Foreign Language Anxiety
and the Advanced Language Learner
Foreign Language Anxiety and the Advanced Language Learner: A Study of Hungarian Students of English as a Foreign Language

By

Zsuzsa Tóth
To my daughter, Fanni
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Anxiety is one of those topics on which significant differences of opinion can be found. Some people believe that anxiety is a minor inconvenience for a language student, perhaps an excuse for not participating in class or a guise to hide a lack of study. Others seem to feel that anxiety may be the linchpin of the entire affective reaction to language learning… (MacIntyre, 1999, p. 24).

My interest in language learning anxiety comes from my own personal experience of foreign language learning and teaching. Besides my own experiences as a learner, it is through teaching university courses of English to English as a foreign language (EFL) majors and preparing them for high-stakes language exams that I have become aware of the presence of target-language-related anxiety among students. Why is it that some learners are anxious while others are not in the same language classroom? What is it that makes them anxious about communicating in English? Is it a serious problem if learners are anxious in their language classes or is it merely “a minor inconvenience” as some people suppose? Is anxiety a more important issue in language learning than in learning other subjects? What is my part, as a language teacher, in creating and alleviating language learning anxiety? It was questions like these that prompted me to conduct research into English major students’ foreign language anxiety (FLA).

Anxiety associated with foreign or second language learning and communication has long been in the focus of second language (L2) researchers. It has been investigated in the broader context of individual learner differences potentially responsible for differential success at language learning since the 1970s (Dörnyei, 2005; Horwitz, 1990). The past twenty-five years, however, seem to have seen a real increase in the number of studies dealing with anxiety in the L2 domain. Attempts have been made to develop a firm theoretical basis for clarifying the construct of language learning anxiety, its development and maintenance, as well as its dimensions (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989, 1991a, 1994a). Instruments have been developed to measure general and skill specific types of anxiety arising in the context of learning a new language (Cheng, Horwitz, & Schallert, 1999; Gardner 1985; Horwitz et
Introduction

As a result of these significant advances in theory and measurement since the mid-1980s, L2-related anxiety has become one of the major, most highly examined psychological variables in second language research, documented in learners of diverse target languages (TL) in various instructional settings (for overviews see Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993a, b; Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a; MacIntyre, 1999; Young, 1991, 1994).

However, in spite of the significant advances and the substantial volume of research conducted in the field, some very basic questions about anxiety in the L2 domain still appear to be unanswered, which is apparent in the conflicting views voiced in the research literature as to the role of this variable in second language learning. It is still a question whether anxiety about foreign language learning and communication declines as proficiency increases, which is essentially asking whether proficiency is a primary factor in determining anxiety level. Another much debated issue is whether language anxiety can account for differential success in L2 learning or is merely a consequence of poor performance or some language learning difficulty. How anxiety relates to other individual differences—cognitive, affective, personality, etc.,—in language learners, is yet another unexplored area. This book aims to make some contribution to the clarification of these very basic, yet unresolved issues in the study of L2-related anxiety.

Besides my personal interest in the topic and the perceived gaps in the literature, the study I report here has been also motivated by the realisation that while L2-related anxiety is a well-researched subject in the North American and Canadian setting and is becoming one in some other contexts—European, Asian (see e.g., Dewaele, Petrides, & Furnham, 2008; Hurd, 2007; Kim, 2009; Liu, 2006; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004; Satar & Özdener, 2008; Sheorey, 2006, Yan & Horwitz, 2008)—in the Central European region, a completely different learning and ethnolinguistic context, it seems to be a neglected, virtually unresearched area. Studies conducted in the US and Canada present anxiety as a widespread and severe problem among language learners (Horwitz, 2001; Horwitz & Young, 1991; MacIntyre, 1995a; Young, 1999). According to one estimation as many as up to one half of American university students carry “alarming levels of anxiety” in their foreign language classes (Campbell & Ortiz, 1991, p. 159), and for many of these learners language courses are felt to be the most anxiety-provoking of the courses they take (Campbell & Ortiz, 1991; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989, 1991b; Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley,
The book explores how this picture compares with Hungarian university students’ experience of anxiety about language learning. Due to (1) essential differences in the status of learners’ native language (world languages vs. Hungarian), (2) differences in attitudes to and motivation for language learning, (3) different language teaching traditions and practices, and (4) differences in terms of frequency of contact with native speakers, to mention but a few factors, the language anxiety profile of Hungarian foreign language learners may be different from those of learners in other cultural settings and instructional contexts. Examining foreign language anxiety of Hungarian students of English, the book wishes to add new empirical data to the study of anxiety in foreign language learners.

