. The other types of anxiety have to be taken into consideration. Input Anxiety influences Processing Anxiety, and Output Anxiety shows the greatest resemblance to general foreign language anxiety.

1. 2. New treatment of listening skill and listening comprehension in FL learning

The second change involves the way the listening skill and listening comprehension in FL learning have come to be treated. At the beginning of the 1970s, listening was no longer treated as a passive language skill, but the active role of the listener started to be recognised. At present, most researchers agree that listening includes highly complex neurological, linguistic, pragmatic, and psycholinguistic processes (Rost 2002). It is an active process for the listener because he/she does not simply receive what the speaker actually says, but constructs a representation of the meaning. The construction of the meaning entails collaboration on the part of the listener, because the listener has to negotiate the meaning by responding to the speaker and by creating meaning through imagination and empathy





(Rost 1990). Listening is no longer seen as a bottom-up process involving a linear series of stages (first the decoding of acoustic input into phonemes, then the identification of words, followed by syntactic analysis). It has come to be seen as a top-down process in the sense that the various types of listener's knowledge (linguistic knowledge and knowledge of the world) that are involved in the understanding of language are not applied in any fixed order (Buck 2001). FL teaching specialists have begun to recognise that listening comprehension cannot be properly mastered unless learners actively learn how to develop it during language classes. It can be assumed that successful listening will depend on anxiety levels that may be present in any of the three stages of the FL learning process. Listening analysis can be effective only if due attention is paid to all the three stages: input as well as processing and production of information.

1. 3. *A new attitude towards bilingualism*

The third change refers to the attitudes of scholars towards bilingualism and bilingual persons, which primarily concerns the acceptance of the possibility that a bilingual child can benefit from growing up with two languages. This change was motivated by Peal and Lambert's study (1962), which was the first to show that bilingualism can result in higher verbal and non-verbal intelligence. Before the study appeared, it was widely thought that bilingualism could have a negative influence on a child's language development and intelligence. Nowadays, there are speculations about many other possible advantages of being a bilingual child. According to Hamers and Blanc (2000), bilingual children show advanced metalinguistic ability in their control of language processing. Cognitive effects of bilingualism appear early in the process of bilingualisation, and they do not require high levels of bilingual proficiency or balanced competence. Bialystok (2001) mentions that bilingual children are aware at an earlier stage of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign and that they can focus their attention more intensely on a particular, more important segment of information so that they can easily exclude redundant information. This enables the working memory to process more information. This new acceptance of the possibility that bilingual children can benefit





from growing up with two languages gave an impetus to the authors of this paper to speculate that bilingual children could also benefit from bilinguality in learning a new foreign language.

2. The study

2.1 Aim

The aim of this study was to explore FL anxiety in different stages of the FL learning process as well as listening achievement of monolingual and bilingual EFL learners. We were also interested in getting an insight into the relationship between FL anxiety and listening achievement. We set out to test the following three hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: 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.

Hypothesis 2: Achievement in EFL listening will be higher for bilingual than monolingual learners.

Hypothesis 3: A negative relationship exists between FL anxiety and listening achievement for both monolingual and bilingual EFL learners.

We grounded our hypotheses primarily on the possible advantages of bilingual persons mentioned in the previous section. We assumed that those advantages of bilingual children that originate from their experience with two languages would reduce their FL anxiety in all three stages of the FL learning process. We anticipated that reduced anxiety would lead to bilingual learners' higher listening achievements. We also expected that the results of our study would confirm the debilitating effect of FL anxiety on FL learning (Young 1991; Price 1991; Spielmann & Radnofsky 2001; Mihaljević Djigunović 2002) and the negative relationship between anxiety and listening achievement (Elkhafaifi 2005).





2.2 Methodology

2.2.1 Variables

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

2.2.2 Participants

A total of 112 Croatian EFL learners took part in the study. The sample comprised an equal number of male and female participants. Each participant was assigned to one of two groups: monolingual and bilingual. At the time of the study all the learners were approximately of the same age as they were either finishing Grade 7 or were just beginning Grade 8 of primary school (Croatian children start primary school at the age of 6-7 years; thus the participants were 13-14 years old at the time). They had all started learning EFL in Grade 4 and had been exposed to the same total number of lessons of English. The monolingual group consisted of learners from two primary schools, while bilingual learners came from four schools. Both groups included learners from urban as well as from rural areas.

