



Reducing student teachers' foreign language pronunciation anxiety through psycho-social training



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 29 March 2016

Received in revised form 2 December 2016

Accepted 1 January 2017

Keywords:

Foreign language anxiety
Foreign language pronunciation
Psycho-social training
Coping strategy

ABSTRACT

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is one of the most examined affective variables in the field of foreign language (FL) learning and researchers have verified FLA reducing strategies of various kinds. In this study, psycho-social training as an FLA reducing strategy was applied to a group of TEFL students (experimental group) combined with intensive English pronunciation training (experimental and control groups). Psycho-social training is a non-therapeutic intervention program of active social learning that should help individuals cope with stressful situations. A self-reported Foreign Language Pronunciation Anxiety (FLPA) questionnaire was used to examine the students' English pronunciation anxiety before and after the training and the students' English pronunciation was evaluated before and after the training. Based on the results of the statistical analysis it can be stated that the levels of pronunciation anxiety and pronunciation quality were similar in both groups before the training. After the training, anxiety was significantly lower and pronunciation quality was significantly higher in the experimental group.

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1. Introduction

Since researchers began recognizing affective factors as equally relevant in learning as cognitive factors in the second half of the twentieth century, one of the most examined affective variables in the field of foreign language (FL) learning was foreign language anxiety (FLA). Numerous studies have examined FLA in relation to language skills, using skill-specific instruments to measure FLA (see, e.g., Hilleson, 1996; Saito & Samimy, 1996; Cheng, Horwitz, & Schallert, 1999; Sellers, 2000; Cheng, 2002; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Zheng, 2008). These studies concluded that speaking is the skill most affected by FLA (Horwitz, 2010), and one of its most immediate determinants is the concern over FL pronunciation (Baran-Łucarz, 2011; Phillips, 1992; Price, 1991), an essential factor in FL speaking.

Pronunciation is seen as the most salient aspect of the language ego (Guiora, Beit-Hallahmi, Brannon, Dull, & Scovel, 1972) and difficult to acquire in a new language. It is strongly related to human identity and the learner's level of self-confidence. Moreover, pronunciation plays a dominant role in the way communication partners are viewed (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010). Therefore, the apprehension of one's ego being threatened in front of others can be a rather strong source of FLA among FL learners (Baran-Łucarz, 2014). FLA is considered more of a psychological (identity-based) construct than a linguistic (competence-based) construct (Arabai, 2015), stemming most likely from the learner's perception of "self" (Scovel, 1991), where self-perceptions, perceptions of others, perceptions of FL learning and performance play important roles (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Yon Yim, 2014).

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Early arguments linking FL pronunciation to FLA and the related concepts of communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety were brought forward by Horwitz et al. (1986). Although mostly theoretical, some researchers have made useful suggestions for teachers on how to help learners diminish their FLA in the classroom (Arabai, 2015; Hashemi & Abbasi, 2013; Horwitz, 1990; Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004; Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley, 1999; Young, 1990, 1999). According to Hashemi (2011), the most frequent suggestions are: making the classroom environment friendlier allowing learners to make mistakes (Constructivist Theory of Learning) and to succeed even with imperfect FL competence (Communicative Approach) or feel safe with a pretend identity (Suggestopedia).

Researchers have verified FLA reducing strategies of various kinds and the remediation of FLA has mostly focused on three intervention approaches: cognitive, affective and behavioral (Hembree, 1988; Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004). Studies verifying cognitive strategies focused on changing learners' cognitive self-appraisals and examined (*inter alia*) the effectiveness of cooperative learning techniques (Nagahashi, 2007), traditional vs. modern teaching methods (Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu, 2010), summative vs. formative evaluation (Hashemi, 2011) or oral corrective feedback (Lee, 2016).

The affective approach is focused on reducing the negativity of the FL experience and includes therapies such as systematic desensitization (Fuller, 1978), biofeedback (Walton, 1981), support groups (Foss & Reitzel, 1988), relaxation (Ratanasiripong, Sverduk, Stanton, & Neale, 2003), meditation (Oxford, 2015) or an engaging program (Ismail, 2016). While FLA researchers in the past have mostly focused on reducing the negative effect of FLA, the current trend is that of positive psychology relying on one's own personality strengths in coping with FLA (Dewaele & Macintyre, 2014).

The behavioral approach presumes that FLA occurs because of poor language skills, prompting the attempt to train learners in FL skills, applying different methods and techniques, e.g., computerized pronunciation practice (Shams, 2005), explicit instruction and self-analysis on the acquisition of FL pronunciation (Lord, 2005) or teaching speaking in a virtual environment (Grant, Huang, & Pasfield-Neofitou, 2014).

Only a few experiments studying FL pronunciation anxiety (FLPA) and verifying the strategies of FLPA reduction have been conducted so far. Apart from recent attempts to test the effectiveness of FLPA reducing strategies (e.g., Lee, 2016; Shams, 2005; Baran-Lucarz, 2013), empirical work that tests and compares the effectiveness of such strategies and includes longitudinal aspects is yet to be performed.

Nearly all interventions attempting to reduce FLA are learner-oriented and rely on FL teachers to implement anxiety-relieving behaviors and practices in their classrooms. It is often forgotten that many FL teachers themselves are not native speakers and may face FLA (Horwitz, 1996; Numrich, 1996; Ohata, 2005). However, the research on teachers' and student teachers' FLA is still rather limited although it can have an undesirable influence on FL learning. The role of the teacher is undoubtedly crucial in making FL learning less stressful and more effective (Al-Saraj, 2011; Hashemi & Abbasi, 2013; Horwitz, 1996; Lee, 2016).

What is missing so far, is a rigorous study of training interventions specifically aimed at reducing teachers' anxiety levels and how this reflects both, their perceived FLPA and the quality of their pronunciation (FLPQ) in English. In the current study, an affective intervention was applied to a group of pre-service English teachers in the form of psycho-social training as an FLA reducing strategy combined with intensive English pronunciation training. Psycho-social training is widely accepted and applied in all levels of education in the United States and Western Europe (Coleman & Deutsche, 2000; Polk, 2000; Topping, Holmes, & Bremner, 2000), but it is only occasionally applied in Slovakia (Dobes et al., 2006). Compared to more traditional forms of education, it induces deeper and longer-term positive changes in participants' social competences (Positive Youth Development, 2014).

To the best of the authors' knowledge, there have not yet been any studies on psycho-social training applied as an FLA reducing strategy. In order to determine whether there is any positive effect of psycho-social training on reducing pronunciation anxiety and on increasing the quality of English pronunciation, psycho-social training was introduced only in the experimental group of this study.

The assumptions were that the level of FLPA would decrease and the level of FLPQ would increase after the experiment due to both the phonetic and psycho-social training. In this context, three research hypotheses were formulated:

Hypotheses:

1. FLPA is significantly lower after psycho-social training.
2. FLPQ is significantly higher after psycho-social training.
3. There is a significant negative relationship between FLPA and FLPQ.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Current context

Modern trends in teaching FLs emphasize an affective aspect of learning to counterbalance the cognitive aspect. Both the pre-service and in-service Slovak teachers¹ of English intuitively assume that the most effective remedies in relieving their

¹ Before conducting the experiment we performed semi-structured interviews concerning English pronunciation anxiety among TEFL university students (114 respondents) and in-service teachers of English (81 respondents) in Slovakia. The results of the interviews are part of a separate study.

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