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Does Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Mitigate Learner Autonomy Development?

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The present research attempts to further the understanding of the relation between the language learner's levels of language anxiety and learner autonomy. The study is based on quantitative data attempting to address the following questions: (1) Does learner anxiety have an impact on the autonomy of young language learners? And (2) Is there a correlation between the high, average, and low levels of learner anxiety and autonomy? The research sample was comprised of grade five (approximately 11 years old) secondary school students registered at a private secondary school. Results of the data analysis established that learner autonomy levels were significantly lower when students had a higher degree of anxiety. The relationship between lower anxiety and higher learner autonomy was discovered to be stronger than that between higher anxiety and learner autonomy. Possible inclinations relating to the language learner's and teacher's awareness of the relationship between anxiety and autonomy are stated.

Keywords: learner autonomy, anxiety, foreign language, young learner

Introduction

More than three decades ago, in the field of second/foreign language learning, prominent researchers (for e.g., Scovel, 1978; Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, 1986; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993) investigated whether affective variables were influential upon the language learners' success or failure in the foreign language class. According to the findings of these investigations, it was claimed that variables were considered to be characteristics of an individual and that these variables may influence the individual's reactions to any classroom situation and, consequently how well the individual will learn a second language (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993). Most notably, among these variables, anxiety was discovered to have an important role in determining the students' success or failure in foreign language learning (Horwitz et al., 1986). Ever since, the potential impact of anxiety has become a major theme still running through the literature of foreign language learning.

A contextual issue affecting anxiety, a psychological phenomenon, is the point that researchers till date have not reached a consensus on its precise definition. However, in the field of language teaching, it is accepted that anxiety is a very influential factor relating to the language learners' performance because it is a "psychological construct, commonly described by psychologists as a state of apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object" (Hilgard, Atkinson, & Atkinson, 1971, as cited in Scovel, 1991, p. 18).

Language anxiety has also been defined as the fear or apprehension occurring when a learner is expected to perform in the second or foreign language (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993) or the worry and negative emotional

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reaction when learning or using a second language (MacIntyre, 1999). Horwitz (2001, p. 113) claims that "not only is it intuitive to many people that anxiety negatively influences language learning, it is logical because anxiety has been found to interfere with many types of learning and has been one of the most highly examined variables in all of psychology and education". Here it must be noted that "generally speaking, language anxiety has been viewed as a particularly negative psychological factor in the language learning process by many of the researchers and academics who have considered its impact on learners" (Daubny, 2005).

Another issue under scrutiny in the field of language learning concerns the concept of autonomy, most notably in terms of its definition and importance within language learning. "Even the basic terminology is full of conflicts. For instance, Dickinson and Holec used different (and reversed) meanings for autonomy and self-direction" (Oxford, 2003, p. 75). According to Dickinson (1987), the learner is totally responsible for taking and implementing decisions about one's own learning because "to take responsibility for one's own learning essentially concerns decision making about one's own learning" (Dickinson, 1993, p. 330).

However, according to Holec, "the need for a term to describe people's ability to take charge of their own learning (for this is how he and his colleagues came to conceptualize 'learner autonomy', see Holec, 1979/1981) arose for practical, though idealistic reasons" (Smith, 2008, p. 395). According to Smith (2008), "Holec's distinction between a desirable learning situation or behavior ('selfdirected learning') and the capacity for such learning ('learner autonomy') has been generally accepted in the specialist literature" (as summarized in Benson, 2001, 2007; see also Little, 1991).

In the present study, the definition of Holec (1979/1981) is adhered. Alongside, "with the development of social science and teaching technology, more and more teachers and researchers (e.g., Holec, 1981; Dickinson, 1987; Boud, 1988; Littlewood, 1999, etc.) realized that it is one of the prominent issues for educators to cultivate students' autonomous learning ability in ESL/EFL teaching" (Chen, 2015, p. 70). As a result, "autonomous learning is known to not only allow learners to cater the learning content and speed to their own needs but also motivate learning, and thus lead to greater language learning" (Dickinson, 1995; Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998; as cited in Iimuro & Berger, 2010, p. 127).