The choice of participants is unique in another respect as well. As reflected in the title, this is a book on FLA with a focus on the advanced language learner. As most previous studies of L2-related anxiety have focused on learners at the beginning or intermediate level, relatively little is known about anxiety at more advanced levels of second language learning (Aida, 1994; Ewald, 2007; Horwitz, 1996; Phillips, 2003; Young, 1994). My work aims to fill this gap by examining advanced learners’: future English teachers’ and other EFL professionals’ feelings of L2-related anxiety in order to provide insights into what role this affective learner characteristic may play in the language learning and communication processes of advanced language learners.

**Aims and overview of the book**

The main aims of the book are (1) to find out how advanced EFL learners’ foreign language anxiety can be characterized, (2) to examine what factors affect anxiety level, and (3) to explore the relationship between FLA and various aspects of learners’ performance and communication experience in EFL. The study I report on was guided by the following research questions:

1. How pervasive is FLA among EFL majors, and what is the degree of this anxiety? What are its main sources and manifestations, and what factors can account for its development?

2. To what extent do learner characteristics such as (1) proficiency level, (2) foreign language aptitude, (3) strength of motivation, (4) L2-self-concept, and (5) personality contribute to FLA?
3. What effect does FLA have on learners’ language achievement at the university level?
4. How does FLA affect oral performance and the subjective experience of L2 communication?

The text is organized into nine chapters as follows. First a theoretical background to the study is provided. Although the book is concerned with a specific kind of anxiety: foreign language anxiety, first I consider the concept of anxiety in general, as a psychological construct, looking at some basic definitions of anxiety in the psychological literature, as well as some theoretical positions on its causes and effects (Chapter 1). After this preliminary, I outline various approaches that have been used in the study of anxiety in the context of L2 learning, which is followed by a detailed description of the model of foreign language anxiety that served as the theoretical framework for the study, and the rationale for adopting this particular conceptualisation of anxiety as a research framework (Chapter 2).

Chapter 3 reviews previous studies into FLA, with a focus on the unresolved issues the book aims to address. After reviewing the relevant literature, a detailed account of the research design is given (Chapter 4). First, the rationale for the methodology is provided, which is followed by the description of the setting and the participants, the instruments used, the data collection procedures, and, finally, the methods of data analysis.

The results of the study are presented and discussed in four consecutive chapters. Chapter 5, addressing the first research question, provides an overview of English major participants’ FLA: its scope, severity, and main characteristics, as well as its various manifestations and most important sources, relying on quantitative as well as qualitative data. Chapter 6, concerned with the second research question, examines how various learner characteristics—proficiency level, FL aptitude, strength of motivation, L2-self-concept, and personality—are related to participants’ feelings of foreign language anxiety, and what contribution they make to its prediction. The subsequent two chapters are concerned with the effects of FLA. Chapter 7, addressing the third research question, looks at the impact of FLA on students’ L2 achievement at the university level as measured by course grades and test/examination results, while Chapter 8, dealing with the fourth question, focuses on the role of anxiety in oral performance and the subjective experience of L2 communication. In the last chapter the most important findings are summarised and conclusions are drawn, together with an account of the limitations and implications of the study.
CHAPTER ONE

ANXIETY AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSTRUCT

Although this is a book on one specific anxiety: the anxiety related to learning and using a language other than one’s mother tongue, first I look at the concept of anxiety in general, as a psychological construct. In this chapter I consider some basic definitions of anxiety in the psychological literature, then I go on to describe some theoretical positions on its causes and effects.

What is anxiety? According to the Collins Cobuild dictionary it is “a feeling of nervousness or worry about something”, while the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines it as “the state of feeling nervous or worried that something bad is going to happen” (my emphasis). As evidenced by these definitions, phrased in the idiom of the layman, anxiety in everyday language refers to an unpleasant emotion or affective state, roughly a synonym or variant of fear¹, which people want to avoid or get rid of (Carver & Scheier, 2006). Psychologists, however, distinguish several categories of anxiety. For a start, when they refer to somebody as anxious it may mean two different things (Levitt, 1980). One of them is that the person referred to is anxious at the moment, i.e. is in an anxious state of mind, which interpretation practically corresponds to the second vernacular definition above (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary). Alternatively, it may mean that the individual in question is an anxious person; we could say a worrier, for whom being anxious is a personality characteristic. These two interpretations are reflective of conceptualisations of the construct (1) as a transient psychological state, an immediate

