

Özgün Makale

Learned Helplessness, Foreign Language Anxiety and Their Impacts on Language Learning*¹

Öğrenilmiş Çaresizlik, Yabancı Dil Kaygısı ve Bunların Dil Öğrenimine Etkileri

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Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı, öğrenilmiş çaresizliğin ve yabancı dil kaygısının dil öğrenmeye etkisini ilgili alanyazını gözden geçirerek araştırmaktır. Öğrenme sürecinin herkes için aynı olmadığı gerçeği göz önünde bulundurulduğunda, birçok değişkenin her birey için farklı öğrenme süreçlerine yol açtığını değerlendirmek şartırcı olmayacaktır. Dilbilim ve eğitim psikolojisi üzerine yapılan kapsamlı araştırmalar, öğrenmede duyuşsal faktörlerin etkisinin gittikçe artan bir şekilde vurgulandığını göstermektedir. Öğrenmenin doğasına paralel olarak, dil öğrenimi de araştırmacıların ilgisini çekmiş ve dil edinimi uzun yıllar boyunca çeşitli çalışmaların ana ilgi alanlarından ve amaçlarından biri olmuştur. Duyuşsal alanda akademik başarıyı etkileyen faktörler arasında, önceki öğrenme deneyimlerinde yaşanan başarısızlığın sonraki öğrenme deneyimlerinde de devam etmesi şeklinde tanımlanan öğrenilmiş çaresizlik ve genelleme sonucunda bilinmeyen korku olarak ifade edilen kaygı konusu özellikle dikkat çekmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Öğrenilmiş çaresizlik, yabancı dil kaygısı, dil öğrenimi

Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore the influence of learned helplessness and foreign language anxiety on language learning by reviewing the related literature. Considering that learning process is not the same for everyone, it would not be surprising to see that many variables lead to different processes for each individual. Extensive studies on linguistics and educational psychology demonstrate an increasing emphasis on the influence of affective factors in learning. In line with the nature of learning, the realm of language learning has also attracted the attention of researchers and language acquisition has been one of the main concerns of several studies for

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years. Among the factors in the affective domain influencing academic achievement, learned helplessness, defined as the failure in previous learning experiences will continue in the following learning experiences, and anxiety, the fear of unknown cause as a result of generalization draw attention to remark.

Keywords: Learned Helplessness, foreign language anxiety, language learning

Introduction

It is argued that theory of transition along with theory of property are the two fundamental complementary theories that describe foreign language learning process. While theory of property emphasizes the structures of knowledge; transition theory, in which individual differences have been pointed out, describes the link between cognitive and learning processes (Henter, 2014). To Olivares-Chuat (2010), after the introduction of the concept aptitude in language learning, there have been many attempts to define individual variables that affect the learning process and accordingly, “cognitive (aptitude, strategies etc.), affective (motivation, anxiety, attitudes etc.) meta-cognitive and demographic factors” (p. 99) have been suggested as the categories. Thanks to extensive studies on linguistics and psychological aspects on learning, an increasing emphasis has been focused on the influence of affective factors in learning process (Djigunovic, 2006; Gömleksiz & Kan, 2012; Kralova & Soradova, 2015; Ni, 2012). Henter (2014), pointing out the same trend, states that during a decade (2002-2012) in seven databases a total of 3262 studies on motivation, attitude and anxiety on foreign language learning were identified. Thus, once associated merely with the cognitive abilities, language learning has recently been acknowledged to be deeply influenced by affective variables and factors (Djigunovic, 2006).

Accordingly, it is emphasized that language learning does not only include psycho-motor behaviours and cognitive processes, however, it also applies affective factors such as motives, interests, and attitudes in the process of production and expression and, therefore language, thoughts and feelings should not possibly be thought independently from each other (Ülgen, 1997). Emotions and perceptions constitute a significant part in our daily lives and we constantly perceive the reports to our brain about the world in which we live through our emotions and feelings. By means of these feelings, we develop our attitudes and behaviours to adopt ourselves to the world (Kralova & Soradova, 2015). Minghe (2013, pp. 57) connotes that “affect” as a term points out the emotional states or feelings and the affective domain is “the emotional side of human behaviour”. It is, thus, argued that affective and cognitive domains are complementary components of language learning process. In this context, while arguing that feelings and emotions could be leading factors in language learning process, Scovel (2000) also maintains that the affective domain has mostly been ignored due to its nature that cannot be measured accurately through certain tools.

