



Listening Anxiety Experienced by English Language Learners: A Comparison between Iranian and Turkish Teacher Candidates

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Abstract

This study focuses on the listening anxiety experienced by teacher candidates (TCs) in Iran and Turkey. Using different data collection methods, including two questionnaires, listening test, and semi-structured interviews, this study tried to investigate the factors behind Foreign Language Listening Anxiety (FLLA) among Iranian teacher candidates (TCs). The participants of the study in Iran context were 29 teacher candidates studying at BA level in English Language Teaching. All of the participants were asked to complete these two questionnaires with the background information regarding their age, gender, years of language study. The participants' answers to FLLAS and FLCAS were analyzed with spss to obtain frequencies and percentages. The results were compared to the same study by Bekleyen. The findings revealed that Iranian TCs experienced a high level of FLLA compared to Turkish TCs and showed a significant positive correlation between FLLA and FLCA, which means that teacher candidates with higher levels of language anxiety tended to have higher levels of listening anxiety. In addition, interview data suggested that Iranian and Turkish participants' FLLA mostly originated from the same source: inadequacy of past education in listening skill. Furthermore, practice was the most frequent strategy used by participants in these two countries to overcome this kind of anxiety.

Keywords: Anxiety; Foreign language learning anxiety; Listening anxiety; EFL learners.

1. Introduction

Language anxiety is a "Subjective feeling of apprehension and fear associated with language learning and use" (Phillips, 1992). Many learners have experienced language anxiety during the process of their learning foreign languages. There has been a substantial body of research that has investigated Foreign Language Anxiety. Studies on this affective phenomenon demonstrated that language students at different proficiency levels report feeling of anxiousness about some aspects of language learning and their language classes (Horwitz, 1996). Whereas early studies on anxiety focused on foreign language anxiety in general (e.g., (Gregersen, 2003; Horwitz, 1996;2001), later research has aligned itself with different facets of foreign language anxiety i.e., speaking, reading, writing, and listening. Pea in his study detected an independent existence of each of the four skills-based anxieties as a distinctive construct. His findings suggest that one general anxiety factor is not enough to explain the variances associated with L2 anxiety across the four skill areas. This implies that each of the four skill-based anxieties should receive independent attention from second language researchers. Another finding of the study by Pea revealed that each of the four skill-based anxieties made an independent contribution to the prediction of FLCAS.

Studies on the effect of anxiety on speaking (e.g., (Gregersen and Horwitz, 2002; Mak, 2011; Phillips, 1992; Woodrow, 2011; Yang, 2010) has revealed a number of factors that underlie speaking-in-class anxiety: fear of negative evaluation; negative attitudes towards English classroom; fear of failure; fear of speaking in front of others without preparation; being corrected when speaking; not being allowed to use first language; speaking with teacher; and alike. Other studies by focusing on the relationship between anxiety and writing (e.g.: (Chang, 2008; Woosrow, 2006) indicated that the relationship between writing performance and language anxiety was mediated by self-efficacy beliefs. Matsuda and Gobel investigated the relationship between language reading anxiety and achievement. The findings showed that overseas experiences benefit students in terms of enhancing their self-confidence and ultimately achieving higher grades. Studies on the relationship between anxiety and listening comprehension (e.g.: (Chang, 2008; Elkhafafi, 2005; In'nami, 2006; Jafari and Hashim, 2012; Voolgely, 1997; Yang, 2010) examined the issue from different perspectives. The findings indicated that teachers can use different ways for ameliorating stress in students in order to enhance their listening comprehension abilities. In addition, many factors such as coping with speed of delivery, making out individual words in a stream of spoken language, making sense of any words that have been identified, and supposed low ability underlined listening anxiety.

This study will compare the listening anxiety experienced by Iranian and Turkish teacher candidates. The comparison between two countries potentially provides cross-cultural and national understanding about the level of listening anxiety and the factors behind it in two societies.

This study tries to address the following questions:

Q 1: What level of FLLA do teacher candidates have in Iran and Turkey?

Q 2: Does FLLA correlate with FLCA and listening score?

Q 3: What causes FLLA in teacher candidates in Iran and Turkey and what strategies do they employ to cope with FLLA?

