

**Foreign language anxiety and its effects on students' determination to study English:  
To abandon or not to abandon?**

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***Abstract***

*Foreign language anxiety (FLA) has attracted much interest. However, little is known about whether FLA affects students' determination to study a foreign language, which is believed to be an important initial condition for students to be able to learn the foreign language effectively. This study investigated anxious tertiary students' experiences in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in order to determine whether their anxiety affected their determination to study English. Participants were 49 non-English major students from a university in Vietnam who were identified as being anxious. Data were collected using autobiographies and interviews, and were analysed using a content analysis approach facilitated by NVivo. The findings indicate that awareness of the importance of English and volition were two important factors that influenced anxious students' determination to study English. The study suggests that students' awareness of the importance of English should be enhanced, and that their volitional strategies should be strengthened, in order to assist them in managing their anxiety effectively and thus to persist in EFL learning.*

**Introduction and background**

Foreign language educators have long been in search of answers to account for the great difficulty faced by a number of students when learning a foreign language where others find it less difficult (Ganschow, Sparks, Anderson, Javorshy, Skinner & Jon, 1994). Students who have difficulty with foreign language learning are often described as underachievers, or lacking in motivation (Chen & Chang, 2004; Tercanlioglu, 2004; Li & Pan, 2009), or as having language learning disabilities (Grigorenko, 2002; Hu, 2003; Reed & Stansfield, 2004). Other affective variables such as attitude, motivation, anxiety and beliefs about foreign language learning have also been considered as factors that might influence foreign language learning. Of these affective factors, anxiety has been given much attention.

Conceptualisations and definitions of foreign language anxiety (FLA) have reached several milestones as researchers seek to understand its nature (see reviews by MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a; MacIntyre, 1999; Tran, 2012). However, the seminal work of Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope has provided the most commonly accepted definition of FLA. They conceptualise FLA as a unique type of anxiety specific to foreign language learning, defining it as ‘a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning process’ (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986: 128).

Research into the distinctive nature of FLA has found evidence for its debilitating effects on foreign language learning. In terms of cognition, anxious students were found to have difficulty processing meaningful input, and to be less responsive to language output (Krashen, 1981, 1982, 1985). Anxiety has also been shown to have negative influences, both pervasive and subtle, on the three stages of cognitive processing: input, processing and output (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991b, 1994a, 1994b; Bailey, Onwuegbuzie, & Daley, 2000). In terms of achievement and performance, research has indicated that both general FLA and anxieties about specific skills, including listening, reading, speaking and writing, have negative effects on student achievement and performance. Significant negative correlations were found between general FLA and course grades (Aida, 1994; Coulombe, 2000; Elkhafafi, 2005; Yan & Horwitz, 2008), between foreign language listening anxiety and listening course grades (Elkhafafi, 2005; Bekleyen, 2009), between foreign language reading anxiety and reading scores (Zhao, 2009), between foreign language speaking anxiety and oral scores (Sellers, 2000), and between foreign language writing anxiety and writing achievement (Chen & Lin, 2009). For example, more anxious students in reading tend to recall less passage content, and experience more off-task, interfering thoughts than their less anxious counterparts (Sellers, 2000), while high-anxiety students in speaking produce longer texts and smaller amounts of continuous speech, have longer mid-clause pauses, make fewer repetitions, and make more false starts (Djigunovic, 2006). These results indicate that FLA does have negative effects on foreign language learning performance and achievement.

However, how anxiety affects foreign language performance and achievement is only one issue to consider when discussing anxiety and language learning, and ‘perhaps not even the most important’ (Horwitz, 2001: 122). According to Elaine Horwitz, one of the leading researchers in the field, greater importance should be assigned to understanding the frustration and discomfort that a large number of students seem to be suffering when learning a foreign language. This view is supported by other researchers who considers students’ psychological experience of foreign language learning to be more important than language proficiency levels (e.g., Spieldmann & Radnofsky, 2001). Indeed, the consequences of FLA may extend beyond the classroom to the point that those who pursue the study

of a foreign language until graduation may actually never use the language again as a result of high levels of FLA (Dewaele, 2007). If this is the case, it is 'not only sad for the individuals but also it is a loss for the whole school system that has invested money, time and energy in the teaching of a FL that will ultimately not be used' (Dewaele & Thirtle, 2009: 638). To address these issues, it is necessary to examine whether FLA affects students' determination to study a foreign language, which is a necessary precondition for their success in learning and also for their future use of the foreign language.