¹ In the psychological literature theoretical distinctions are made between anxiety and allied concepts such as fear and phobia, “based on the degree to which the emotion is specific to a stimulus, or its appropriateness to a situation” (Levitt, 1968, p. 36). For practical and experimental purposes, however, according to Levitt (1968, 1980), anxiety and fear are indistinguishable. Stress and tension are two other terms frequently used with reference to anxiety, the former usually referring to “the particular emotion under investigation”, while the latter either to a “condition of the musculature of the body” or a “vague feeling of restlessness” indicative of the presence of anxiety (Levitt, 1968, p. 36).
response to some anxiety-provoking stimulus, and (2) as an individual difference (ID) or trait variable, referred to in the psychological literature as state anxiety and trait anxiety, respectively.

### 1.1 Trait versus State anxiety

The distinction between a personal trait of anxiety and anxiety states has been delineated in the 1960s (Cattel & Scheier, 1961, 1963; Lazarus, 1966; Spielberger, 1966) and the two anxiety concepts have been further elaborated with the development of measuring instruments (Spielberger, Gorsuch, & Lushene’s, 1970 and Spielberger’s, 1983 State/Trait Anxiety Inventory). Trait anxiety, according to Spielberger (1983, p. 1), refers to “relatively stable individual differences in anxiety-proneness, that is, to differences between people in the tendency to perceive stressful situations as dangerous or threatening and to respond to such situations with elevations in the intensity of their state anxiety reactions” (my emphasis). Anxiety-proneness, or a general predisposition to experience anxiety in a wide range of situations, is seen as a personal characteristic of an individual, considered to be one of the primary traits of human personality as modelled by personality psychologists (Dörnyei, 2005). It is a key constituent of the Neuroticism/Emotional Stability dimension of Eysenck’s three-component personality model (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985) as well as of the ‘Big Five’ model (Goldberg, 1992, 1993; McCrae & Costa, 2003), two widely accepted taxonomies of personality traits, currently dominating personality psychology research. Individuals with high levels of trait anxiety are generally nervous people, lacking emotional stability (Goldberg, 1993), who experience state anxiety elevations more frequently and in a larger number of situations than low trait-anxiety individuals (Spielberger, 1983). The stronger the anxiety trait, the more likely it is that the anxiety-prone individual will experience more intense elevations in state anxiety in situations s/he perceives as dangerous or threatening (Spielberger, 1983).

State anxiety, in turn, refers to the “moment-to-moment experience of anxiety” (MacIntyre, 1999, p. 28): to transitory emotional states, which, according to Spielberger (1983, p. 1), are characterised by “subjective feelings of tension, nervousness, and worry, and by activation or arousal of the autonomic nervous system”. As evidenced by this oft-cited definition, anxiety is not a unidimensional, easily definable psychological experience, but a multifaceted one: a complex of cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and bodily reactions (Sarason, 1984, 1986). There have been various attempts in psychological research to separate and define these various
Anxiety as a Psychological Construct

responses in order to get a better understanding of the anxiety construct (Deffenbacher, 1977, 1978; Kaplan, McCordick, & Twitchell, 1979; Liebert & Morris, 1967; Morris, Davis, & Hutchings, 1981). As a result, a distinction is commonly made between two main anxiety components: worry and emotionality, the former referring to the cognitive, the latter to the affective side of anxiety. Worry is defined as “… distressing preoccupations, and concerns about impending or anticipated events” (Sarason, 1986, p. 21), while emotionality refers to the anxious individual’s awareness of bodily arousal or tension (Sarason, 1984, 1986). The arousal-mediated responses may include: physiological changes (e.g., faster heartbeat, sweating, blushing), psychosomatic symptoms (e.g., headache, stomach ache), physical activities (squirming, fidgeting, self or object manipulations such as wringing hands, playing with hair/clothes/pen), as well as speech disturbances (e.g., stuttering, stammering, having a quivering voice, etc.) (e.g., Ehrman & Oxford, 1995; Gregersen, 2005, 2007; Leary, 1982; MacIntyre, 1999; Schwarzer, 1986, Young, 1999). Anxious states may vary in intensity and fluctuate over time as a function of the amount of stress experienced at a given moment (Spielberger, 1983) and may have some or all of the above manifestations of anxiety (Leary, 1982; Schlenker & Leary, 1985).