2. Review of Literature

Most of the previous studies examined foreign language anxiety experienced by language learners. Few attempts have been made to study anxiety experienced by foreign language teachers. As Horwitz (1986) asserted "Even though language teachers are supposed to be high-level speakers of their target language, language learning is never complete, and most nonnative language teachers are likely to have uncomfortable moments speaking their target language", a number of researchers attempted to study language anxiety experienced by language teachers. Atay and Kurt (2006), examined the effect of second language writing anxiety on prospective language teachers. The subjects of the study experienced high or average writing anxiety leading to difficulties in organizing their thoughts and ideas while writing in target language. In another study Bekleyen (2009) examined foreign language listening anxiety among Turkish language teacher candidates. Results indicated that teachers with higher levels of language anxiety tended to have higher levels of listening anxiety, which had a negative impact on their listening score. Most of the teachers in her study attributed the primary source of their anxiety to the low priority placed on listening in their previous language training.

The commonalities, if can be found, will assist in making statements about listening anxiety issues among teacher candidates that are valid in more than one country with particular implications for teacher education programs and educators. Moreover, research examining pre-service teachers' listening anxiety within international context may also shed light on the role of factors that are context specific, with further implications for teacher educators and policy makers.

Language Teacher Education in Iran and Turkey

In Iran and Turkey, foreign language learning (especially English) has always been considered important. In Iran, students are required to learn English language from secondary level (sixth grade) of their education, and learning English continues for seven years. In Turkey, primary schools require students to learn a English language from fourth grade.

Language teachers in Iran and Turkey are required to have a university degree. In order to enter university teacher candidates must obtain high score on language component in University Entrance Exam. In Iran this exam contains multiple choice question items, including reading, grammar, and vocabulary sections. In Turkey the exam contains grammar, translation, and reading. In both countries since teachers in high school try to prepare their students for this national exam, they generally neglect speaking and listening skills in language classrooms. This results in having difficulty in mastering these skills in later education.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study in Iran context were 29 teacher candidates studying at BA level in English Language Teaching at Azad University in the city of Zanjan. None of the participants had an overseas experience. The TCs were between the ages of 18-24. Their previous study of English was restricted to school education. The participants in Turkey context were 71 teacher candidates studying English language teaching at Dicle University in Diyarbakir, a city in the southern region of Turkey and their ages ranged from 18-21.

3.2. Instruments

To compare the result of this study with the results obtained from TCs in Turkey the same instruments were used:

3.3. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS)

FLCAS, developed by Horwitz (1986). in 1986, and FLLAS developed by Kim (2005), were used in this study. Each questionnaire contains 33 items which are in the form of statements. All the items are close-ended, and participants were asked to respond using Likert Scale with 5 points ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. At the top of the FLLAS the researcher added the items related to participants demographic information (age, gender, years of English language study).

3.4. Interview

To gain Qualitative data, an informal interview was conducted with 22 TCs at the end of the study in Persian language with Iranian participants. In Turkish context 47 participants were interviewed in their native language, Turkish, since Bekleyen assumed that in this way participants can express their feelings comfortably. The purpose of

the interview was to elicit information regarding TCs sources of listening anxiety and the coping strategies they use to overcome this affective variable.

3.5. Listening Test Score

In Iran the TCs in university have to take listening and speaking courses for two successive terms during their first year of study. These two skills presented and practiced simultaneously during the term for three hours a week. The students were tested on both skills during the term as well as the end of the term. The course instructor provided the researcher with the final listening scores in order to be compared with the TCs' FLCA and FLLA results. In Turkey, the teacher candidates in the university take listening, speaking in their first year of their study. The listening courses are offered for three hours a week.

3.6. Procedures

All of the participants were asked to complete these two questionnaires with the background information regarding their age, gender, years of language study. From 29 participants in the study, in Iran, 22 of them were volunteered to participate in an interview. From 71 participants in Turkey context 54 took part in an interview with the researcher. They were assured of anonymity. This follow-up interview was used to shed more light on the causes and effects of anxiety experienced by the teacher candidates.