The criterion followed in assigning learners to the monolingual group was that their both parents were native speakers of Croatian and that 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 subjects except EFL.

The breakdown of the monolingual group with reference to their gender is shown in Table 1 below.





Table 1: Characteristics of Monolingual Participants (N = 56)

LANGUAGE	NUMBER OF LEARNERS	
	Male learners	Female learners
Croatian	28	28
Total	28	28

The criterion followed in assigning learners to the bilingual group was the knowledge of two languages (Croatian and an additional one; in this case our participants had knowledge of Albanian, 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.

The breakdown of the bilingual group with reference to their gender and the languages they spoke is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Characteristics of Bilingual Participants (N = 56)

LANGUAGES	NUMBER OF LEARNERS	
	Male learners	Female learners
Albanian and Croatian		1
Czech and Croatian	9	9
Italian and Croatian	19	18
Total	28	28





2.2.3 Instruments

Two instruments were used in this study: a FL anxiety scale and a listening achievement test. The former was used to measure the level of FL anxiety learners experience in different stages of the EFL learning process and the latter was used to measure learners' listening comprehension in EFL.

In order to find out in which of the different stages of the FL learning process FL anxiety was the highest, we used MacIntyre and Gardner's *Anxiety Scales* (MacIntyre and Gardner 1994). They comprise 6 items each accompanied by a five-point Likert scale. The theoretical range for each of the three learning stages (input, processing, output) is 6 to 30. A score higher than 20 in any of the stages signifies high intensity of anxiety in that stage. In the current study the Cronbach's alpha yielded the following internal consistencies: .87, .89 and .83 for the Input Anxiety Scale, the Processing Anxiety Scale and the Output Anxiety Scale, respectively.

Listening comprehension testing involved the use of *Test 4* of the *Cambridge Preliminary English Test* (Fried-Booth 1996). We considered it to be the most suitable for our participants considering their age and length of learning English at school. This 30-minute test has 25 questions and consists of four different parts. Learners always hear the recording twice. The questions test learners' listening comprehension explicitly and implicitly. Part I (Questions 1-7) and Part II (Questions 8-13) are multiple-choice questions offering four answers, in Part III (Questions 14-19) learners fill in gaps with missing information and in Part IV (20-25) they decide whether the statements are correct or incorrect. The parts reflect an increasing level of difficulty. In Part I learners first hear the question followed by a very short recording providing an answer to that question. Learners then choose which of the four pictures correctly illustrates the meaning of the recorded answer. In Part II learners first read all the questions and four written answer alternatives for each question. Then they hear a longer recording with answers to all the questions and they are asked to put a tick in the correct box for each question. As there are no pauses in the recording in this section, it is more difficult for learners to know which part refers to which question. The use of passive to introduce





news and reformulation instead of repetition of exact words in suggested answers further increases the difficulty of this part. In Part III learners get a text of some 50 words with six gaps which they have to fill in with information from the tape. It is again difficult for learners to know which part of the text refers to which of the gaps and there are no suggested alternatives to choose from. In Part IV learners are expected to use their knowledge regarding intonation as well as knowledge of the world.

2.2.4 Procedure

Data collection for the 91 Grade 7 learners was organised just before the end of the school year in mid-June 2004, while the instruments were administered to 21 Grade 8 learners in mid-September of the same year (at the very beginning of the following school year). The participants were first acquainted with the purpose of the study; they were informed that their participation was voluntary and that it would not affect their grades in English in any way. After they gave their consent to participate, they were asked to do the listening test and to fill in the anxiety scales.

2.3 Results and discussion

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

2.3.1 FL anxiety in different stages of the FL learning process

By comparing measures of central tendency in the two groups of participants (see *Table 2*) 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: $\bar{x} = 19.05$, $SD = 4.89$; bilinguals: $\bar{x} = 16.46$, $SD = 5.10$), processing stage (monolinguals: $\bar{x} = 16.95$, $SD = 5.01$; bilinguals: $\bar{x} = 13.77$, $SD = 4.79$) and in the output stage (monolinguals: $\bar{x} = 17.80$, $SD = 5.32$; bilinguals: $\bar{x} = 14.89$, $SD = 5.32$).