In the same vein, Carroll (1962) also emphasizes the significance of affective factors in the formula he presents in the second language learning model. In the equalization where the linguistic knowledge and skills to be gained are expressed with ‘Kf’, ‘Kp’ includes the learner’s general knowledge of other languages as well as their native language; ‘A’ represents physiological, biological, intellectual and cognitive abilities; ‘M’ refers to personality, attitude, motivation and anxiety and ‘O’ represents language learning opportunity. According to the theory, in the absence of any of the elements of the formula shaped as $Kf = Kp + A + M + O$, learning process could be hampered.



Similarly, in the Affective Filter Hypothesis (“Affective Filter Hypothesis”), Krashen (1982) emphasizes that affective variables such as motivation, self-confidence and anxiety in foreign language learning influence language acquisition in a positive or negative way (Demircan, 1990). According to the theory, five main hypotheses - “the acquisition-learning distinction; the natural order hypothesis; the monitor hypothesis; the input hypothesis and the affective filter hypothesis” - in language acquisition process have important roles. Ni (2012) argues that affective filter explains the relationship between affective variables and second language acquisition process by highlighting the point that second language learners differ in terms of affective filter degrees or activities. Individuals whose attitudes for second language acquisition are not at the proper degree or level will not only be exposed to less input but also face a high level affective filter - even they understand the message, the input could not reach the language acquisition device. Individuals with such attitudes will not only get more ‘input’; they will also have a lower or weaker filter. Affective factors, which comprise certain feelings such as anxiety, confidence, attitudes etc., therefore, determine the amount of intake and input regarding acquisition. In other words, the theory connotes that learners with high levels of motivation, positive attitudes, confidence, low anxiety levels receive far more input than those who have high levels of anxiety, low motivation and confidence along with negative attitudes (Krashen, 1982). It, therefore, can be concluded that affective filter actively influences - the learners’ level of input and ultimately their academic achievement in language learning acquisition. In this respect, learning process, as a whole, is influenced by feelings of competence, motivation, anxiety, confidence, burnout and helplessness in a latent way.

Shortly, countless conditions, experiences and obstacles shape individuals’ perceptions towards life and their learning process. Yaman, Esen and Derkuş (2011) connote that individuals often undergo some experiences related to affective domain in life that make them feel helpless in different contexts. When the feeling of helplessness accompanies anxiety, there might emerge situations over which individuals could lose the control readily and this feeling might cause to give up easily and thus triggering failure. In this context, the present study is believed to present scientific assumptions along with the findings from the related research with regard to learned helplessness and foreign language anxiety over language acquisition.

Learned Helplessness

It has been argued that not all individuals use their potentials to solve problems, and sometimes they tend to avoid and withdraw even when they have the ability to control and change events or problems encountered. When examined in terms of the learning process, which is the main determinant of human behaviour and defined as permanent changes in the knowledge or behaviours of the individual through experiences (Woolfolk, 1995), learned helplessness has been used in explaining the cause of many behavioural patterns of withdrawal. Being an important factor of affective domain in language learning process to be handled since it leads to lack of confidence and failure the in-learning process (Dağgöl, 2018), learned helplessness has been defined as a giving up behaviour caused by a previous experience (Seligman, 1974). From a general perspective, based on previous experience, the concept of learned helplessness, is known as the thought that all effort made in any attempt will lead to failure as usual, or like the previous ones (Woolfolk, 1995).

