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The Role of Anxiety in University-Level Spanish Courses

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Abstract

This study compares the results of a questionnaire about anxiety completed by university students of Spanish with a grammar quiz. The results reveal that students who admit to feeling “normal” earned the highest scores. The students proved to be poor predictors of their success, and they admit that subject areas other than foreign languages are more anxiety provoking. The students indicate that what most affected their level of anxiety was often contributed to outside factors (amount of sleep, preparation). While anxiety can affect classroom performance, these effects are less detrimental than previously thought. The results of this study¹ can be used to better understand the role of anxiety in the foreign language classroom and steps that can be taken to diminish it, particularly in students who are considered millennials (born between 1986-1995).

Introduction

Anxiety is a common feeling that we all face in our daily lives. While anxiety may be inevitable, we can attempt to control our reactions during a stressful situation. Anxiety is especially prevalent in academic contexts because students are in an environment in which they are constantly being evaluated. In such situations, many learners feel anxious and believe that this anxiety may adversely affect their performance on a test or exam. However, what effect does anxiety really have in the classroom on its learners and their performance?

This paper sheds light on the effects of anxiety of learners of Spanish at the university level by comparing students' attitudes toward anxiety with their performance on a class task. After highlighting related research on anxiety in the classroom and in particular research related to millennial students, we discuss the methods that were used to elicit the data. The results show

that students who simply reported feeling “normal” performed better than those who felt anxious or calm. It was also found that students are not always accurate predictors of their performance and that, according to them, foreign language is less likely to cause anxiety than other subjects. In addition, the factors that most decrease anxiety are often those that are out of the hands of educators, such as the level of preparation by the student, perhaps indicating that attempts to mitigate anxiety by the instructor are futile.

This study helps to clarify the role of anxiety in the foreign language classroom. If anxiety were better defined, teachers and students could also work together to improve test scores and language proficiency. Furthermore, this study may be useful to the second-language teacher and help him/her to know how the student feels in the class, helping to improve the acquisition of language. Finally, this study hopes to fill the void in research that exists about anxiety in second language class particularly as it relates to millennials. The present study investigates more than whether anxiety has an effect on learning, but rather strives to answer the following more specific questions:

1. What is the relationship between anxiety and test performance?
2. Are students good at predicting their own performance?
3. In general, do students feel more anxious in a foreign language class?
4. What factors increase and decrease classroom anxiety?
5. What do students think about anxiety and test performance?
6. How does anxiety affect millennial students, in particular, in the foreign language class?

Finally, this study investigates the central, overarching question: What role does anxiety play in the foreign language classroom?

Literature Review

Much research has been conducted on the anxiety that a test taker may experience when completing an exam. Researchers have tried to study the connection between the level of anxiety and test performance. This correlation, however, is not as clearly defined as one might assume, as the findings of researchers who have studied the causes and effects of anxiety in the field of education are varied.

Several researchers have concluded that anxiety has a negative influence on students' performance in the L2 (second language) classroom. Supon (2004) confirms the negative effects of anxiety and proposes strategies to “help students with their academic performance levels while diminishing significantly their levels of test anxiety” (292). Elkhafafi (2005), in a study conducted of American English speakers learning Arabic, writes: “FL learning anxiety and listening anxiety...both correlate negatively with achievement” (206). Osboe, Fujimura and Hirshel (2007), in their study of Japanese learners studying English conclude that “foreign language anxiety has clearly been shown to have a negative impact on performance in the foreign language classroom” and that “L1 personality factors do have a carryover role in the L2 classroom” (1). Occhipinti (2009) recognizes the negative effects of L2 anxiety, writing “foreign language anxiety is a common debilitating feeling which affects students in a variety of ways”

(81). Duxbury and Tsai (2010) insist that “[f]oreign language anxiety is a universal phenomenon that inhibits students’ achievement in ESL and EFL classrooms. A student’s native language is his/her main coping mechanism, it defines their worth and identity” (4). Wang (2010) notes that “foreign language anxiety is one of the best predictors in accounting for individual differences in language learning success in SLA, and that it is proved to be one of the most essential and influential affective factors” in her study of Chinese students who were studying English (562). Xu and Li (2010) in a similar study confirm the negative effects of student anxiety in the L2 classroom, writing that language anxiety is “a negative factor resulting in low spirits for the learner” (250). Recently, Kuwabara (2016) found that fear of negative evaluation was directly related to foreign language anxiety (60) and Liu and Ni (2015) found that low confidence and anxiety resulted in poorer performance in English-language writing tasks in Chinese students (56).

Lu and Liu (2011) find that learner anxiety “produced a significant effect on the students’ performance in English” as they studied the effects of anxiety on Chinese learners of English (1298). Mahmoodzadeh (2012) addresses learner characteristics that affect anxiety: “gaining more FL knowledge may not necessarily lead to a substantial reduction in experiencing FL anxiety” in his study of Iranian learners of English (466). Liu (2012) writes that “over 80% of the subjects responded to more than one third of the items in a manner reflective of anxiety. The debilitating impact of anxiety on language learning was also demonstrated by its significant association with foreign language performance” (132). Regarding ways to reduce anxiety, Partridge and Eamoraphan (2015) found that being able to confer with a peer did not reduce anxiety in the foreign language (high school) classroom (180).