The medians show that the upper half of the scores is on a higher anxiety level in all three stages among monolingual learners: input stage





(monolinguals: 19.5; bilinguals: 17), processing stage (monolinguals: 17; bilinguals: 14), output stage (monolinguals: 18; bilinguals: 14).

All the modes, with the exception of one of the three modes in the processing stage, are lower in the bilingual group: input stage (monolinguals: 22; bilinguals: 12, 17, 19 and 20), processing stage (monolinguals: 15; bilinguals: 6, 14 and 16), output stage (monolinguals: 18; bilinguals: 14).

The following conclusion results from the comparison of indicators of variability: in the output stage there are participants with the lowest possible minimum score in both groups. In the bilingual group there is such a participant with the lowest possible minimum score even in the processing stage, whereas in the monolingual group the lowest minimum score is 7. In the input stage the score is one point lower in the bilingual group than in the monolingual group.

In case of maximum score, the differences are even higher (two points in the input stage, and three points in the output stage), with the exception of the processing stage, where the maximum is equally high.

Lower sums of scores for all the three stages are another evidence of the lower FL anxiety level in the bilingual groups.





Table 3: 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
Mean	19.05	16.95	17.80	16.46	13.77	14.89
Median	19.5	17	18	17	14	14
Mode	22	15	18	12,17,19&20*	6,14 &16**	14
Standard deviation	4.89	5.01	5.48	5.1	4.79	5.32
Minimum	8	7	6	7	6	6
Maximum	30	26	29	28	26	26
Range	22	19	23	21	20	20
Sum of scores	1067	949	997	922	771	834

*appears 5 times

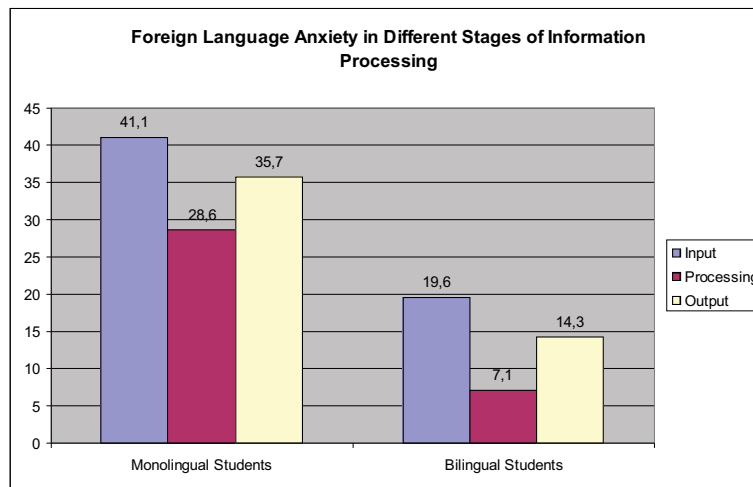
**appears 6 times

It can be seen from *Figure 1* that high intensity FL anxiety was 20% more present in all the three stages of the FL learning process among monolingual than among bilingual participants.





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



The results of t-test show that the differences between the means of the two studied groups (Tables 4, 5 and 6) are statistically significant in all the three stages (input stage: $t = 2.74$, $p < 0.01$; processing stage: $t = 3.44$, $p < 0.001$; output stage: $t = 2.85$, $p < 0.005$) and this confirms that the two groups belong to two different populations.

Table 4: Differences between means in Input Anxiety (t-test)

	t	p
Monolingual learners	2.74	0.01
Bilingual learners		





Table 5: Differences between means in Processing Anxiety (*t*-test)

	t	p
Monolingual learners	3.44	0.001
Bilingual learners		

Table 6: Differences between means in Output Anxiety (*t*-test)

	t	p
Monolingual learners	2.85	0.005
Bilingual learners		

A comparison of FL anxiety obtained in different stages of the FL learning process in the present study with the results of a study conducted in the USA (Onwuegbuzie, Bailey and Daley 2000: 98) points to some important differences. The first difference is that the participants in the American study had higher anxiety values in the output stage than in the input and processing stages, and again higher values in the input stage than in the processing stage. In our study, both monolingual and bilingual participants experienced the highest anxiety levels in the input stage, followed by anxiety in the output stage, with the lowest anxiety in the processing stage.