The concept of learned helplessness was discovered in the 1960’s when Seligman and his colleagues conducted a conditioned reflex experiment on dogs to examine the relationship between learning and fear (Seligman, 1975). In the experiment, he took a group of dogs that were



not subjected to any experiment and divided them into three categories. The dogs in the first group were named “escape group” and applied a low level of electric shock to them. Dogs in this group had the opportunity to stop the shock by pressing a button on the panel next to their head in the cabin. If the button was not pressed within 30 seconds, the shock ceased spontaneously. These dogs learned to press the button quickly and in time were able to press the button sooner. The second group was named “yoked group” and they were shocked under the same conditions as the “escape group”. However, even if these dogs pressed the button, the shock did not stop. The duration of shock applied to these dogs was the same as that applied to a dog in the escape group. Thus, the escape and yoke group were shocked at the same time. Since the shock did not stop when the dogs in the “yoked group” pressed the panel, after several attempts, they gave up pressing the button on the panel (Cherry, 2017; Geer, 1968; Overmier & Seligman, 1967; Seligman, Maier, Seligman & Maier, 1967). Based on their experiments, Seligman (1975) defined the term learned helplessness as a situation that prevents the avoidance behaviour of dogs which were once previously exposed to electric shocks.

While the concept of learned helplessness was closely associated with animals and their behaviours, research findings show that exposure to uncontrollable situations in humans has a detrimental effect on subsequent performance (Cherry, 2017). For example, Hiroto (1974) investigated learned helplessness in humans using a similar mechanism used in experiments with animals and found that exposure to uncontrollable stimuli produces the effect of helplessness in humans, as well.

As the concept itself has a solid ground on the psychology of individuals, it can generate negative consequences among learners who have the belief that they cannot improve or overcome the problems they come across due to their prior failures in the school context (Raufelder, Regner, & Wood, 2018). It is argued that people easily avoid and accept the obstacles they face as a result of learned helplessness and it also applies to focus on relatively easy jobs, and this often occurs in situations where failure cannot be controlled (Firmin, Hwang, Copella, & Clark, 2004; Wayne & Cecil, 1982), and this makes learned helplessness be one of the basic components that forms obstacles for effective and meaningful learning. There have been a number of studies aiming to identify the effects of learned helplessness on academic achievement. Filippello et al. (2020) found out that academic achievement was negatively predicted by learned helplessness. Similar results were gained through Aydoğan’s (2016) study that revealed the negative correlation between academic achievement and learned helplessness. Likewise, in Krejtz and Nezlak’s (2016) study, learned helplessness negatively correlated with math and language achievement. Sorrenti, Filippello, Orecchio and Buzzai (2016) also highlighted the negative impact of learned helplessness on academic achievement. In a specific context, Yaman et al. (2011) connotes that in language learning, learned helplessness becomes a significant variable as the process itself mostly depends on the learner and her/his interpersonal interactions. In this sense, once learners develop or experience the feeling of frustration and helplessness, they generally show a tendency to avoid or evade tasks and regard themselves to be unsuccessful learners (Raufelder et al., 2018). Albalawi (2017), referring to Nakata (2006), suggests that learners’ perception of noncontrollable failure paves the way for the feeling of helplessness and this kind of insight is especially related to demotivation which finally leads to learned helplessness in language learning process.

The Causes of Learned Helplessness

Teodorescu and Erev (2014, pp. 1) connote that the prevalent description of learned helplessness is its emphasis on “perceived uncontrollability” and when individuals lose the control or the



command over the actions, they become helpless, give up struggling and cease trying to regain the control. They develop an idea that any attempt and endeavour appear to be futile and acquire a kind of self-defeating prejudices. In this sense, learned helplessness is not an inborn trait or characteristics, rather it is something that is gained through previous experiences. In this process, previous academic settings in which learners get unpleasant feedback from their teachers (Raines, 2014), personality style, needs, priorities, maladaptive perfectionism, low motivation, (Tayfur, 2012) could be considered as the causes of learned helplessness. Further, Kolber (2020) emphasizes on the impacts of experiences at school and argues that schools have become the criterion of success where everybody does not meet all the requirements. This causes a kind of frustration and learners develop negative attitudes towards school. This frustration finally leads to low levels of self-efficacy (Kolber, 2020; Wu, 2020) and naturally learners develops learned helplessness.