1.2 Situation-specific anxieties

In addition to conceptualising anxiety (1) as a general personality trait, and (2) as a “here-and-now” experience, a third perspective from which anxiety has been investigated in various areas is what has come to be known as a situation-specific approach (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a). This approach has been motivated by the realisation that the personality/individual difference conception of anxiety, by its nature, deemphasises the situational determinants of anxiety, since it is based on the assumption that anxiety is a stable, distinctive characteristic of an individual, applicable across situations (Dörnyei, 2005; Endler, 1980; Leary, 1982). Critics of the trait view of anxiety, however, have argued that, since anxiety is experienced by a person in context, traits should be considered in interaction with the situations in which the anxiety is aroused (e.g., Endler, 1980; Mischel & Peake, 1982). The situation-specific view of anxiety is based on the assumption that certain types of situations are more likely to produce anxiety than others, however, there is individual variation among people as to what particular situations they perceive as anxiety provoking. The same individual may feel anxious in one type of situation and not in others. Thus, situation-specific anxieties
are seen as anxieties experienced in certain well-defined situations, such as taking a test or speaking in public, for instance. Adopting Spielberger’s (1983) conceptualisation, situation-specific anxiety could be defined as a personal predisposition or tendency to become anxious in one type of situation, that is, a trait of anxiety applied to a particular context (MacIntyre, 1999). This brief overview of the three related but logically different conceptualisations of anxiety as a psychological construct—the trait/state distinction and the notion of situation-specific anxieties—was presented as an essential preliminary to the discussion of various approaches to the study of anxiety in second language learning (see in section 2.1), and the definition of the specific anxiety construct the book is concerned with: foreign language anxiety (see in section 2.2).

1.3 Anxiety in social contexts

Considering the fact that foreign language learning as a rule takes place in a social setting and, by its nature, entails communication in various interpersonal encounters in and outside the classroom (teacher - learner, learner - learner, learner - native speaker/other non-native L2 speaker), it is useful to place the anxiety experienced in this domain in the wider context of a specific set of anxieties called social anxieties (MacIntyre, 1995a, b). In the psychological literature social anxiety is used as an umbrella term to refer to common forms of apprehension among psychologically healthy people, such as, audience anxiety, stage fright, speech anxiety, social-evaluative anxiety, communication apprehension, shyness, etc., which, albeit diverse in some ways and occur in different kinds of social settings, are regarded as various manifestations of the same sociopsychological experience: nervousness in interpersonal encounters (Leary, 1982, 1990). It is defined as “anxiety arising from the prospect or presence of interpersonal evaluation in real or imagined social settings” (Leary, 1982, p. 102). In more simple terms, people who are socially anxious are concerned with the impressions others form of them and fear undesired evaluation. The causes of such anxiety have been theorised in the psychological literature in different ways. The various models proposed to explain the basis of social anxieties may be potentially relevant with regard to foreign language anxiety as well; therefore in the next section I give a brief summary of each theoretical position.
1.4 Theories of the causes of social anxieties

Four major theoretical positions have been proposed to account for the anxiety experienced in social encounters: (1) the classical conditioning model, (2) the skills deficit model, (3) the cognitive self-evaluation model, and (4) the self-presentation model (Leary, 1982).

Classical conditioning

The first of these, classical conditioning, is based on the behaviourist idea that fears can be classically conditioned by pairing aversive, fear-evoking stimuli with otherwise harmless objects or events (Watson & Rayner, 1920). According to this view, social anxiety may be a classically conditioned emotional response, that is, people may experience anxiety in certain situations because they associate stimuli in those settings with aversive or negative outcomes in the past (Bandura, 1969; Wolpe, 1973). An example for this could be the student who once failed an exam in a particular room of the university and feels nervous ever since whenever he enters that room (Smith et al., 2005). To apply this to language learning, a learner may feel anxious in language classes, because s/he may have had negative or unpleasant experiences in such classes in the past.