The participants in the American study were drawn from a large mid-southern university. We concluded that FL anxiety was differently manifested in our sample of younger learners. Younger Croatian learners seemed to experience greatest problems when they were initially presented with a new word, phrase or sentence in the FL while receiving, concentrating on and encoding external stimuli.

Another difference lies in the value of the means. In our study the means were lower than in the American study in all the three stages in the bilingual group (input stage $t = 2.89$, $p < 0.01$; processing stage $t = 5.86$,





$p < 0.0$; output stage $t = 5.91$, $p < 0.01$) and the same is true for the output stage in the monolingual group ($t = 2.01$, $p < 0.05$). The means obtained in the American study were higher: input stage: $\bar{x} = 18.56$, $SD = 4.04$, processing stage: $\bar{x} = 17.80$, $SD = 4.06$; output stage: $\bar{x} = 19.36$, $SD = 4.13$.

The fact that FL anxiety was found to be lower in our study than in the American study does not come as a surprise. We believe that it may be connected to the amount of contact learners have with the FL. According to our knowledge and experience even Croatian monolingual learners are more often exposed to FLs than American learners. FLs are omnipresent on Croatian television channels, cinema, video and DVD: foreign programmes are regularly subtitled, not dubbed, allowing considerable everyday exposure. Large numbers of foreign tourists visit Croatia, and a very small percentage of them will try to address local people in Croatian. Participants in our study started to use computers when no software in Croatian existed. Most of the information on the Internet is still available in languages other than Croatian. Croatian citizens travel to countries where the local population does not speak Croatian or any of the related south-Slavic languages. On the other hand, Americans will mainly be exposed to English, not FLs, while watching TV or going to the movies. When American citizens travel abroad, in most hotels and while sightseeing they will be able to use their mother tongue. Foreigners coming to their country will try to speak to them in English.

Our findings show that anxiety in EFL was lower in bilingual learners than in monolingual learners. Thus they have confirmed our first hypothesis that anxiety in EFL will be lower in bilingual than in monolingual learners.

2.3.2 *Listening comprehension*

Results of the listening test show a better performance of bilingual than monolingual learners. A quick glance at the figures in the last row of *Table 7* reveals that monolingual students provided a total of 755 correct answers and their bilingual counterparts 1007.

An analysis of the values of all the measures of central tendency and variability (*Table 7*) shows a much higher achievement of bilingual learners





than their monolingual peers: the mean for the bilingual group is higher by 4.5 points, while the standard deviation is lower (monolingual learners: \bar{x} = 13.48, SD = 4.96; bilingual learners: \bar{x} = 17.98, SD = 4.38). The dividing line between the two halves of the results is at 18 in the bilingual group and at 13 for monolingual learners. The most common values in the bilingual group are 17 and 22, whereas the mode of the monolingual group is much lower - 13. The learner with the lowest result in the monolingual group had only three correct answers, while the lowest score in the bilingual group was 8. In the monolingual group there was no learner who answered all the questions correctly: the highest score was 24. In the bilingual group there were three learners who did not make a single mistake.

Table 7: Measures of central tendency and variability in the listening comprehension test

	Monolingual learners	Bilingual learners
Mean	13.48	17.98
Median	13	18
Mode	13	17 & 22*
Standard deviation	4.96	4.38
Minimum	3	8
Maximum	24	25
Range	21	17
Sum of correct answers	755	1007

* appears 6 times

Results of t-test (*Table 8*) show that the difference between means of the two tested groups was statistically significant ($t = -5.09$, $p < 0.001$).





Table 8: Differences between means in listening comprehension (T-test)

	t	p
Monolingual learners	5.09	0.00
Bilingual learners		

The results presented above confirm our second hypothesis that the bilingual learners will be more successful in listening comprehension than the monolingual learners.

2.3.3 Relationship between FL anxiety and listening comprehension

In order to look into the relationship between FL anxiety and listening comprehension achievement we computed correlation coefficients between anxiety scale scores and listening test results (see Table 9). A statistically significant negative relationship between FL anxiety in all three stages of the FL learning process and listening was found in both of the tested groups. The results have, thus, confirmed our third hypothesis that there will be a negative relationship between FL anxiety in all the three stages of the EFL learning process and achievement in listening comprehension in both groups of participants.