4. Data Analysis

The participants' answers to FLLAS and FLCAS were analyzed with SPSS to obtain frequencies and percentages. The responses for a small number of items that expressed confidence in listening were reverse coded. To assess the relationship between the teacher candidates' FLCA, FLLA, and listening scores correlations were conducted using Pearson product moment correlation. The semi-structured interviews with students were transcribed and analyzed to obtain general themes and categories from the statements made by the participants.

5. Results

To answer question 1 (what level of FLLA do TCs have?) frequencies and percentages of answers to FLLA questionnaire were computed and summarized in Appendix for both countries. The possible scores ranged from 33-165 (33 means that no anxiety exists and 165 means that the participant has the highest score). In this study the Iranian participants' scores ranged from 72-135. Considering their English proficiency levels their FLLA scores' mean was high (mean=101.83, sd= 16.56). The analysis of the questionnaire items reveals that item 2 (*I get nervous if a listening passage is read only once during English listening tests*), item 5 (*I am nervous when I am listening to English if I am not familiar with the topic*), item 18 (*I get worried when I have little time to think about what I hear in English*) received the highest mean score of 5.2 and items 1, 9, 10, 33 with the mean score of 4.8. Also, items 30 and 32 received a mean score of 4.6. In the study in Turkey, the scores on the FLLA ranged from 58-132 and the TCs FLLA mean was 95.30 (SD=18.35). In the questionnaire item 31 (*English stress and intonation seem familiar to me*) received the highest mean score, M=4.05 (this item was reverse coded and the high score shows a high level of FLLA). Item 4 (*when a person speaks English very fast, I worry that I might not understand all of it*) and item 7 (*If I let my mind drift even a little bit while listening to English, I worry that I will miss important ideas*) also had high mean scores, M=3.97 and 3.84 respectively.

To provide answer to question 2 (does FLLA correlate with FLCA and listening scores?) Pearson product moment correlation was carried out to assess the relationship between these variables. The results revealed a significant positive relationship between the FLLA and FLCA (in Iran, $r = 0.64$, $p < 0.01$ and in Turkey, 0.52 , $p < 0.01$), with the shared variance of .40 in Iran and .27 in Turkey. In addition, a significant negative relationship found between the TCs' FLLA and their listening scores (in Iran $r = 0.78$, $p < 0.01$ and in Turkey 0.53), with the shared variance of .60 in Iran and .28 in Turkey. Table 1 compares the results in Pearson product correlation matrix.

Table-1. *Correlation is significant at $p < 0.01$

FLLA	FLCA	Listening score
FLLA	1.00	—
FLCA Iran = .64*	Turkey = .52* 1.00	—
Listening score Iran = -.78*	/Turkey = -.53*	Iran = -.72*/ Turkey = -.56*1

Interviews with some of the participants (in Iran context 22 out of 29 and in Turkey 54 out of 71) were conducted to find answer to the third question (what causes FLLA in TCs and what strategies do they employ to cope with FLLA?). The following tables show the frequencies of the causes of FLLA mentioned by the participants in Iran and Turkey context.

Table-2. Causes of FLLA in Iran

Responses	<i>f</i>	%
Not enough practice in the past	15	68
Failure to recognize pronunciation of some of the words	9	40
Insufficient command of Target Language	7	31
Fast speaking	5	22
Formal language classroom setting & Presence of the teacher	4	18
No familiarity with the topic	2	9

Table-3. Causes of FLLA in Turkey

Responses	<i>f</i>	%
Inadequacy of previous education	27	50
Failure to recognize the spoken form of a known word	22	41
Failure to identify segments of sentences	19	35
Failure to recognize weak forms of words	15	28
Poor quality of the listening materials	11	20
Failure to understand different accents and dialects	8	15
Lack of topical knowledge	6	11
Lack of vocabulary or grammatical knowledge	3	6

As the table indicates participants have different sources of FLLA. Most of them, in both countries, attributed this anxiety to their previous education.

Nearly all of the Iranian participants indicated that practice is the strategy that they use to cope with the FLLA. The most common strategy used by Turkish participants was practicing. Asking for help, thinking positively were the other common strategies used by these learners.

6. Discussion and Implications

The results of the present study revealed a significant positive correlation between FLLA and FLCA, which means that teacher candidates with higher levels of language anxiety tended to have higher levels of listening anxiety. Both measures of FLLA and FLCA, correlated negatively with the listening scores of the teacher candidates. These findings support the claims made by many researchers (Elkhafafi, 2005; Horwitz, 1986).