Based on the progression of literature, it is possible to witness that "studies of anxiety have also focused on different language outcomes, such as rate of second language acquisition, performance in language classrooms, and performance in high-stakes language testing" (Zheng, 2008, p. 1). However, more recently research revisiting anxiety has considered the potential effect of anxiety on learner motivation and autonomy (Oxford, 2003; Liu, 2012; Sanadgol & Abdolmanafi-Rokni, 2015).

Research conducted on foreign language teaching to young learners focusing on anxiety and autonomy is relatively scarce. However, there are studies which have analyzed anxiety in children as an illness and in these investigations focusing on the anxiety of children, it was discovered that "anxiety disorders are the most common mental health problem experienced by children, with studies reporting between 3%-24% of children below the age of 12 years develop significant anxiety problems that interfere with daily functioning (Cartwright-Hatton, Mc Nicol, & Doubleday, 2006, as cited in Headly & Campbell, 2013, p. 48). Another area of children's anxiety investigated was social anxiety, and in a study conducted by Crick and Ladd (1993), it was found that fifth graders when compared to third graders, had exhibited significantly greater levels of social anxiety. Inspired by the formerly stated studies and upon the consideration that below the age of 12 is a critical period for different types of anxiety, the present study aims to address children at the age of approximately 11 years old.

Along these lines, the present research attempts to further investigate whether there is a correlation or not between language learner anxiety levels and language learner autonomy in young learners.

Research Questions

The present study is based on quantitative data attempting to address the following questions:

- (1) Does learner anxiety have an impact on the autonomy of young language learners?
- (2) If so, is there a correlation between the high, average, and low levels of learner anxiety and autonomy?

Methodology

Participants

The research sample was comprised of a total of 103 participants whom were all grade-five (approximately 11 years old) early secondary education students registered at a private secondary school located in Istanbul, Turkey. The participants were both male and female students who had reached A2 level of English as a foreign language during the academic year of 2015-2016. However, having a limited number of participants, gender differences were not addressed in the study.

Instruments

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). In order to determine the participants' classroom anxiety, the original form of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) was employed. However, on consideration that the participants were young learners and at A2 proficiency level of English, it was decided to administer the questionnaire in its Turkish translated form rather than the original English. Therefore, a Turkish form which had already been estimated to be reliable and implemented in a study for an MA thesis (Zhanibek, 2001) was used in the present study. The FLCAS is composed of 33 items relating to communication apprehension, tests anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. The measurement scale employed in the FLCAS is a five point Likert type scale which ranges from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree". As claimed by Zhanibek (2001, p. 31), "The FLCAS has also demonstrated internal consistency achieving an alpha coefficient of 0.93 with all items producing significant corrected item-total scale correlation.... the FLCAS is considered to be valid and reliable tool to measure the subjects' foreign language anxieties".

Autonomy Learner Questionnaire (ALQ). The learner autonomy of the participants was measured with the autonomy learner questionnaire (ALQ) comprised of 44 statements and designed by Ilknur Savaskan (2003) who had employed the questionnaire in her Ph.D. thesis study. The ALQ was designed and adapted according to the children's language comprehensibility, in addition to the English version it was also translated from English to Turkish by Savaskan (2003). The total internal reliability coefficient of this questionnaire can be considered acceptable because it was found as: Cronbach Alpha: 0.8070023 (Savaskan, 2003) (See Appendix A, for the English version of the ALQ).

The ALQ was originally designed to measure the following nine different dimensions of areas for investigation: (1) Readiness for self-direction (items 1, 3, 4, 16, 28, 32); (2) Independent work in language learning (items 2, 5, 6, 7, 10, 20, 35); (3) Importance of class/teacher (item 8, 11, 12, 13, 18, 19, 27, 36); (4) Role of teacher: Explanation/Supervision (items 9, 14, 15, 21, 22); (5) language learning activities (items 17, 23, 24, 37); (6) Selection of content (items 25, 26, 29); (7) Objectives/Evaluation (items 31, 33); (8) Assessment/Motivation (items 30, 34, 38, 39, 40); and (9) Other cultures (items 41, 42, 43, 44). However, the

present study did not focus on these dimensions and took into account only the overall score gained from the ALQ because the major aim was to investigate whether there was correlation or not between learner anxiety and autonomy.