Skills deficit

According to the second, the skills deficit hypothesis, people may become anxious in social settings because they lack the skills necessary for smooth, pleasant, and successful interaction (e.g., Bellack & Hersen, 1979). As a consequence, they are likely to mismanage their interactions with others, which may result in “awkward, strained, and otherwise aversive” encounters (Leary, 1982, p. 105). Derailed, uncomfortable conversations, if encountered frequently, may lead to a stable fear of social interaction per se, because of the discomfort it entails for the individual with social skills deficit, who is unable to interact in an appropriate, facilitative manner (Schlenker & Leary, 1985). The reason why people may fail to execute appropriate social responses may be (1) that they have not learned or practiced proper execution of needed skills, or (2) although

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2 This is based on Watson’s experiment to condition a boy to fear a white rat by producing a loud noise whenever he was about to touch the animal. After a series of pairings of the rat and the loud noise, the boy began to show fear already at the sight of the rat, unaccompanied by any noise (Leary, 1982).
they learnt appropriate behaviours, they cannot put them into practice (Leary, 1982). Applying this hypothesis to language learning, language learners may feel anxious about using the L2 in and outside the classroom because they lack the skills and various competencies (e.g., linguistic, pragmalinguistic, sociocultural, etc.) necessary for smooth and pleasant interaction.

**Cognitive self-evaluation**

The third theory proposed considers people’s beliefs (i.e. what they think) about themselves, other people, and the anxiety-arousing situation to be the key factor in this type of anxiety (Atkinson et al., 1994; Schlenker & Leary, 1985). According to the cognitive self-evaluation model, the primary reason why people become anxious in social encounters is not that they lack necessary skills, but rather that they believe they lack them and consider themselves inadequate (Leary, 1982). It has been pointed out that “the behaviours of the socially anxious individuals may be reasonably adequate by external standards but evaluated as inadequate by the socially anxious individual” (Clark & Arkowitz, 1975, p. 212), which explains why people with no apparent skill deficits may also experience anxiety in interpersonal situations. The fact that, in contrast to this, people considered to be unskilled by outside observers do not necessarily experience anxiety in such situations is also claimed to support the idea that skill deficits are neither necessary, nor sufficient causes of interpersonal anxiety (Leary, 1882). According to the cognitive self-evaluation theory, it is people’s negative evaluation of their own ability to handle a given situation that precipitates anxiety, as it produces expectations of unfavourable social outcomes (Clark & Arkowitz, 1975; Meichenbaum et al., 1971; Rehm & Marston, 1968). Negative self-evaluation may be related to unrealistic expectations, excessively high standards for evaluating oneself, and other dysfunctional cognitions (Atkinson et al., 1994; Bandura, 1969). Applying this theory to language learning, another potential reason why a learner may feel anxious about using the target language is that s/he believes his L2 ability or competence is inadequate, thus expects to perform poorly and fears potential negative consequences.

**Self-presentation**

The proponents of the fourth theory argue that each of the above models identifies important antecedents of interpersonal anxiety and
possesses explanatory power, but neither of them is adequate to account for it by itself (Schlenker & Leary, 1985). Self-presentation theory is meant to be a model integrating previous ones. According to this conceptualisation, the anxiety experienced in interpersonal encounters is produced by the interaction of two sets of factors: (1) motivation to make a desired impression on others, and (2) doubt that one will be successful in doing so (Leary & Schlenker, 1981; Leary & Kowalski, 1995; Schlenker & Leary, 1985). It is posited that the stronger one’s motivation is to convey certain self-presentation and the higher the level of doubt that one will be able to do so, the higher the anxiety experienced. If, however, one is not concerned with how s/he is seen and evaluated by others or believes he is able to make the desired impression, social anxiety should not occur according to this model, that is, the two factors are seen both as necessary and sufficient conditions for anxieties of this kind. The two key components—motivation to make a favourable impression and doubt that one will succeed in doing so—, in turn, are assumed to be a function of both dispositional and situational variables, as well as of the critical factors posited by previous models. For instance, dispositional variables, such as, excessive need for approval, or fear of negative evaluation, are likely to heighten one’s motivation to make desired impressions on others, as do certain situations, e.g. evaluative ones (exam, job interview), or the presence of important or critical others/experts (Leary, 1982; Schlenker & Leary, 1985). Other situations, novel or ambiguous ones, encounters with strangers; factors like previous unpleasant experiences/failures, real or perceived skill deficits, and certain dispositional characteristics like low self-esteem, etc., on the other hand, are bound to increase the level of doubt that one can create the desired impression. The implication of this theory with regard to language learning is that various diverse factors—past experiences, skills and competencies, self-evaluation and other learner beliefs, dispositional variables, and situational factors—as well as their interaction have to be considered when examining the causes of anxiety in the L2 domain.

