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FOREIGN LANGUAGE LISTENING ANXIETY IN HIGH SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Nina Daskalovska

Goce Delcev University, Stip
nina.daskalovska@ugd.edu.mk

Adrijana Hadzi-Nikolova

Goce Delcev University, Stip
adrijana.hadzi-nikolova@ugd.edu.mk

Natka Jankova Aladjozovska

Goce Delcev University, Stip
natka.alagozovska@ugd.edu.mk

Abstract: Language learners progress at different rates and attain different levels of language competence. This is due to many factors that influence success in language learning. Some of these factors are aptitude, personality, age, attitudes, motivation, learning styles, etc. One of the factors that has been widely investigated is language anxiety. A lot of research has been carried out to determine the relationship between language anxiety and learners' achievement as well as the sources of learners' anxiety and the possible ways of reducing anxiety in the classroom. Most of the research has focused on general language anxiety. However, it has emerged that even though general language anxiety may be a problem for many learners, there are different types of anxiety related to a particular situation, a particular task, or a particular language skill. Regarding language skills, speaking is regarded as the most anxiety-provoking, which has also been reported by many learners. Listening anxiety has not been researched as much as speaking anxiety, but studies show that listening can also cause learner anxiety and can seriously affect listening comprehension. The purpose of this study is to determine the level of listening anxiety in high school and university students learning English as a foreign language. The instrument used to measure the listening anxiety levels is the Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS) which consists of 20 items that describe how learners feel about listening to English. The results show that both groups of participants exhibit low levels of anxiety, and there is no statistically significant difference between the two groups.

Keywords: *language learning; listening; anxiety; age; language proficiency.*

1. Introduction

Listening plays a crucial role in people's daily lives, consuming more time than speaking, reading, or writing. Rost (2001, pp. 2-4) explains that listening has been defined from four perspectives: receptive, constructive, collaborative, and transformative. From the receptive perspective, listening means catching what the

speaker said, getting the speaker's idea, unpacking the speaker's content, harvesting what is in the speaker's mind, and so on. According to the constructive perspective, listening means figuring out what is in the speaker's mind, reframing the speaker's message in a way that's relevant to you, understanding why the speaker is talking to you, noticing what is not said, etc. The collaborative perspective sees listening as the process of negotiating shared information or values with the speaker, responding to what the speaker has said, or signalling to the speaker which ideas are clear and acceptable to you. And from the transformative perspective, listening is creating a connection between the speaker and the listener, showing empathy with the speaker, imagining a possible world for the speaker's meaning, altering the cognitive environment of both the speaker and the listener, and so on. These definitions show that listening is a complex communication process that involves receiving, remembering, interpreting, and evaluating messages, constructing meaning, and responding.

Oxford states that "listening is the most frequently used language skill. Of the total time devoted to communicating, 45% is spent listening, 30% speaking, 16% reading, and 9% writing" (1993, p. 206). Acquiring a second language heavily relies on listening and reading for language input. Despite its significance, teaching listening skills in classrooms was neglected for a long time, with the belief that learners will transfer the skill from the first to the second language and will be able to develop listening skills in the target language without much intervention on the part of the teacher.

Bass (cited in Palmer, 2014) remarks that 50 to 70 percent of classroom time is spent listening to teachers, classmates, and audio-video materials. However, we cannot expect students to develop their listening skills simply by being exposed to the language in the classroom. One reason is the limited time of English language classes in foreign language contexts. Another reason is that like all the other skills, listening skills can be improved with "deliberate instruction and purposeful practice" (Palmer, 2014, p.1) by incorporating teaching listening strategies and meaningful interactions in the classroom. Richards (2008) points out that teaching listening skills is not only important for improving listening comprehension, but for language learning in general, because much of the input and data that the learners receive in language learning comes from listening. Furthermore, after leaving the classroom, "two channels of information enable learners to extend their knowledge of the target language. The first is exposure to the written word through reading. The second is exposure to the spoken word through listening – listening to videos, radio broadcasts, podcasts, talks and announcements, or to an interlocutor" (Field, 2009, p. 5). As the main aim of language teaching is to develop learners' communicative competence, and communication is a two-way process, it is clear that developing listening skills should be given the place in the classroom that it deserves.