The measurement scaled of the ALQ is a five-point Likert scale which ranges from "Always true" to "Never true". While "Always true" was assigned five points for positive/independency statements, "Never true" was scored one point and reverse scoring was adhered to negatively stated/dependency statement items. Dependency statements are items 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 21, 22, 30, 34, 36, 38, and 40.

Data Analysis and Results

Since the FLCAS does not have a standard scoring procedure, the present study employs Ganschow and Sparks (1996, p. 202), "standard and consistent method for determining group membership". Ganschow and Sparks (1996) used an ideal answer for each of the 33 items on the FLCAS and calculated the groups sample mean for these items, and then determined the degree to which the students deviated from the sample mean. "An 'ideal' answer was either 'Strongly agree/agree' or 'Strongly disagree/disagree', depending upon the direction of the question".

Table 1

Results of FLCAS Anxiety Grouping

Anxiety category	Number	Percentage (%)
LO- ANX	43	41.7
AVE-ANX	38	36.8
HI-ANX	22	21.3

Students scoring one or more standard deviations above overall sample mean were identified as low anxiety (LO-ANX); those between +0.99 and -0.99 standard deviations from the sample mean were identified as average anxiety (AVE-ANX); and those one or more standard deviations below the sample mean were identified as high anxiety (HI-ANX) (Ganschow & Sparks, 1996). Having used this calculation process, all of the participants (103), based on their FLCAS scores were assigned to appropriate groups. As a result, three groups were formed. The group smallest in population was formed by the participants scoring one standard deviation or more below the mean (see Table 1).

On consideration that the ALQ was being administered to a new population of approximately 10 to 11 year old young learners, the researcher of the present study found it appropriate to re-calculate the internal reliability coefficient of this questionnaire according to the three different anxiety groups. All of the data was analyzed by means of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The findings were as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Results of Anxiety Group ALQ Reliability

Reliability statistics			_
Group	Cronbach's Alpha	N of items	_
Low anxiety	0.837	44	_
Average anxiety	0.845	44	
High anxiety	0.881	44	

In order to determine the level of the independency of a group, chart of ALQ scores determining the degrees of learner Independency was used (Savaskan, 2003) (see Table 3).

Table 3

Degrees of Autonomy

Level of scores	Calculation	Interval	Degree	
Minimum score -Lower limit	$44 \times 1 = 44$	0-44	More dependent	
-Upper limit	$44 \times 2 = 88$	45-88	Dependent	
Average score -Upper limit	$44 \times 3 = 132$	89-132	Neutral	
Maximum score -Lower limit	$44 \times 4 = 176$	133-176	Independent	
-Upper limit	$44 \times 5 = 220$	177-220	More independent	

The minimum and maximum points (from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree) were given to a choice on the Likert scale (see Table 3).

Table 4
Statistic Results of Descriptives

N Mean	N7	N. Maan	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		- Minimum	Maximum
	Std. Deviation	Std. Ellol	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	- Millilliulli	Maximum		
LO-ANX	43	149.5814	17.60713	2.68506	144.1627	155.0001	103.00	183.00
AVE-ANX	38	141.9211	19.38707	3.14500	135.5487	148.2934	95.00	181.00
HI-ANX	22	133.8636	21.93995	4.67761	124.1360	143.5913	81.00	182.00
Total	103	143.3981	19.99085	1.96976	139.4911	147.3051	81.00	183.00

SPSS was employed for basic descriptive statistics. The results of the ALQ according to the three specified anxiety groups' displays that all groups have made it to the autonomy "Independent" level (see Table 4). However, here it must be stressed that the HI-ANX Group is just on the border line with a mean score of 133,8636. Another point that needs consideration about this result is that among the three groups, the HI-ANX Group 95% Confidence Interval for Mean Lower Bound is found the lowest with a score of 124.1360 and the standard deviation for this group is the highest with a score 21.93995. These results show that the participants within this group have scored the most differing scores with one another.

Table 5

ANOVA Results

Total ANOVA					
	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between groups	3726.860	2	1863.430	5.031	0.008
Within groups	37035.819	100	370.358		
Total	40762.680	102			

For the present study, one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was also employed. The purpose of this comparison was to determine if significant differences exist between the three groups (low, average, and high) of anxiety in terms of autonomy. The results of ANOVA displayed a 0,008 point significant difference between the groups of anxiety (see Table 5).