It is indisputable that English plays a very important role as a global language. In many countries, it has been argued that having English proficiency is like possessing an Aladdin's lamp, as it can bring material prosperity by ensuring access to education, international business, science and technology (Kachru, 1990; Hamid, 2009). This high degree of importance accorded to English is supposed to create a very strong motivation for students to learn English. Whether this motivation is strong enough to help students to regulate themselves in managing FLA, or whether it is negated by FLA, is worth considering. Thus, in addition to the findings about the effects of FLA on achievement from correlational research, it is important to understand whether FLA affects students' determination to study English. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to investigate anxious students' experiences in learning EFL by assessing whether FLA affected their determination to study English.

## **Research method**

### **Participants**

Participants in this study were 49 non-English major students ranging in age from 18-20, comprising 21 males and 28 females. They came from five different faculties in a university in Vietnam: Business Administration, Economic and Development Studies, Accounting and Finance, Economic Information Systems and Political Economics. These students were taking a Basic English Level 2 course, which was preceded by a Basic English Level 1 course and followed by a Basic English Level 3 course. Of the 49 students, 21 had studied English since primary school, 25 since junior high school, one since senior high school, and two began their study at university.

### **Instruments and procedures**

Data for the study were obtained using autobiographies and interviews. The autobiography was a self-report of EFL learning experiences, and the interview was conducted subsequently to clarify and elaborate on the information provided in the autobiography.

Before participating in the study, the student participants completed a questionnaire. This questionnaire contained initial questions about demographics and a preliminary assessment drawing from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale developed by Horwitz and her colleagues to measure anxiety levels (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986). Based on their anxiety scores, these students were identified as being anxious: nine students were classified as high-anxious (HA) and 40 as medium-anxious (MA). The students were invited to participate in the study, firstly by writing an autobiography about their EFL learning experiences and preferences. Then, six of them (two males and four females) were selected to participate in unstructured interviews based on their potential to provide rich data to understand the matters of interest for the study.

The data obtained from students' autobiographies and interview transcripts were then analysed following a content analysis approach facilitated by NVivo, a qualitative data analysis computer software package produced by QSR International.

### **Results and discussion**

In order to examine whether FLA affected the students' determination to study English, attention was paid to their self-evaluations of experiences of anxiety and their reported plans for EFL learning. Because these students were university students, once the required English language courses at the university concluded it would be up to them whether to pursue further EFL learning or not. Therefore, examination of their anxiety experiences and their reported plans for EFL learning would reveal whether they differed in their decisions about learning EFL and, if they did, what factors influenced their decisions.

Based on their reported plans for EFL learning, the 49 students were classified into three groups. Group One included those students who exhibited a strong desire to persist in their EFL learning ( $N=30$ , including 4 HA students and 26 MA students). Group Two included those students who, despite their decision to study English, were currently reluctant to study it ( $N=15$ , including 4 HA students and 11 MA students). Those students who wanted to abandon EFL learning altogether were classified into Group Three ( $N=4$ , including 1 HA student and 3 MA students). The numbers in each group indicated that whether these anxious students decided to pursue further EFL learning or not did not absolutely depend on their anxiety levels.

Based on the insights gained from these anxious students' responses, two factors emerged as strong influences on their determination to learn English: awareness of the importance of English and volitional control. Further discussion of these factors is presented sequentially in the following sections.

Note: The following codes are used to facilitate the tracing of references from the data: Int=Interview; Aut=Autobiography; L=line. For example, (Khanh, Int, L5) indicates that the quotation is from the interview with Khanh, line 5 in the transcript. All names used are pseudonyms.