Not all studies imply an adverse effect on performance by anxiety. Brandmeier (2005) concludes that “no positive or negative correlations were found among anxiety factors and both written comprehension tasks” (67). On anxiety in the foreign language classroom, Trang, Moni, and Baldauf (2012) affirm:

[G]reater importance should be assigned to understanding the frustration and discomfort that a large number of students seem to be suffering when learning a foreign language. This view is supported by other researchers who consider students’ psychological experience of foreign language learning to be more important than language proficiency levels. (2)

It should be noted that research about specific generations of learners (particularly millennials) has emerged in recent years, and research about post-millennials (or “Generation Z”; born after 1996) is still emerging and will continue to develop in the coming years. Many researchers have examined some specific traits of the millennial learner and this generation of learners’ struggles and successes in an academic setting. Bozavli’s study (2016) seeks to contribute to the research on understanding aspects Generation Y’s (millennial’s) foreign language learning. The findings indicate that while the participants (millennials) showed a high ability to learn and were enthusiastic, they had difficulties with speaking the language, verbal expression and comprehension. Success was more evident in written communication and expression. Liu and Ni

(2015) also examine learner anxiety of varying levels in different skills (writing, speaking, listening, and reading) of the language. Researchers have also incorporated the role of gender in anxiety (Liu and Ni, 2015; Kao, Tzu-Ching Chen, & Craigie, 2017; Karatas, Alci, Bademcioglu, & Ergin, 2016).

Bozavli (2016) refers to and expands previous research done about millennials entering the workplace by Yüksekbilgili (2013) that may explain millennials difficulties in speaking and verbal communication—a lack of social skills in listening and communication as well as impatience and anxiety. As discussed in Morreale and Staley (2016), more research is needed on the possible link between the impatience and anxiety of Generations Y and Z in speaking the target language and verbal communication and to “the ubiquitous presence of technology and its impact on their lives (370).” Morreale and Staley (2016) discuss at length millennial impatience, anxiety, and lack of social skills in relation to “the elephant in the college room” (370), or technology. Seemiller and Grace (2016) discuss other learning barriers for post-millennials, including an overreliance on technology, trouble distinguishing fact from opinion, a sense of entitlement, and an 8-second attention filter complete with a need for immediate response. They also include post-millennial learner preferences, including learning by doing over learning by listening as well as the preference for visuals. Partridge and Eamoraphan (2015) elaborate on social anxiety variations in individual versus group work/cooperative learning settings. These are all factors that will continue to influence L2 learning, classroom environment, teacher-learner rapport, and instructor pedagogy and planning.

As noted earlier, there is much interest in the topic of anxiety and test taking. However, more research is needed to better determine if there is a possible correlation between learner anxiety and test performance, and moreover, to understand how students process their anxiety and how it manifests itself in their test scores. With the new importance that standardized tests have been given, it is more urgent than ever for educators to understand the role of anxiety and test performance in the foreign language classroom. Elkhafaifi (2005) also notes the need for studies like the present, writing “learner background, cultural knowledge, and student motivation for studying the language are some of the other factors to be considered in future studies of anxiety” (216). According to Supon (2004), “teachers must examine, develop and implement strategies to help students’ educational gains so that they may increase test scores”(292). Therefore, this study adds to the body of research on the topic of anxiety in the L2 classroom and strives to make this issue better understood by determining to what extent educators’ precautions and strategies are necessary.

Methodology

To carry out this study and to answer the above questions, two Spanish classes (each of approximately 22 students) served as the sample. Two classes from the same class level (with approximately the same number of students) were chosen in order to compare the results. This study was conducted at a large university in the southeastern region of the United States in the spring of 2013. The vast majority of students were English-only speakers between the ages of 18 and 22. The main instrument was a questionnaire containing closed questions – i.e., the questions

were multiple choice and the student who completed a questionnaire could not introduce any response that did not appear in the list of possible answers. The second instrument was a brief Spanish grammar test that measured student performance. The results from the questionnaire and the grammar quiz were then compared.

Results

As to the first question of the study (*What is the relationship between anxiety and test performance?*), the results of the questionnaires indicate that there is a relationship between these two variables, but such a connection is not very well defined. According to these data, it appears that the hypothesis about the role of anxiety in performance on a test is correct. Students with the greatest anxiety (50% accuracy) performed worse than those who admitted the lowest level of anxiety (60%). However, being more relaxed (less anxious) did not create higher grades than simply feeling normal (65.9%).