1.5 Anxiety in instructional situations

Since foreign language learning typically takes place in an educational setting, another important research area that may potentially inform the study of anxiety in the L2 domain is educational psychology. Anxiety is one of the major, most highly examined psychological variables studied in education, and most research in this field, understandably enough, has been concerned with the effects of anxiety on learners’ academic
achievement and ability to profit from instruction (Tobias, 1979; 1980; Horwitz, 2001). Anxiety has been considered as a variable associated with underachievement, high dropout rates, and low grade point averages (e.g., Spielberger, 1966; Spielberger, 1962; Spielberger & Katzenmeyer, 1959; Taylor, 1964). Studies conducted in various instructional settings—including traditional classroom-based as well as individualised instructional contexts—have consistently documented high levels of anxiety to be related to low levels of achievement at all academic levels, from elementary school to higher education, and with regard to various learning tasks and academic subjects (e.g., Gaudry & Spielberger, 1971; Lunneborg, 1964; Mallow, 1981; Tobias, 1979).

1.6 Theories of the effects of anxiety on performance and learning

Anxiety is most typical in explicitly evaluative situations, such as tests or examinations, in which people perform to be evaluated. However, the anxiety-provoking potential of instructional situations is not restricted to this domain. In fact, the “evaluative threat” is virtually ubiquitous in this context, since everyday routines, such as being called on in class, participating in class discussions, having to hand in homework or other assignments to the instructor, etc., may all have evaluative consequences (Tobias, 1980).

The negative association between anxiety and achievement in evaluative situations has been generally attributed to the cognitive or worry component of anxiety (see in 1.1), which is theorised to interfere with attentional and cognitive processes involved in learning and performance (Eysenck, 1979, 1992; Sarason, 1986, 1991). People with high levels of anxiety have been found to differ from those low in anxiety with regard to their cognitive activity before and while performing in evaluative contexts, with anxious individuals tending to engage and become absorbed in self-preoccupying worry, i.e. distressing ruminations about how they are doing, how they are seen by others, their personal incompetence, implications of failure, etc., (Sarason, 1978, 1991; Wine, 1971, 1982). This self-focus is believed to distract from task-focus, since attention capacity occupied by self-related cognition is bound to reduce the attention capacity necessary for performing a given task (Eysenck, 1979, 1992; Schwarzer, 1986).

This conceptualisation is in line with the long-held view in psychology that emotions in general and anxiety in particular affect attention (Oatley & Jenkins, 2001). Anxiety is presumed to narrow attention, as the person who is afraid or experiences anxiety inadvertently focuses on the
perceived danger signal or threat, ignoring everything else, and his/her nervous system switches to a characteristic processing mode directed at anxiety-related stimuli (Oatley & Jenkins, 2001). The cognitive representation of worry and other self-related preoccupations stimulated by high anxiety is supposed to absorb processing resources, consequently, since humans are supposed to have a limited capacity information processing system (Broadbent, 1958, 1971; McLaughlin et al., 1983; Shiffrin & Schneider, 1977), less capacity is left for coping with task demands, which is the explanation theorised to account for the documented lower performance of anxious individuals on cognitive tasks (Eysenck, 1979, 1992; Sarason, 1986, 1991; Tobias, 1986).

Cognitive interference, as outlined above, is hypothesised to affect not only performance, but also various pre-performance cognitive processes mediating learning. According to a model of the effects of anxiety on learning from instruction, anxiety may exert its effect at three important stages, named after the classical information-processing components, the input, the processing, and the output phase (Tobias, 1979, 1980, 1986). Input refers to the presentation of instructional material to learners, at which point anxiety may impact learning by interfering in the degree to which the instructional input is internally represented or registered. According to the model, learners with high anxiety are likely to experience greater difficulty in making nominal input effective stimuli, because they have less attentional capacity available than their peers with low anxiety. Anxiety interference at this stage is bound to be cumulative, since input which has not been internally represented, is not available for processing at the next stage, thus some proportion of processing and time will have to be devoted to reconstructing the missing input. Processing represents all operations performed by learners to record, organise, and store the instructional input, at which stage anxiety is presumed to exercise its effect on learning by affecting the cognitive operations involved. Anxiety is more debilitating on tasks/instructional material, which is (1) difficult, (2) reliant on short and intermediate term memory, or (3) poorly organised. Finally, output denotes performance on any measure or situation demonstrating that the instructional objectives have been mastered. Anxiety in this phase is hypothesised to interfere in the retrieval of previously mastered material.

