

## AN INVESTIGATION INTO FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING ANXIETY, STRESS AND PERSONALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the correlations between foreign language anxiety, coping with stress and personality characteristics in higher education learners. The study was carried out with 399 learners (164 females and 235 males). The learners' age ranged between 17 and 32, and the mean age was 19.30. The data collection instruments used in the study were Personality Test Based on Adjectives, Scale for Coping with Stress and the Anxiety Scale for Foreign Language Learning. Pearson's conduct moment correlations and independent samples t test were used to analyze the data. Statistical analyses revealed that the mean anxiety scores of the males and females did not differ significantly. Moreover, there was not a significant correlation between coping with stress and personality characteristics.

**Key Words:** Personality, coping with stress, foreign language learning anxiety.

### INTRODUCTION

Personality is one of the most extensively studied concepts in psychology. Every trait that defines a person helps us get acquainted with and understand that particular person. In this respect, personality refers to a person's all interests, attitudes, skills, speaking style, outer appearance and his/her adaptation into the environment (Burger, 1993). There are quite a few theories about personality. These are psychoanalytic approach, biological approach, behavioural/social learning approach, cognitive approach, humanistic approach and distinctive feature approach (Burger, 1993). One of these theories is the five-factor personality theory. A number of personality psychologists have adopted the five-factor personality model since 1980s and obtained significant findings that lend support to this model (İnanç and Yerlikaya, 2010). The five-factor personality model, which is a hierarchical organization of personality factors, is composed of five basic dimensions. These five factors are extrovertedness, neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness (McCrae & John, 1992; Costa ve McCrae, 1995), and these factors have been investigated in quite a few studies (e.g., Bacanlı, İlhan & Aslan, 2009).

The subscale of neuroticism is described by the characteristics of being, anxious, distressed, uneasy and insecure (Manavipour, Mohammadi & Shahabi, 2013). Extroverted individuals are often known to be social, lively, cheerful, enthusiastic, optimistic and sociable people. Among the characteristics that form openness are a powerful imagination, desire to welcome new ideas, multi-faceted thinking and intellectual curiosity.

Agreeableness can be defined as being forgiving, helpful, humble, meek, merciful, and accommodating (McCrae & John, 1992; Costa ve McCrae, 1995). The individuals with a high agreeableness score are sociable people who love others and tend to give what they have to others (McCrae & John, 1992; Costa & McCrae, 1995). Conscientiousness encompasses the characteristics of being responsible, ambitious, cautious and disciplined (Bacanli, İlhan & Aslan, 2009).

Individuals' encountering serious or insignificant difficulty might lead to the initiation of the coping process (Türküm, 2001). In this process, the individual tries to assess his/her situation, puts into practice his/her existent skills activated by personality features and takes action (Türküm, 2001). Stress emerges as a result of the interaction between the person and the environment. What is significant in this interaction is that the individual considers events and persons as a source of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). If the individual does not see these events and people involved in them as a source of stress, he/she will not experience stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Arslan, 2010). Two methods for coping with stress are as follows: Problem-focused coping refers to a situation in which direct coping strategies that alter the relationship between the individual and environment are used (Lazarus, 1993). Problem-focused coping, one of the methods of coping with stress, is a more active strategy, and it encompasses a logical analysis that directs itself to knowledge and planned action that entail accurate expectations about the properties of emotional stimulants (Türküm, 1999). If the change occurs in the form of the individual's interpreting the environment rather than in the form of direct behaviours, this type of coping is referred to as emotion-focused coping (Lazarus, 1993). The second method; that is, emotion-focused coping is a passive strategy, and it encompasses getting rid of emotions that emerge as a result of an undesirable event (Türküm, 1999). Problem-focused coping results in change in external conditions, while the use of emotion-centred methods leads to an internal change in the individual (Lazarus, 1993). In coping patterns of individuals, both coping strategies appear together and various strategies are used (Türküm, 1999).

Certain properties of the individual such as personality, thinking style, psycho-social characteristics and his/her capabilities play a significant role in how efficiently and properly he/she can cope with stress (Aysan, 1988; Aysan, 1993). Successful coping strategies that the individual uses help eliminate stress, while unsuccessful ones lead to various psychological and physiological responses that are triggered by stress (Folkman, 1984). It was found that individuals who lack effective problem-solving skills were more anxious, less self-confident and more stress in comparison with those with such skills (Heppner and Anderson, 1985; Heppner and Baker, 1997).

Researchers and educators have identified various types of anxiety (Brown, 2000). However, not all types of anxiety are harmful for learners as there is a distinction between debilitating and facilitative anxiety, the latter referring to a little anxiety that fuels to learn better. Another distinction is between trait and state anxiety. Trait anxiety is a part of a person's personality and is often difficult to get rid of. Therefore, researchers mostly focus on state or situational anxiety and debilitating anxiety to help learners alleviate negative impacts of anxiety. A number of studies have found that such variables as anxiety, attitude and motivation have a deep impact on foreign language learning (Gardner, 1982; Gardler & MacIntyre, 1992, 1993; Skehan, 1989, 1991; Spolsky, 1989). Finding solutions for the problems that foreign language learners encounter today is relatively significant. Research findings concerning this issue and views of the stakeholders of foreign language education suggest that we should accept the existence of anxious learners and seek solutions for this problem (Ergür, 2004).