Gordon and Gordon (2006) specify that in the learning process, first the learner constructs the meaning of any piece of information based on her/his prior knowledge and then associates it with different cases. Thus, negative events from early life experiences could create and later trigger to have a tendency for pessimistic explanatory style and depression, which is primarily linked with learned helplessness. In this context, Abramson, Seligman and Teasdale, (1978, pp. 49) argue that, whenever individuals, developing helplessness, face or experience any failure, they attribute this to certain causes, which could be “stable or unstable, global or specific and internal or external”. The kind of attribution chosen by individuals determines whether the feeling of helplessness will be permanent or temporary, powerful or weak and whether their helplessness will affect the perception of their own self-esteem. Attribution theory, whose purpose is to decipher and analyse the causes and reasons of behaviours, focuses on internal and external attribution. While the former deals with individual traits such as personality and manners, the latter is based on the assumption that outer variables, other than the individuals’ own, have impacts on failure.

Another important factor, generally stemming from learned helplessness as a source of stress is anxiety. This particular feeling has been found to be related with learned helplessness (Martinko & Gardner, 1982).

Anxiety

Defined as “an uncomfortable feeling of nervousness or worry about something that is happening or might happen in the future” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020); an uncertain fear that occurs through learning and generalization and mostly as a result of frustration (Alaylıoğlu & Oğuzkan, 1976); “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry” (Spielberger, 1983, pp. 1), anxiety plays a significant role on academic achievement.

When considered within the framework of language learning, it is stated that students who worry and fear that they will never be able to complete any given task in a satisfactory way are left alone with anxiety. Researchers have stated that anxiety is an important affective variable in foreign language achievement and that anxiety is quite common among foreign language learners and this negatively affects language performance (Bailey, Onwuegbuzie, Daley, & Christine, 2000). Most of the research on language learning and affective domain has focused on the phenomenon of anxiety, which plays a key role in language learning. Arguing that anxiety is one of the most important predictors of success in second language learning, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) state that students were more anxious in foreign language lessons than in other courses. Among others, Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) define language anxiety as the worry or fear when individuals are required to use a foreign language with not sufficient command.



Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) have drawn a theoretical framework for investigating the anxiety levels of foreign language students. The first part of the frame is defined as “communication apprehension”. This is explained by the fact that although students have mature thoughts or ideas in order to communicate, they cannot communicate in any way due to their immature word repertoire in a foreign language. Therefore, not being able to express oneself or fully understand others causes anxiety. The second part of the frame is “test anxiety”. This type of anxiety occurs when individuals are required to have exams in their foreign language courses and it is related to the fear of failure in academic assessment. The last component of the frame is “fear of negative evaluation”. In this case, students who are not sure of themselves and what they are saying may have a feeling of not being able to make a good impression on the people around them. While admitting these conceptual components of anxiety in foreign language learning, Horwitz et al. (1986, pp. 128) also puts forward the idea that anxiety in foreign language cannot be evaluated merely taking into account these constructs alone. Rather, they see it 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”.

For quite a long time, researchers have studied on the “anxiety-provoking” prospective of language learning and emphasizes on the two fundamental skills in language learning: speaking and listening (Horwitz et al., 1986, pp. 125). Saturdaysyah (2017) examining the effect of anxiety on speaking performance found that students who had lower anxiety level had better score on speaking performance. Likewise, Aghajani and Amanzadeh (2017), Lestari, Loeneto and Ihsan (2019), Handanayi and Ngadiman (2018), Taeko, Manalo and Greenwood (2004), Hasibuan and Irzawati (2019) found in their studies that anxiety had negative impacts or showed negative correlations with speaking performance. However, there are also studies, though very few, revealing insignificant impact. For instance, in a study conducted by Illyin, Hanifah and Yuniarti (2019), it was discovered that anxiety did not have a significant effect on speaking ability. As for its effect on listening, Taysi (2019) found that there was a negative and significant correlation between anxiety and listening performance. Similarly, Namaziandost, Hafezian, and Shafiee (2018), Kim (2000), Arnold (2000) and Yihui and Shiyong’s (2019) studies also revealed negative link between anxiety and listening performance. In addition to the studies on the adverse effects of anxiety on specific skills in language learning, anxiety is also concluded to have negative influences on academic achievement. Halder (2018) and Oflaz (2019), along with the meta-analysis conducted by Teimouri, Goetze and Plonsky (2019) discovered the negative associations between the mentioned variables. On the other hand, Razak, Yassin, and Maasum (2017) and Akpur (2017) found that there was no significant correlation between the levels of anxiety and academic achievement.