This brief overview of psychological theories of the causes and effects of anxiety in social and instructional settings focused on theoretical positions potentially relevant with regard to the anxiety experienced in L2 learning and communication as well. In the next chapter I look at different
approaches to the study of anxiety in the context of second language learning.
CHAPTER TWO

ANXIETY AND SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

2.1 Approaches to the study of anxiety in second language learning

The study of anxiety in L2 learning began more than three decades ago, in the 1970s, a period marked by an upsurge of research focusing on the learner, specifically various learner characteristics which could be related to differential success at language learning (Horwitz, 1990). It was then that anxiety, among other individual difference variables such as language aptitude, motivation, personality, etc., started to be examined as a potential factor influencing L2 achievement (Dörnyei, 2005; Horwitz, 1990).

From the outset, there seem to have been essentially two different approaches to the study of anxiety in language learning, which can be labelled (1) the “anxiety transfer”, and (2) the “unique anxiety” approach (Horwitz & Young, 1991; MacIntyre, 1999). The two approaches are based on different conceptualisations of L2-related anxiety. The assumption behind the first approach is that the anxiety experienced in an L2 context is simply the transfer of other forms of anxiety into the L2 domain, in other words, it is presumed that individuals who are generally anxious or experience anxiety in certain types of situations have a predisposition to also experience anxiety when learning or using a foreign language. In more specific terms, anxiety in the L2 context has been viewed either (1) as the manifestation of a general trait of anxiety (as defined in 1.1), or (2) as the transfer of some situation-specific anxiety (see in 1.2) (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a; MacIntyre, 1999). Consequently studies adopting this approach used either measures of trait/state anxiety (e.g., the Manifest Anxiety Scale (MAS), Taylor, 1953; the State/Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI), Spielberger et al., 1970; Spielberger, 1983), or instruments measuring situation-specific anxieties.

1 Focus on the learner is the title of an anthology, very influential in the 1970s (Oller & Richards, 1973, referred to by Horwitz, 1990).
like test anxiety (Sarason & Ganzer, 1962) and communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1970) to investigate anxiety in the L2 domain.

In contrast, the assumption underlying the second approach is that language learning produces a unique type of anxiety. This theoretical perspective is based on Gardner’s hypothesis that “a construct of anxiety which is not general but instead is specific to the language acquisition context is related to second language achievement” (1985, p. 34). In this conceptualisation, anxiety experienced in L2 contexts is seen as a situation-specific anxiety aroused by the experience of learning and using a second language. In line with this conceptualisation, the anxiety measures which studies adopting this approach employed were designed to tap specifically into the anxiety experienced in foreign language classes and/or L2 communication (e.g., the French Class/Use, English Class/Use Anxiety Scales Gardner, Clément, and associates have used since the 1970s as parts of the Attitudes and Motivation Test Battery, developed by Gardner, Clément, Smythe, & Smythe, 1979).

Of the two contrasting perspectives outlined above, the “unique anxiety” approach turned out to be the more fruitful one. Studies taking the “anxiety transfer” approach yielded inconsistent, contradictory results not only across but even within studies (MacIntyre, 1999). As pointed out in reviews of these early anxiety studies (Scovel, 1978; Young, 1991, 1994), some investigations indicated a negative (e.g., Bartz, 1974 in Young, 1994), while others a positive relationship between anxiety and L2 performance (e.g., Kleinmann, 1977), still others found no significant relation between the two constructs (e.g., Westcott, 1973 in Young, 1994). Furthermore, some studies reported results difficult to interpret, for instance that anxiety was negatively related to one language skill but not to another (Swain & Burnaby, 1976; Tucker, Hamayan, & Genesee, 1976), or that anxiety positively related to one FL, negatively to another, and not related to a third one in the same study (Chastain, 1975). In short, studies adopting this approach were unable to present a clear picture of how anxiety was related to L2 learning. One possible reason for the mixed and confusing results is that various studies adopting the “anxiety transfer” approach used different measures of anxiety, as described above, which itself rendered comparisons across studies difficult (Young, 1994). More important than this, however, is the problem that none of these measures were specific to the anxiety aroused in L2 situations, in short, there was no
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harmony between the anxiety definition/measure and the actual variable to be measured (MacIntyre, 1999, Scovel, 1978; Young, 1994).\(^2\)

By contrast, studies taking the “unique anxiety” approach, which used measures of anxiety specific to the L2 context, were uniform in consistently indicating an inverse relationship between L2-related (L2 class, L2 use) anxiety and various measures of L2 performance (Clément, Gardner, & Smythe, 1977, 1980; Gardner, Smythe, Clément, & Glikzman, 1976; Gardner, Smythe, & Lalonde, 1984). Thus, while the assumption that a general trait of anxiety or certain situation-specific anxieties transferred from other domains operate in language learning was not supported by empirical findings, the idea that a unique type of anxiety might be at work proved to be a more plausible hypothesis.