Anxiety is often defined as the state of uneasiness or fear in a threatening situation (Scovel, 1991). Foreign language anxiety remains outside the scope of this general definition. Anxiety is defined either as a situation or a characteristic in educational research. A person who is always anxious might feel anxiety in a variety of situations. On the other hand, anxiety based on a situation is a temporary phenomenon that emerges due to a particular reason (Woodrow, 2006). However, some researchers mentioned a third type of anxiety; that is, anxiety for a particular situation. Such type of anxiety is the type of anxiety that emerges in particular situations (Spielberger, Anton and Bedell, 1976). Studies show that foreign language anxiety falls into this category

(MacIntyre and Gardner 1991b; Horwitz 2001). It causes uneasiness and negative feelings, particularly in second language acquisition that is centred on speaking, listening and learning (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1994). Horwitz et al., (1986) claimed that foreign language anxiety has three components. The first of these is communication anxiety; the second one is negative social criticism, and the third one is test or academic anxiety. Gardner and MacIntyre (1989) found an anxiety type supporting Horwitz's perspective, but test anxiety was not significant in his study.

A number of studies have found that anxiety leads to negative consequences in foreign language learning. For instance, MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) observed that anxious students learned a list of words more slowly than their peers with less anxiety, and that they had difficulty in remembering the words they had learned before. In two other studies, it was found that learners who experienced anxiety studied harder than learners without it, but they were less successful than the latter (Horwitz et al., 1986; Price, 1991). In a study on secondary school students in English classes, Öner and Gedikoğlu (2007) found that anxious learners were less successful than their less anxious counterparts. Scovel (1978) stresses that positive and negative anxiety should not be confused. Positive anxiety makes students willing to learn and encourages them to participate in learning activities actively. On the other hand, negative anxiety, on the other hand, makes learners worry about or doubt their own capabilities, discouraging target language use (Ergür, 2004, p. 49). Similarly, Brown (2000) notes that anxiety stifles learning if it is too much or too little. A little anxiety might work and it is commonly referred to as facilitative anxiety. On the other hand, too much anxiety proves harmful to learning and is referred to as debilitating anxiety. Andrade and Williams (2009) found that approximately 25% of the students stated that anxiety hindered the learning process.

There have been contradictory findings regarding foreign language learning anxiety in males and females. Some researchers found that higher anxiety scores in favour of females (Donovan & MacIntyre, 2005; Mesri, 2012; Demirdaş & Bozdoğan, 2013) or males (Kitano, 2001), while some others found no correlation between foreign language anxiety and gender (Cheng, 2002; Dewaele, 2002; Doğan, 2008; Capan, & Simsek, 2012). Furthermore, in a recent study, Park & French (2013) studied on 948 university students in Korea, and they found that female students had higher levels of anxiety, but they had higher grades in comparison with males and low-anxiety students.

The purpose of the present study is to examine foreign language learning anxiety with respect to personality and coping with stress. Furthermore, it also investigates whether foreign language learning anxiety significantly differs across genders. The following section gives information about method, participants and data collection tools.

## METHOD

### Participants

The survey model is used in the present study. The study sample was selected from several faculties at Selçuk University in Konya, Turkey through random group sampling method. The participants to the study were 399 volunteers (164 females and 235 males). The mean age of the participants was 19.30 years (with an age range of 17-32 years) with a standard deviation of 2.26 years.

*Coping with Stress Scale (CWSS):* Coping with Stress Scale, *CWSS for short*, was developed for higher education students by Türküm (2002). This scale is composed of 23 Likert items (Strongly agree absolutely suitable=5, strongly disagree never suitable=1) and is used to test learners' styles for coping with stress. The scale consists of 3 subscales. These are seeking social support, problem-focused coping and avoidance. The internal reliability coefficients for these subscales of the CWSS were calculated to be .85, .80 and .65, respectively. The item-total correlations of the subscales were found to be .61, .48 and .34, whereas calculated correlation coefficients were found to be .85, in the test-retest method (Türküm, 2002).

### Personality Test Based on Adjectives

The Personality Test Based on Adjectives, the PTBA for short, is a scale developed by Bacanlı, İlhan and Aslan (2009). It is composed of 40 pairs of adjectives that are appropriate for the personality conception put forward by the Five-factor Personality Theory. The scale, which is composed of five subscales (Emotional instability/neuroticism, extrovertedness, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness), included seven-point items. The internal reliability coefficient of the PTBA was calculated using the data collected from 285 participants, and the scale was administered to 90 participants in two-week intervals. The internal reliability coefficients of the subscales of the test ranged between .73 and .89. The highest internal reliability coefficient was calculated to be .89 for extrovertedness, while the lowest one was .73 for neuroticism. The range of item-total correlations for the subscale of emotional instability (.26-.55) accounts for why the internal reliability coefficient of this subscale is lower in comparison with others. It is seen that the weakest correlation belongs to agreeableness ( $r=.86^{**}$ ,  $p<.01$ ), while the highest one belongs to openness ( $r=.68^{**}$ ,  $p<.01$ ). As a result, the internal reliability coefficients of personality subscales are well over .70 (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994), and this indicates that the scale is reliable (Bacanlı, İlhan and Aslan, 2009). Based on the results of the factor analyses carried out to test the validity of the PTBA, 40 adjective pairs were determined, and it was found that the five subscales explained the 52.6% of the variance in the PTBA. As a result of the calculations for external validity, it was found that personality factors significantly correlated with the scales used. This finding indicates that this data collection tool is valid (Bacanlı, İlhan and Aslan, 2009).