Table 9: Correlation coefficients between FL anxiety in the three stages of the EFL learning process and listening comprehension

	Listening comprehension	
	Monolingual learners	Bilingual learners
Input Anxiety	-.33*	-.42**
Processing Anxiety	-.48**	-.54**
Output Anxiety	-.38**	-.48**

**p<0.01

*p<0.05





It is interesting to note that all the coefficients are higher for the bilingual group. Although the bilingual participants experienced significantly lower levels of anxiety than the monolingual ones, their listening 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 listening achievement with language anxiety was found in case of Processing Anxiety. This suggests that Processing Anxiety may perhaps be the most important type of language anxiety impacting on listening comprehension, particularly in case of bilingual learners.

4. Conclusion

The results of this study have confirmed our three starting hypotheses. Bilingual learners experienced lower levels of FL anxiety than monolingual learners. Their listening comprehension was at a higher level than that of monolingual learners. Listening achievement correlated negatively with FL anxiety.

We believe that bilingual learners, compared to monolinguals, are at an advantage thanks to being exposed to more languages. Their extensive experience in using two languages in everyday life can be assumed to prevent or reduce FL anxiety and, perhaps, also contribute to the development of linguistic self-confidence.

As the present study has confirmed a strong negative relationship between FL anxiety in all three stages of the FL learning process, on the one hand, and achievement in listening comprehension, on the other, teachers of EFL should be aware of its existence and its possible debilitating effects. In order to achieve better results in FL learning, teachers should do their best to detect the manifestations of FL anxiety and to reduce its detrimental effects on their learners.

If no other factors have considerably contributed to the results of the present study, bilingualism may be considered as facilitating the learning of FLs. Wherever possible, thus, parents and other stakeholders should allow children to grow up as bilinguals.





5. Limitations of the study and suggestions for further study

Two main limitations need to be mentioned. The first concerns characteristics of the sample. Although the sample was balanced in terms of gender and number of participants in the two groups, its overall size was rather small. Also, participants were drawn from among several educational institutions and were taught by different teachers. In spite of the fact that there is a central curriculum followed in all schools, instruction by different teachers can never be the same. The second limitation lies in the very nature of FL anxiety. It is widely known that it is linked to other individual factors and not only to those that were included in this study. Therefore, one should interpret our results with caution and not attribute the lower anxiety and better listening comprehension in bilingual learners only to the advantages of their bilinguality. It is possible that some other individual factors, which were not included in the study, have contributed to the results as well.

Since our findings suggest that Processing Anxiety may be especially relevant for understanding listening comprehension it might be valuable to look into this type of anxiety more closely. Parallel research on the role of Processing Anxiety in reading comprehension could reveal whether the high impact of the Processing Anxiety is common to receptive skills. As hinted above, future studies could also make significant contributions to this area by addressing interactions of language anxiety with other individual learner differences.

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STRAH OD STRANOGA JEZIKA I RAZUMIJEVANJE SLUŠANJEM KOD MONOLINGVALNIH I BILINGVALNIH UČENIKA EN- LESKOGA KAO STRANOGA JEZIKA

Rad analizira rezultate istraživanja straha od jezika i razumijevanja slušanjem u učenju engleskoga kao stranoga jezika. Istraživanje je provedeno na uzorku od 56 monolingvalnih i 56 bilingvalnih učenika osnovne škole. Rezultati potvrđuju statistički značajan viši stupanj straha od jezika kod monolingvalnih nego kod bilingvalnih učenika u svim trima fazama kao i statistički značajan viši stupanj razumijevanja slušanjem kod bilingvalnih nego kod monolingvalnih učenika. Ustanovljena je statistički značajna negativna povezanost između straha od jezika u svim fazama i uspjeha u učenju engleskoga kao stranog jezika u obje ispitivane grupe.

Key words: foreign language anxiety, bilingualism, listening comprehension, EFL.

Ključne riječi: strah od stranoga jezika, bilingvizam, razumijevanje slušanjem, engleski kao strani jezik





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