Upon the results of ANOVA, Multiple Comparisons were conducted through least significant differences (LSD), and Bonferroni tests for pairwise comparisons (see Table 6). Both of the LSD and Bonferroni tests

showed that the significant difference of the mean scores of autonomy among the groups was between the Low Anxiety and High Anxiety Groups—0.002 for LSD and 0.007 for Bonferroni.

Table 6

Multiple Comparisons Results

Multiple compari	sons						
Dependent variab	le: Total						
	(I) CRUP	nun (I) Chun Mea	Mean	Ct 1 F	or Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
	(I) GRUP	(J) GRUP	Difference (I-J)	Std. Error		Lower Bound	Upper Bound
	LO-ANX	AV-ANX	7.66034	4.28477	0.077	-0.8405	16.1612
	LO-ANX	HI-ANX	15.71776*	5.04455	0.002	5.7095	25.7260
LSD AV-AN HI-AN	AM ANW	LO-ANX	-7.66034	4.28477	0.077	-16.1612	0.8405
	AV-ANA	HI-ANX	8.05742	5.15565	0.121	-2.1712	18.2861
	HI-ANX	LO-ANX	-15.71776 [*]	5.04455	0.002	-25.7260	-5.7095
		AV-ANX	-8.05742	5.15565	0.121	-18.2861	2.1712
BONFERRONİ	LO-ANX	AV-ANX	7.66034	4.28477	0.231	-2.7727	18.0934
		HI-ANX	15.71776*	5.04455	0.007	3.4347	28.0008
	AV-ANX	LO-ANX	-7.66034	4.28477	0.231	-18.0934	2.7727
		HI-ANX	8.05742	5.15565	0.364	-4.4962	20.6110
	HI-ANX	LO-ANX	-15.71776*	5.04455	0.007	-28.0008	-3.4347
		AV-ANX	-8.05742	5.15565	0.364	-20.6110	4.4962

^{*} The mean difference is significant at the p< 0.05 level.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study attempts to shed light to the issue of the relationship between foreign language classroom anxiety and learner autonomy. The findings of this study clearly indicated that all of the participants in the three groups of anxiety; high, average, and low, were autonomous learners because they had all scored an average between 133-176 points, placing them into the "Independent" group.

Thus, perhaps due to the point that the high anxiety group had scored a borderline mean score with 133.8 point on the ALQ, there was a significant difference in levels of autonomy between those with high and low anxiety. Participants with high anxiety scored approximately 16 points lower in mean scores of autonomy when compared to those with low anxiety. This finding, when compared to that of an early investigation conducted by Young (1998) overlaps because the former researcher had discovered that "severe performance anxiety mitigates against autonomy and motivation, though mild anxiety may sometimes enhance them" (Young, 1998, as cited in Oxford, 2003, p. 83). Along these lines, in a more recent study, Liu (2012) proposed that "anxious learners may be less motivated to engage in autonomous learning activities either in or out of the classroom and less likely to expend effort learning the language, eventually becoming less proficient language learners. It would be reasonably impossible for teachers to enhance their students' learning autonomy or language proficiency without first paying attention to those with low motivation or high anxiety" (p. 133).

Another point of view which can be stated is that, teachers may not be aware of their highly anxious learners and this is a very important issue when considering effective learning. However, unfortunately it has been reported that "children's problems with anxiety in most cases remain largely hidden" in the classroom environment (Muris & Meesters, 2002, p. 589, as cited in Layne, Bernstein, & March, 2006). This in return could lead to negative interventions in the child's learning processes. Although teachers may have an

understanding of anxiety and autonomy, in order to realize optimum learning in the classroom, effective teachers need to be able to identify and manage their learners with anxiety and provide an autonomy supportive classroom environment.

On the contrary to the present study, a study seeking to discover the relation between anxiety and language learner autonomy was conducted by Sanadgol and Abdolmanafi-Rokni (2015), who had found that there was no correlation between the anxiety and autonomy levels of Iranian high school students learning English as a foreign language. According to Sanadgol and Abdolmanafi-Rokni (2015), even though there was no statistically significant correlation between the two variables, teachers still needed to be aware that autonomous students can still feel worried about their language learning experiment.