Causes of Foreign Language Anxiety

As it has been stated above, there are many studies focusing on foreign language anxiety and mostly its adverse effects on academic achievement. From a synthesis of studies, it can be concluded that the foremost causes that lead to foreign language anxiety, as has been framed by Horwitz et al. (1986, pp. 129), are “communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation”.

To Horwitz et al. (1986), adults often perceive themselves as capable and competent to express what they think when they interact with others in their native language in various socio-cultural settings. However, this assumption generally becomes challenging while speaking in a foreign language as their attempts to communicate will be assessed in a different, unknown and unfamiliar cultural settings. In another word, their speaking will be judged, or even threatened



by implicit and uncertain linguistic and socio-cultural criteria. Thus, any endeavour in a foreign language will possibly to test individuals' perceptions of their self-efficacy, competence as well as ability, and thus leads to fear and apprehension.

Test anxiety, a psychological situation in which the individuals suffer from a fear of failure, mostly arouses when unrealistic or perfectionistic standards are set. In a foreign language class where written tests, oral exams and pop-quizzes are frequent, test anxiety represents a potential obstruct (Dewaele, Petrides, & Furnham, 2008; Horwitz et al., 1986; Mills & Blankstein, 2000; Vanstone & Hicks, 2019). Fear of negative evaluation is also another construct that stems from the apprehension about other people's feelings and interpretations. As the interactions and communication tools are more frequent in a foreign language class more than any others, learners generally tend to avoid situations where their peers or others might evaluate them negatively (Geuken et al., 2020; Horwitz et al., 1986).

Apart from the theoretical background framed by Horwitz et al. (1986), there are some other factors that pave the way for the emergence of foreign language anxiety. Among others, the influence of peers and teachers (Bekleyen, 2004); low esteem and proficiency in the target language (Huang, 2012; Mahmoodzadeh, 2013; Oteir & Al-Otaibi, 2019; Young, 1991); low parental education level (Pan & Akay, 2015); activities conducted during the class and course design (Jackson, 2002); communication fear (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991); setting perfectionistic targets (Dewaele et al., 2008); previous experiences and self-worth (Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley, 1999) as well as teacher's role and atmosphere of the learning environment (Oteir & Al-Otaibi, 2019); competitiveness and beliefs (Huang, 2012) could be listed. Young (1991, pp. 426) also itemized the potential sources of foreign language anxiety as "personal and interpersonal anxieties, learners' beliefs about language learning, instructors' beliefs about language teaching, instructor-learner interactions, classroom procedures and language testing". Thus, it can be concluded that these sources are perceived by individuals and mostly they form a basis for a perpetual trait.

Discussion

The effects of learned helplessness and foreign language anxiety on individuals' academic achievement are noteworthy to remark and in the light of the framework explained above, it can be concluded that each of these affective variables could be a natural hindrance to individuals' ability to learn and to achieve their goals satisfactorily.