### Foreign Language Learning Scale

The Foreign Language Learning Scale, developed by Doğan (2008), is composed of 27 items. The scale is composed of five-point Likert items with options ranging from "Completely Agree" to "Completely Disagree". The reliability of the scale was calculated after 80 students responded to it. The internal reliability of the scale was found to be .92.

### RESULT

The data were analyzed using SPSS 16.0. Pearson's conduct moment correlations and independent samples t test were used to analyze the data.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Neuroticism	399	30.31	8.33
Extrovertedness	399	41.53	9.71
Openness	399	36.88	9.15
Agreeableness	399	40.73	9.85
Conscientiousness	399	31.05	8.36
Avoidance	399	28.93	4.35
Problem-focused	399	29.29	4.68
Seeking social support	399	21.74	3.05
Foreign Language Learning Anxiety	399	73.75	16.65

Table 2: Comparison of Foreign Language Learning Anxiety Scores of the Students Across Genders

Locus of Control	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	p
Female	164	73.72	15.92	-.029	.97
Male	235	73.77	17.18		

The participants to the study were 164 females and 235 males. The mean foreign language learning anxiety score of female learners were found to be 73,72, while the male learners' score was calculated to be 73.77. There was not a significant difference between the mean scores of the gender groups ( $t=-.029$ ,  $p=.97$ ). This finding indicates that males and females are similar in terms of foreign language anxiety. This finding concurs well with those of some other studies mentioned earlier (Cheng, 2002; Dewaele, 2002; Doğan, 2008; Capan, & Simsek, 2012).

Table 3: The Correlation Between the Five-Factor Personality Characteristics and Foreign Language Learning Anxiety

	Neuroticism	Extrovertedness	Openness	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness
Foreign Language Learning Anxiety	-.00	-.05	-.06	-.04	-.00

An examination of foreign language anxiety and personality characteristics reveals that there is not a statistically significant correlation between foreign language learning anxiety and neuroticism, extrovertedness, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness.

Table 4: The Correlation Between Coping with Stress and Foreign Language Learning Anxiety

	Avoidance	Problem focused	Seeking social support
Foreign Language Learning Anxiety	-.08	-.09	-.00

An examination of the correlation between foreign language anxiety and coping with stress reveals that there was not a significant correlation between avoidance, being problem-focused and seeking social support.

## CONCLUSION

In the present study, it was found that foreign language learning anxiety scores did not differ significantly across genders. This finding indicates that female and male learners are similar in terms of foreign language anxiety. However, as noted earlier, there are opposing findings in the literature about this issue. Interfering conditions and certain variables might account for these contradictory findings. This finding suggests that foreign language learners regardless of gender might experience anxiety to a certain extent. Too much anxiety stifles learning and should be alleviated using various instructional methods and techniques to help anxious learners learn better.

Another finding of the present study is that there was not a significant correlation between learners' personality characteristics and foreign language learning anxiety. Similarly, there was not a significant correlation between coping with stress and foreign language anxiety. The success of coping styles used by the individual helps alleviate stress, while the failure of these styles results in various psychological and physiological responses (Folkman, 1984).

Spielberger (1972) maintains that how the source of stress is perceived by the individual affects how deeply it is felt by him/her. Anxiety increases in line with how threatening or harmful the situation is for the individual. It emerges after the individual consciously feels the disharmony between his/her identity and his/her experiences, and it emerges as a response to the struggles that intend to change the identity (Aydin & Dilmac,

2004). Foreign language anxiety causes uneasiness and negative feelings, particularly in second language acquisition that is centred on speaking, listening and learning (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1994). However, it is often observed that speaking anxiety is more severe in foreign language learners.

Horwitz et al., (1986) claimed that foreign language anxiety has three components. The first of these is communication anxiety; the second one is negative social criticism, and the third one is test or academic anxiety. Positive or negative correlations between personality features and anxiety and between coping with stress and anxiety are expected. This expectation concord well with the findings in the literature discussed earlier. However, there was not a significant correlation between these variables in the present study. This finding might be due to the characteristics of the study sample or the properties of the data collection tools used in the study. Prospective studies with different sample sizes and using other scales might be effective in understanding the relationship between personality traits. Furthermore, since there are opposing findings regarding the role of gender in foreign language anxiety, we need to carry out more detailed studies on this issue and perhaps meta-analyses that synthesizes all studies regarding this issue to give a more general outlook.

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