The next question posed with this study is: *Are students good at predicting their own performance?* These data show that the highest grades were from those students who thought they had performed worse than normal, while those who thought they performed better were mistaken. Those who judged their performance as "normal" received grades were higher (63% accuracy) than those who thought they had performed "better" (58.5%). To answer the next question of this study (*Do students feel more anxious in a second language class or another subject?*), the data indicate that science (40%), not foreign languages (16%), causes the most anxiety in students. After science, according to these informants, mathematics causes more anxiety (34%), while art/music (5%) and history (5%) do not seem to cause much anxiety to students.

The next question of this study is as follows: *What caused the increase or decrease your anxiety level?* The factor that reduced anxiety the least was the person who administered the exam (2%). As for the factor that most lowered anxiety, most respondents answered that nothing lowered his/her anxiety (70%). But the factor that increased anxiety was the level of preparation (62%), but "nothing" is the second most common response (16%). Finally, to better understand how students feel about anxiety and test performance, the data show that the vast majority (83%) believe that anxiety has a negative effect on the performance of a test. Only 8% percent of students think that anxiety increases a test grade, while 9% claim that anxiety had no effect on their performance.

Discussion

The data have shown that the central, overarching question of this study, *what role does anxiety play in the foreign language classroom*, is a complicated question that has many facets. In the first question, we found that students with more anxiety had lower grades. This would suggest that anxiety brings down the grades of a test. But if this were true, would the absence of anxiety not cause the opposite effect? We see that this did not happen. Students who were more relaxed did not have the best grades. In contrast, the best students were those who felt "normal." Much

anxiety may cause negative effects, but the best thing for a student is not overconfidence, but rather a calm or normal demeanor.

On their perceptions of the causes of anxiety, only 6% (the lowest percentage) of students said that the person who gave the exam had an effect on its performance, compared to 73% who said that their lack of preparation affected performance, and 8% who answered "nothing." These results also show that the person administering the test does not seem to have much impact either the student or his/her performance. This finding is significant since the majority of standardized tests administered are done so by a proctor and not by the students' usual instructor.

It was found also that students are not good predictors of their own performance. That is, while student frequently thought they performed worse than usual, the truth is that they did better than they thought they had. Also, while it did not have much impact on their own performance in class, 83% percent of the respondents thought that anxiety negatively affects one's grade. Only 8% of students thought that anxiety may improve one's grade.

A limitation of this study is the relatively small size of the sample. These data only reflect the attitudes of 45 students. In a future study, a larger sample would be preferable as more informants' attitudes would make the data more impactful. These data were collected from two classes of the same intermediate Spanish course level. Collecting data from different courses might also reveal a connection between anxiety and course level. Also, in future study, a questionnaire that allows students to write in their own attitudes towards anxiety would be useful as these qualitative data would shed light on the students' feelings and reflect a greater variety of responses than a closed questionnaire.

As a result of the update to this study and in consideration of recent research, other inquiries in the future research of learner anxiety in the general college classroom as well as in the foreign language classroom emerged. Areas of further inquiry included but were not limited to: learner anxiety specifically connected to Generation Z; the impact of technology on learner anxiety; learner attention span and anxiety; (social) anxiety variation in individual versus group work/cooperative learning settings; and the role of gender in learner anxiety.

Why do our questions surrounding students' potential anxiety merit more research in the foreign language classroom, particularly at this time? In short, anxiety is currently the biggest mental health concern on college campuses. The Center for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMH) at Penn State University has published its 2018 Annual Report which summarizes data about college student mental health. Data were contributed to the CCMH during the 2017-2018 academic year by 152 college and university counseling centers, describing almost 180,000 college students seeking mental health treatment. The report also summarizes data trends from 2013 to 2018. Similar to past reports, in 2017-2018, anxiety was the top concern of students, followed by depression. Since anxiety is such a concern on our college campuses and will impact our students, our classrooms, and our teaching, more research into its impact on student learning is needed.

Conclusion

The results of this study show that while anxiety did have an effect on performance, it did not have quite the negative impact as previously thought. These results imply that the emphasis on reducing students' anxiety might be unnecessary since the data indicate that there is little difference in performance between a person with a great deal of anxiety and a very relaxed one. The factors that reduced anxiety were often things that were not directly related to the instructor, such as the student's amount of sleep or preparation. Educators should focus on making students feel as "normal" as possible, rather than focusing on reducing or eliminating anxiety. Instructors might seek to deemphasize the weight of "test days" and instead should try to make the classroom environment appear as much like a normal class day as possible. By having students who are at ease, instruction will be more enriching. However, more research is essential to better understanding anxiety in the foreign language classroom and at the university level in general, particularly in certain areas (i.e., the role of gender; cooperative learning setting versus individual work setting; learning and communication traits and needs of millennials; and possible differences in individual learner anxiety levels in different skills in the foreign language).

Endnote

This article updates and extends an earlier publication in *Academic Exchange Quarterly* by including current research on the anxiety-related characteristics of millennial students in the second-language classroom (Spring 2014, Anxiety in the Foreign Language Classroom, Bryant Smith and Terri Schroth).

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