1.1. Foreign language (FL) listening anxiety

Anxiety is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system (Spielberger,

1983, p. 1). Horwitz et al. (1986, p. 125) state that when anxiety is limited to the language learning situation, it falls into the category of specific anxiety reactions. FL anxiety is defined as a “distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Horwitz et al., 1991, p. 31). Zheng (2008) points out that foreign language learning can be a traumatic experience for many learners. According to a study conducted by Worde (quoted in Zheng, 2008), one third to one half of students examined reported experiencing debilitating levels of language anxiety. The negative effects of anxiety have been acknowledged for a long time. In the 1970s several humanistic approaches to language teaching and learning appeared based on the assumption that teachers need to provide favorable conditions for learning that include stress-free and low-anxiety classroom environments. Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis (1981, 1982) stated that a high affective filter, or feelings of anxiety impede language acquisition, and that a lower affective filter or anxiety levels provide better conditions for the language input to become intake.

Of the four language skills, it is believed that speaking is the most anxiety-provoking skill. Indeed, many studies have confirmed that learners exhibited greater anxiety when it came to speaking compared to other language skills (Horwitz et al., 1986, 1991). However, listening also causes a lot of worries as learners fear that they will not be able to understand what they hear and will not be able to respond adequately. Scarcella and Oxford (1992) state that listening anxiety arises when students perceive a task as excessively challenging or unfamiliar. This anxiety intensifies when listeners mistakenly believe that they are obligated to comprehend every word they hear.

Ji et al., (2022) state that before 2000, FL anxiety was already recognized as a significant factor influencing learning outcomes and that FL listening anxiety emerged as a new concept during this period, but it was seen as a subtype of general FL anxiety. FL listening anxiety is defined as the “fear of misunderstanding what language learners listen to and being embarrassed by interpreting the message wrongly” (Serraj & Noordin, 2013:p.3). Ji et al. (2022) present three approaches to defining foreign language anxiety: the psychological approach, viewing anxiety as feelings of tension and heightened autonomic nervous system activity; the situation-specific approach, suggesting FL anxiety as a distinct complex form of anxiety experienced in a language learning setting; and the social approach to listening anxiety, emphasizing negative beliefs about listening ability and the pressure to understand every word as sources of frustration and potential negative self-evaluation. The social approach also highlighted the fear of misinterpreting information during decoding as a contributor to listening anxiety. The authors point out that the introduction of FL listening anxiety marked a pivotal moment, prompting extensive research from 2000 to 2014 to distinguish it from general FL anxiety. The three approaches were employed to understand FL listening anxiety: the psychological approach focused on tension, worry, lack of confidence, and emotionality; the situation-specific approach identified anxiety in general and test situations; and the social approach argued that foreign language listening anxiety

is socially constructed due to diverse communicative and social events. Ji et al., (2022) remark that since 2014, research on FL listening anxiety has surged, exploring its relationship with other affective variables such as motivation, self-efficacy, meta-cognitive awareness, and listening achievement. However, incongruence in defining FL listening anxiety poses challenges in measurement, leading to mixed results in studies examining its correlation with listening achievements. The authors conclude that the theoretical frame for FL listening anxiety encompassing the psychological, situation-specific, and social approaches, reflects the multifaceted and complex nature of this phenomenon.

2. Literature Review

Even though FL listening anxiety has been investigated much less than general FL anxiety, there are still a plethora of studies that help us understand the sources of FL listening anxiety and how listening anxiety affects comprehension and achievement.

One of the rare studies that compared general FL learning anxiety on students' achievement and of listening anxiety on students' listening comprehension is the study conducted by Elkhafaifi (2005). The author used two measures of anxiety and a background questionnaire, and these scores were correlated with the participants' final grades and listening comprehension scores. For the purpose of the study, the author adapted the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) where the word *reading* was replaced with *listening*, and thus created the Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS), which was used for the first time as a measure of FL listening anxiety. The results showed that general learning anxiety and listening anxiety are different but related phenomena, and that both are negatively correlated with achievement.

Kimura (2008) investigated the relationship between FL anxiety in 452 Japanese students and two variables: gender and university major (Social Science and Math). For that purpose, the author used Kim's (2000) FLLAS translated into Japanese. Regarding gender, there were no statistically significant differences. In relation to the second variable, Math students experienced higher levels of anxiety than Social Science students in the dimension of Emotionality of the FLLAS.

In order to investigate the possible causal relations between foreign language (English) listening anxiety and English listening performance, Zhang (2013) administered the foreign language listening anxiety scale (FLLAS) and IELTS test twice with an interval of three and a half months to 300 participants learning English as a foreign language. The results indicated that FL listening anxiety affected FL listening performance, but there was no systematic effect of FL listening performance on FL listening anxiety. The authors explain that causal relationships may be due to the situation-specific nature of FL listening anxiety.