\(^2\) Another explanation for the inconsistent findings was offered by Chastain (1975), who suggested that “perhaps some concern about a test is a plus while too much anxiety can produce negative results” (p. 160), which seems to be a restatement of the Yerkes-Dodson Law/Principle (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908 described in Levitt, 1968; Smith, Sarason, & Sarason, 1982), according to which there is an inverted “U” relation between anxiety and performance, with maximally effective performance occurring at the midpoint, rather than at the minimum or maximal level of anxiety arousal. This implies that some anxiety enhances performance, while too much of it has a negative effect, particularly on complex tasks (cf. Spence-Taylor drive theory – Spence, 1958; Taylor 1951, described in Tobias, 1986; Levitt, 1968, 1980). Although the vast majority of general anxiety research suggests a negative association between anxiety and performance (see in 1.6), according to Alpert and Haber’s (1960) theory anxiety may have a debilitating or a facilitating effect. However, it has been proposed, both in the psychological literature and in L2-related anxiety research, that the term anxiety “might best be reserved for the mid to high portion of the activation continuum, rather than the entire spectrum” (Korchin, 1964, cited in Levitt, 1968, p. 230), i.e. there may be a positive aspect of anxiety which stimulates one’s performance, however we only begin to talk about anxiety when the imbalance appears, that is, when arousal is perceived as a negative and destructive rather than a positive and constructive force (Rardin in Young, 1992). For this reason, it has been suggested that other terms such as an incentive to improve, a positive drive to go after something, a heightened level of attention, a productive state of alertness, etc. rather than anxiety be used for arousal that is beneficial for performance (e.g., Krashen, Terrel, and Rardin in Young, 1992). In short, definitional differences across early studies of anxiety in L2 learning—whether anxiety was conceptualised as facilitative or debilitating, state or trait, test anxiety, or communication apprehension, etc.—may well have contributed to the unclear picture research adopting the “anxiety transfer” approach presented about anxiety and L2 performance.
2.2 A theoretical model of foreign language anxiety

The development of a theoretical model of foreign language anxiety by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) was a very important step forward in the study of anxiety in language learning. Although Gardner, Clément and associates’ research was also guided by the tacit assumption that language learning produces a unique type of anxiety, as evidenced by the use of measures of anxiety specific to L2 situations in their studies, the concern of that line of research, as MacIntyre & Gardner (1989) pointed out “has been with larger issues of attitudes and motivation, rather than the more specific role of any single construct such as anxiety” (p. 42). Therefore, Horwitz et al.’s (1986) has been the first attempt to single out anxiety from the broader context of affective variables and provide a theoretical basis from which research focused directly on anxiety could proceed.

Horwitz et al.’s (1986) model of FLA bridges the two approaches (i.e., “anxiety transfer”, “unique anxiety”) described above (MacIntyre, 1999). Like Gardner (1985), Horwitz et al. (1986) conceptualise L2-related anxiety as a distinct type of anxiety expressed in response to the unique experience of learning and using a language other than one’s mother tongue (L1), distinguishing it from (1) a general trait of anxiety, which may show up in a large variety of circumstances, as well as (2) other, more general forms of anxiety. At the same time, arguing that this anxiety essentially has to do with performance evaluation in an academic and social context, Horwitz et al. (1986) draw parallels between L2-related anxiety and three related performance anxieties: (1) communication apprehension, (2) test anxiety, and (3) fear of negative evaluation, and propose a three-part model, with these components as conceptual “building blocks” of the anxiety construct they called foreign language anxiety (p. 31).

Communication apprehension is a type of shyness or fear associated with communicating with people (McCroskey, 1970), which in the L2 domain can manifest itself in anxiety about speaking the target language (oral communication anxiety), especially speaking it in public (“stage fright”), as well as in apprehension about not understanding or misinterpreting L2 messages (receiver anxiety) (Wheeleless, 1975).

Test anxiety is defined as “the tendency to view with alarm the consequences of inadequate performance in an evaluative situation” (Sarason, 1978, p. 214). In the language classroom it refers to worry over frequent testing, which may become a source of frustration for learners, as their proficiency is assessed while it is being acquired.