It is possible to claim that the statistical data obtained from the present study has proved that in learner autonomy development, high foreign language anxiety in language learning is not a hindering but rather a mitigating factor and this point is worth considering and necessitates further detailed investigations. As a result, it is possible to argue that in foreign language teaching, teachers and learners need to consider the point that there is a relation between foreign language classroom anxiety and learner autonomy.

The present study has provided an imperative for teachers to be aware that students with high anxiety for language learning may at the same time possess an internal constraint on their development of autonomy. So, for effective language learning, teachers aiming to enhance their student's autonomy would also need to consider the duty of assisting their students with coping and reducing anxiety. For teacher professional development, training teachers and teacher candidates on anxiety and autonomy should be considered in pre-service and in-service teaching programs.

The present research which may contribute to the limited research in this area, has displayed the point that learner anxiety and autonomy are related. Certainly, it is crucial to express that the present study has its limitations. The quantitative data were gathered through the implementation of two questionnaires to 103 students. In future studies, investigations as such can be replicated with the addition of qualitative data, the investigation of the relevance of motivation, or impact on language proficiency. A much bigger population of participants would also yield conclusions with higher validity and acceptability.

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Appendix A

Autonomy Learner Questionnaire

ITEM 5 4 3 2 1

- 1 When I am learning English I try to relate the new things I have learned to my former knowledge.
- 2 I use other English books and resources on my own will.
- 3 When I hear someone talking in English, I listen very carefully.
- 4 I want to talk in English with my family or friends.
- 5 It is my own preference to read English books written in basic English.
- 6 While learning English, I like activities in which I can learn on my own.
- 7 I like trying new things while I am learning English.
- 8 I am afraid that I won't learn a topic if the teacher doesn't explain it in the English class.
- 9 I don't like learning English on my own.
- 10 If I cannot learn English in the classroom, I can learn working on my own.
- 11 I feel confident when the teacher is beside me while I am learning English.
- 12 I can learn English only with the help of my teacher.
- 13 My teacher always has to guide me in learning English.
- 14 While learning English I would like my teacher to repeat grammatical rules.
- 15 I feel happy when my teacher explains every detail of English.
- 16 In the future, I would like to continue learning English on my own/without a teacher.
- 17 In the English lesson I like projects where I can work with other students.
- 18 I can learn the English grammar on my own/without needing a teacher.
- 19 I use my own methods to learn vocabulary in English.
- 20 I like learning English words by looking them up in a dictionary.
- 21 Only my teacher can teach me the English grammar. I cannot learn on my own.
- 22 I want the teacher to give us the words that we are to learn.
- 23 I would like to use cassettes/video/CD's in the foreign language, outside of the classroom.
- 24 In fact I like to listen and read in English, outside of the classroom.
- 25 I would like to select the materials for my foreign language lessons.
- 26 I would like to share the responsibility of deciding what to do in the English lesson.
- 27 I know how I can learn English the best.
- 28 If I haven't learnt something in my English lesson, I am responsible for it.
- 29 I would like to choose the content of what is to be taught in the English lesson.
- 30 I don't study the topics after I get a good grade from my test.
- 31 I think my friends are better than me in the foreign language. I want to reach their level of English.
- 32 I hesitate on the matter of compensating what I have missed in English lessons.
- 33 I believe that I will reach a good level in the English language.
- 34 I study English when we are going to have a test.
- 35 I think that I learn English better when I work on my own.
- 36 I only study for the English lesson when the teacher gives homework.
- 37 I find it more useful to work with my friends than working on my own for the English lesson.
- 38 I do the English lesson activities only when my teacher is going to grade me.
- 39 I like it when my teacher gives us different test types, other than written tests.
- 40 I like it when my teacher does a lot of tests in our English lesson.
- 41 I try to understand the jokes and riddles of the foreign language I am learning.
- 42 I also investigate the culture of the foreign language I am learning.
- 43 I also investigate the idioms and sayings of the foreign language I am learning.
- 44 I ask people who have lived abroad about the lifestyles of the people living there.