Zhai (2015) explored students' anxiety in English listening comprehension by using quantitative and qualitative methods in 82 freshmen of English majors. The author used a modified foreign language listening questionnaire to examine the participants' listening anxiety level, and a series of interviews were done in order to explore the sources of anxiety deeply. The results showed that the participants

experienced a little higher listening anxiety, that there was a significantly negative correlation between anxiety and listening comprehension, and that the main sources of anxiety were lack of confidence and listening strategies, the characteristics of listening comprehension and materials as well as fear of negative evaluation.

Li (2022) conducted a meta-analysis in order to explore the relationship between foreign language listening anxiety and the four correlates, i.e., two high-evidence correlates (listening performance and listening strategy) and two low-evidence correlates (motivation and reading anxiety). For the two high-evidence correlates, the author also conducted a moderator analysis in order to examine the moderating effects of learners' age, foreign language proficiency, and language distance. The results indicated a moderate and small negative correlation of listening performance and listening strategy, while the two low-evidence correlates had small and moderate-to-large effect sizes, with motivation being the small and negative correlate, and reading anxiety being the moderate-to-large and positive correlate. Learners' age and foreign language performance appeared to be significant moderators.

In order to find out the sources of learners' listening comprehension anxiety (Vogely (1998), 140 participants registered in the first three semesters of university-level Spanish courses completed a questionnaire that elicited information about whether they were experiencing listening anxiety or not, what made them anxious and what types of settings, exercises, or activities helped to lower their anxiety level. Of the 140 participants, only nine percent reported that they did not experience listening comprehension anxiety. The participants' comments fell into four general categories: input, process, instructional factors, and personal factors. The input category (51%) included sources of anxiety such as the nature of the speech, level of difficulty, lack of clarity, lack of visual support, and repetition of input; in the process category (30%) the participants mentioned inappropriate strategies, lack of time to process, can't study for listening comprehension, can't check answers; the instructional factors (6%) included lack of practice, testing and uncomfortable environment; and the personal factors (13%) included fear of failure, nerves, and instructor's personality.

Kim (2002) investigated the existence of FL listening anxiety and general FL anxiety as well as the relationship between listening anxiety and learner background factors. The instruments used for the study were the Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS) and the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLLAS). The majority of the participants reported having experienced anxiety in classroom listening activities and in real-life situations. The factor analysis revealed two main factors: tension and worry over English listening and lack of self-confidence in listening. The correlation analysis showed that listening anxiety was significantly related to general FL anxiety and listening proficiency, and the multiple regression analysis indicated that lack of self-confidence in listening was the best predictor of listening proficiency. In addition, there was a significant relationship between listening anxiety and two background factors: university major, and study with tutors and in private language institutes.

In an attempt to investigate general FL anxiety and the four language skill-

specific FL anxiety, Ran et al. (2022) administered a questionnaire to 1023 medical students learning English as a foreign language. Contrary to the widely accepted view that speaking is the most anxiety-provoking skill, the results of this study showed that the predominant FL anxiety came from English listening anxiety (a mean value of 106.863), while English reading anxiety was the lowest (a mean score of 62.726). Both male and female students demonstrated the greatest degree of FL anxiety in English listening and the least anxiety in English reading. Students' prior English learning achievements were negatively connected with their FL anxiety. The self-evaluation of students' English listening, writing, and reading abilities was considerably negatively connected with FL anxiety, but the self-evaluation of their English-speaking abilities was positively correlated with FL anxiety.

Chen et al. (2023) conducted a study with 187 university students in China to investigate the effect of gender and foreign language listening anxiety (FLLA) on listening comprehension. The instruments included the FLLA scale and the Oxford Online Listening Level Test to measure FLLA and L2 listening comprehension. The findings indicated that individuals with lower anxiety exhibited superior listening skills compared to those with moderate and high anxiety levels. Gender variations were explored in two facets of listening, namely, listening comprehension and FLLA. More precisely, females outperformed males in listening comprehension, and females demonstrated a greater degree of FLLA in comparison to males.