With regard to the causes of FLLA, most of the participants related their anxiety to the lack of previous practice of this skill. Nearly all of the participants in Iran and most of the participants in Turkey believed that by practicing they can overcome their listening anxiety.

A direct comparison between the results of this study and a similar study by Bekleyen (2009), shows that both studies indicated a positive correlation between FLLA and FLCA, and a FLLA correlated negatively with teacher candidates listening scores. However, the level of FLLA among Iranian teacher candidates was much higher ($r=0.64$) than Turkish teacher candidates ($r=0.52$) in Bekleyen's study. The interview results of the present study are also in line with those of Bekleyen (2009), who found that inadequacy of the previous education was the main cause of FLLA among Turkish teacher candidates. The reported strategies are also consistent with Bekleyen's findings: the more time learners spend practicing listening the less they experience FLLA. Regarding the other causes of FLLA, the findings somehow differ from each other. Bekleyen found lack of knowledge and lack of vocabulary or grammatical knowledge as the least reported causes of listening anxiety, but these causes are the most reported causes of listening anxiety among the participants of this study.

Similar results may be attributed to the same educational system of high school in Iran and Turkey. In these educational systems the priority is given to teaching reading, grammar, and vocabulary and listening as well as speaking are generally neglected in language classrooms. Bekleyen asserts: "In fact, the situation in Turkey is an example of the wash back effect of language tests. In case of turkey, a possible solution may be to modify the UEE (University Entrance Exam) by adding a listening (and speaking) component (Bekleyen, 2009). This will place more importance on teaching listening skill at the high school level. Consequently, TCs will have lower levels of listening anxiety caused by their lack of proficiency in oral comprehension".

Incorporating listening as one of the components of lesson plans in language classrooms make teachers as well as students aware of the importance of L2 listening skill. As Hinkel (2006) emphasized along with teaching listening, L2 listening pedagogy should include strategy training (e.g. meta-cognitive strategies like planning for listening, self-monitoring the comprehension process, evaluating comprehension, and identifying comprehension difficulties and also cognitive strategies such as discourse organization, inferencing, elaboration, and summation) and a variety of L2 listening techniques (pre-listening, making predictions, listening for the gist or the main idea, listening intensively). Strategy training can help listeners to compensate for incomplete understanding, missed linguistic or schematic input, or misidentified clues. Also as Hinkel mentioned conversations are useful in providing practice on morphosyntax, lexical parsing, and phonological variables in order to integrate teaching grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation with both speaking and listening instruction (Hinkel, 2006).

7. Conclusion

Horwitz stated that an anxious language learner is an ineffective language learner and teacher candidates as language learners who experience foreign language anxiety cannot benefit instructional opportunities which are provided for them (Horwitz, 2001). Some of the participants of the study attributed their anxiety to the formal learning environment. Therefore, every effort should be made to help teacher candidates to overcome their anxiety in order to enhance and upgrade their language proficiency. Language teachers by acknowledging the existence of this kind of feeling among language learners and trying to teach effective coping strategies can help their learners to overcome language anxiety. Effort should be made to make classroom a safe and less anxiety-provoking place by emphasizing collaborative activities among teachers and the students.

Overall, language anxiety can dramatically influence the process of language learning and teaching. Language teachers not only should be aware of the anxiety on the success of their learners, but also should help them to overcome this destructive feeling. By being familiar with the listening anxiety experienced during their learning process, teacher candidates as future language teachers become more sensitive to the learners' affective needs. Allocating enough attention to listening skill, selecting appropriate listening materials, acknowledging the existence of the feeling of anxiety among learners, teaching effective strategies to help learners cope with anxiety, creating a friendly and learning-supportive environment for learners can be helpful for language learners in order to assist them to achieve the intended performance in the target language. In addition, the comparison between Iranian and Turkish teacher candidates provides an opportunity to investigate the listening anxiety that experienced by language learners in two different countries. The results have implications for university educators as well as teacher candidates as it provides an awareness of the affective variables that language learners encounter in their learning and teachers attempt to ameliorate these destructive factors.

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