Learned helplessness, commonly defined as the generalization of negative previous experiences and not being able to surmount these aversive feelings when facing with new environments (Firmin et al., 2004; Seligman & Maier, 1967; Teoderescu & Erev, 2014), results in low interest, a decrease to response and inactiveness (Greer & Wethered, 1984). Sorrenti et al. (2016) connote that it could be a significant predictor of academic achievement in that it is related to beliefs, feelings, and explanatory types. In this sense, individuals with learned helplessness do not trust their abilities and talents; think they do not have adequate self-confidence and this leads to motivational, cognitive and affective insufficiencies (Gordon & Gordon, 2006). They also attribute their failures to personal disabilities, their lack of talents as well as their thinking abilities. In this case, classrooms become a kind of places they feel imprisoned as their performances are so poor in class and their self-confidence is so low (Raines, 2014). When learners cannot meet the requirements of the school, they would be labelled as lazy and or unintelligent ones. This naturally will cause them to suffer from depression and this specific feeling could hinder them from realizing their potentials (Peterson, Maier and Seligman, 1993).



Ghasemi (2021) connotes that utilizing certain strategies related to motivation applied by teachers and other authorities could be helpful coping with learned helplessness. In the same vein, creating a non-threatening atmosphere and relationship between students and teachers as well as supporting students to comprehend how to evaluate their achievements and failures in terms of their efforts could be an onset (Raufelder et al., 2018). Further, increasing individuals' levels of motivation, promoting linguistic competence, setting and listing realistic goals, positive feedback from teachers, re-assessing the failures of the past experiences could be remedial solutions to cope with the adverse impacts of learned helplessness (Ghasemi, 2021).

Foreign language learning anxiety is another factor in affective domain that influences the learning process negatively. It is commonly defined 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” (Horwitz et al. 1986, pp. 128), almost all researchers on the field agree on the fact that language anxiety is an important obstacle that prevents learners from acquiring language (Ali & Fei, 2017; Rabadi & Rabadi, 2020). Arnold (2000) puts a further step and argues that language learning anxiety is among the prevalent factors that is placed near the top even in informal settings like on the streets, let alone the formal ones like in classes. It increases the levels of tension, nervousness as well as apprehension and thus concern and agitation arise.

Ever since the emergence of the concept, many suggestions have been put forward to cope with anxiety. To Horwitz et al. (1986), educators are supposed to apply the two alternatives to reduce the degree of anxiety, the prerequisite of which is to admit the presence of language anxiety. They can assist their students in dealing with existing agitative situations or they can create such a stress-free learning atmosphere that the learners would not develop any kind of anxiety. In cases of low academic performance, teachers should always raise an awareness that learners' undesirable behaviours, unwillingness to participate in class activities, underachievement could stem from anxiety rather than lack of ability, talent or insufficient background.

As the charge of the situation cannot solely be attributed to the students, suggestions to cope with anxiety are also directed to teachers. Creating lively and friendly atmosphere as well as enjoyable environment could be helpful in reducing the levels of anxiety (Kusuma, 2019). Further, applying relaxing activities so that students can get a chance to know each other (Lucas, 1984); persuading them to believe that they are proficient (Ni, 2012); encouraging them to practice and making them exposed to the language more (Liu & Jackson, 2008); employing cooperative techniques, forming support groups, making use of technology specifically in speaking (Lestari et al., 2019); using conversation cards (Young, 1991); using the same questioning patterns to all students to imply that they are not treated differently (He, 2017); starting with simple, following small steps as well as applying a communicative approach (Alrabai, 2015) would be beneficial in eliminating the unfavourable effects of anxiety.

As a conclusion, the review of literature and a myriad of relevant empirical studies on learned helplessness and language learning anxiety highlight and emphasize that these affective variables form challenging concerns in learning process. A thorough and systematic review of the subject matter would bring about a detailed comprehension of the issue and this endeavour could pave the way for an opportunity to spot the missing component in educating the learners by emphasizing the fact that it is not the learners' lack of understanding, rather it could be educators' not to understand why they do not want to learn (Gordon & Gordon, 2006). In today's world, in particular, where the fear of contagion has begun to dominate almost every aspect of our daily life, coping with the negative impacts of the factors mentioned presents much more interest than



ever before. Psychological counselling by professionals, emphatic approach by educators and the related shareholders, effective leisure time activities, though in online platforms, friendly learning atmospheres could be helpful in reducing the adverse effects of learned helplessness and anxiety in educational settings.

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