2.1. Purpose of the study

Some of the studies on foreign language listening anxiety focus on learners' levels of anxiety, others try to discover the sources of anxiety, and another set of studies attempts to find out the relationships between anxiety and other variables such as comprehension, achievement, motivation, age, gender, and so on. Lee (2022) found out that age was an important factor in learners' foreign language listening anxiety. The aim of this study is to explore the levels of listening anxiety in two groups of learners of different ages and proficiency levels. The research was initiated based on the following set of research questions:

1. What are the foreign language listening anxiety levels of high school and university students in the Republic of North Macedonia?
2. Do foreign language listening anxiety levels differ in students of different ages and proficiency levels?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants in this study were two groups of learners. The first group (Group 1) comprised 50 high school students, aged 15-16 years, who had been studying English for 8-9 years. The second group were 47 university students, aged 19-20 years, who had been studying English for 12-13 years, and who were enrolled in an English language and literature study program at Goce Delcev University in North Macedonia (Group 2). English proficiency tests were not administered as it was considered that the high school students were at a pre-

intermediate/intermediate level, while the English major students were considered to be at an upper-intermediate/advanced level.

3.2. Instruments

The instrument used for this study was the FLLAS by Elkhafaifi (2005) which consists of 20 items on a 5-point Likert scale that describe how students feel about listening in English. Response options ranged from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5), where lower scores indicated lower anxiety, and higher scores indicated higher anxiety. The FLLAS has an estimated internal reliability of .96 (Cronbach’s alpha). The responses to three items were reverse-coded to make sure that a high score represented high anxiety. The questionnaire was translated into Macedonian to ensure that all the participants could understand each item.

3.3. Procedure

The participants were informed about the aim of the study, and they all agreed to take part in it. The questionnaire was administered during the participants’ regular classes. The average time for completing the survey was approximately 10 min.

The responses of the participants were calculated, and a mean score for each item and for each group was obtained.

3.4. Results and discussion

Research question 1

What are the foreign language listening anxiety levels of high school and university students in the Republic of North Macedonia?

The overall mean score of Group 1 was 1.791 (Table 1), which indicates low anxiety levels. Except for three items, the mean scores for all items were under 2.00. The only three items with a score above 2.00 were item No. 15 (*The hardest part of learning English is learning to understand spoken English*) with a mean score of 3.00, followed by item No. 9 (*I usually end up translating word by word when I’m listening to English*) with a mean score of 2.28, item No. 1 (*I get upset when I’m not sure whether I understand what I’m hearing in English*) with a mean score of 2.24 and item No. 8 (*It bothers me to encounter words I can’t pronounce while listening to English*) with a mean score of 2.18. These results show that the high school students do not experience high levels of anxiety in listening situations, and their main worry is not understanding spoken English, so many of the participants resort to translating word by word. However, the items containing stronger words such as being intimidated, nervous, and confused had lower mean scores, which indicates that the participants do not experience such strong negative feelings while listening in English.

Regarding Group 2, the overall mean score was 2.08, which still indicates low anxiety levels, but a bit higher than the high school group. The item with the highest mean score was again item No. 15, but in addition to items 1, 8, and 9, other items scored higher than the high school group, such as *I get upset whenever I hear unknown grammar while listening to English* (mean score of 2.42) or *You*

have to know so much about English history and culture in order to understand spoken English (mean score of 2.18).

The results of this study in which the participants were high school and university students showed that both groups had low anxiety listening levels, which is much lower than other studies. For example, in Kim’s study (2002), the mean score was 3.26, the same as in Chen et al. study (2023), indicating slightly raised listening anxiety levels. Ran et al. (2002) found that of all four skills, the highest levels of anxiety were associated with listening, where 51% of the participants were found to be above the mean.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Group 1		Group 2	
Mean	1.791	Mean	2.0895
Standard Error	0.09270752	Standard Error	0.097117604
Median	1.75	Median	2.1
Mode	1.7	Mode	1.97
Standard Deviation	0.414600632	Standard Deviation	0.434323127
Sample Variance	0.171893684	Sample Variance	0.188636579
Kurtosis	2.672139034	Kurtosis	1.231223747
Skewness	1.221827472	Skewness	-0.090138311
Range	1.8	Range	1.96
Minimum	1.2	Minimum	1.1
Maximum	3	Maximum	3.06
Sum	35.82	Sum	41.79
Count	20	Count	20

In some studies that investigated the relationship between listening anxiety levels and listening comprehension, the foreign language listening anxiety questionnaire was administered together with the listening comprehension test, which might have contributed to elevated anxiety levels. The low anxiety levels in this study may be due to the fact that the participants did not take any other test and the questionnaire was administered in a relaxed atmosphere. Zhang (2013) argues that “single items in the FLLAS [that] measure anxiety are not stable over time” (p.173). He identified three sets of items in the FLLAS: Listening Anxiety (LA) items which indicate feelings of nervousness, upset, distress, or intimidation during listening activities, implying a high level of state anxiety when scores are high; Self-Belief (SB) items which show traits of confidence and satisfaction with one’s FL listening proficiency; and FL Listening Decoding Skills (DS), which describe learners’ cognitive ability related to memory, attention and understanding where high scores suggest low proficiency in listening. Based on the analysis, the author concluded that foreign language listening anxiety is “a situation-specific anxiety with a complex structure involving anxiousness, sadness, intimidation, confidence, and satisfaction” (p. 173). Therefore, the conditions in which FL listening anxiety is measured are also important. If the participants are not faced with an immediate listening task, they will not experience strong feelings of upset

or distress at the moment, so their state anxiety will be low, and if they have a positive self-image, we can expect results that indicate low listening anxiety.

Research question 2

Do foreign language listening anxiety levels differ in students of different ages and proficiency levels?

The t-test for paired samples shows that the difference between the two groups is not statistically significant ($t=5.73$, $p>0.5$).

Even though there is a small difference between the two groups, it is not statistically significant, so we can conclude that both groups expressed similarly low levels of FL listening anxiety despite the difference in age and general language proficiency.

In Li's study (2002), the moderator analysis revealed that age and foreign language proficiency significantly influence the correlations between listening anxiety and both listening strategy and performance. Specifically, children showed a more negative correlation between listening anxiety and listening strategy than adolescents and adults, possibly due to differences in the frequency of metacognitive strategy use in listening comprehension. The study suggested that adolescents and adults might be more adept at employing such strategies than young children.

It is worth mentioning that one week before the FLLAS questionnaire was administered, the same groups of participants completed the MALQ (metacognitive awareness listening questionnaire) (Daskalovska et al., 2023), which showed a high level of metacognitive awareness for both groups. Namely, the overall mean score for the high school students was 4.18, and for the university students it was 4.26 on a 6-point Likert scale, which showed moderate levels of metacognitive awareness. However, for three groups of strategies: Directed Attention, Person Knowledge and Problem Solving, both groups exhibited high levels of metacognition. Therefore, one reason for the results in this study may be that all the participants were aware of metacognitive listening strategies and probably used them in listening situations. Moreover, as the participants were reminded of these strategies one week before they completed the FLLAS, it may have contributed to feelings of confidence in their listening abilities.

4. Conclusion

The study aimed to determine FL listening anxiety levels in high school and university students in the Republic of North Macedonia as well as to examine the effects of age and proficiency level. The results showed that both groups showed low levels of anxiety, and the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant, which is in contrast to other studies that show higher levels of listening anxiety. However, various factors may influence the results of a study, such as the conditions in which the questionnaire is administered, the type of instruction, the teacher's attitude and rapport with students, the types of activities the students do, the incorporation of strategy training, and so on. In the present study, one of the factors that may have influenced the results is the

high level of metacognitive awareness of listening strategies of the participants and the fact that they were reminded about these strategies one week before the experiment. Therefore, one of the ways of reducing the level of listening anxiety in the classroom is to incorporate strategy training in regular instruction and teach specific listening strategies that would improve learners' listening comprehension and increase their listening proficiency. Teachers should provide a lot of practice opportunities for learners and design tasks and activities that help students realize that they do not need to understand every word in order to get the overall message. In addition, the materials used in the classroom need to be of interest to the students and at an appropriate level. The attitude and personality of the teacher are also very important. As Kim (2000) says, teachers should be "more sensitive to students' emotions, and work to develop methods to manage and alleviate anxiety in the classroom" (p. 29).

Vogely (1998) presents students' suggestions for alleviating listening anxiety such as making input comprehensible by using familiar, meaningful topics and vocabulary, incorporating games and other fun activities, giving clear instructions and organizing tasks appropriately, training students to use listening strategies, having more listening practice and getting regular feedback, creating a pleasant atmosphere for learning and having realistic expectations, as well as "developing language confidence through small successes and through the use of anxiety-reducing techniques" (p. 73).

In sum, listening anxiety is an important factor for success in language learning, and teachers can do a lot to reduce learners' anxiety. Language teachers have a lot of roles and responsibilities in the classroom, and they need to be aware of learners' problems, emotions and struggles, and should take appropriate measures to make the learning experience effective, successful, and enjoyable.

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