### **Awareness of the importance of English and anxious students' determination to study English**

The primary determinant of whether these anxious students wanted to pursue EFL learning was awareness of the importance of English. If these students had been unaware of the importance of English, they would abandon their learning of it. See, for example, the following excerpt from the interview with Duyen:

- Duyen I need to study ... I find that ... several times I have wanted ... generally speaking, I want to abandon it [EFL learning] but I cannot.
- Int Why can't you abandon it? Why do you want to abandon it?
- Duyen Because I have tried to study hard but I cannot acquire it. But when I think ...
- Int Why can't you abandon it?
- Duyen Because anxiety ... it is like ... if we abandon it, we would fail exams, generally speaking ... it is like ... nowadays we think that if we do not have English proficiency, we cannot get a job. If we abandon it now, when we graduate from university with limited English proficiency, there will certainly be fewer opportunities for us to get a job compared to other friends. (Duyen, Int, L311-319)

Duyen wanted to abandon her EFL learning; however, she found it so important to achieve proficiency in English that she could not abandon it. It was her awareness of the importance of English that provided a strong motivation for her to pursue EFL learning, otherwise she might have abandoned it.

In another situation, Hoai had experienced such high anxiety in English language sessions at high school that she considered English 'an obsession'. However, her recognition of the importance of English when she entered university caused a change in her attitude towards EFL learning:

- Hoai Since I entered university, in such a competitive learning environment, I have recognised the importance of this subject [English], as it will be my companion in my life. I do not want to keep myself absorbed in this situation [feeling stressed in studying English], so I have decided to focus on studying English in order to change myself. (Hoai, Aut, L48-51)

Similar to Duyen, Hoai might have given up EFL learning due to her anxiety if it hadn't been for her recognition of the importance of English.

Based on these disclosures, it can be seen that anxious students would be more likely to abandon EFL learning if they did not perceive its importance. Nevertheless, this motivation alone was not enough to help the students manage their anxiety. In fact, all of the 49 students reported being aware of the importance of English for their future; however, not all of them decided to pursue EFL learning despite the difficulties, particularly the anxiety, that they encountered. Thus, other factors must have contributed to this difference in their decisions.

By the time these students entered university, all of them reported having recognised the importance of English. At this point, they had two things in common: (i) they were anxious about studying English, and (ii) they were aware of the importance of English for their futures. However, despite these similarities, their individual plans for EFL learning were different. In comparing and contrasting the students in the three groups through their autobiographies, there was evidence that these students differed in their volitional control.

### **Volition and anxious students' determination to study English**

The students in Group One had one thing in common, that is, they had very strong volition. For example, although Dao confided that 'I always think I am the worst student at English in the country, so I do not like studying it at all' (Dao, Aut, L38-39), because she was aware of the importance of English, she insisted on studying it:

Dao I am currently taking an extra English language course from basic to advanced level, and it is my first action to improve my English. In addition, my plan is to spend 30 minutes a day on English and, when I have free time, I try to watch movies or listen to music in English, do further exercises, enrich my vocabulary. (Dao, Aut, L44-47)

Dao showed very strong volitional control during implementation of her study plan.

Similarly, Huyen, despite having experienced being laughed at several times, still decided to pursue EFL learning:

Huyen There have been times when I felt as if I were down, but after times of tears and disappointment, I encouraged myself to keep trying, not to give up. (Huyen, Aut, L80-81)

Huyen's anxiety did not prevent her from making all possible efforts to improve her English. For example, even bad weather and illness could not prevent her from getting to her extra English language class regularly for fear of missing the knowledge she might need:

Huyen But it is really hard to study, especially when coming late to class due to traffic jam, or when my classes at the university ended late, although I tried to ride my bicycle as fast as I could to foreign language centre, I frequently could not get to class in time. And on the rainy days in November, sometimes I rode from College of Economics to the centre and got wet through. I sat in class trembling with cold but refused to take the teacher's advice to go home to change clothes. Actually I wanted to go home very much, but I feared that if I went home I could not catch up with my classmates, so I dared not. (Huyen, Aut, L59-64)

In this excerpt, Huyen's determination was so strong that she urged herself to make every effort to realise her plan; otherwise she might not have been able to overcome such obstacles.

Lien described a different situation where she struggled with her anxiety about studying English:

Lien After two years enduring anxiety, I thought I could not fall down like that. I thought no one could save me better than I could, and that if I wanted to have a good future, I had to get out of that situation. One year is not a long time, but I was determined to make every effort to study English, and I forced myself to do so by all means. (Lien, Int, L44-47)

Lien's reflections reveal that, with strong volition, she was able to follow her goals. Undoubtedly, without her recognition of the importance of English for her future and her strong volitional control, Lien might not have been able to overcome the obstacles caused by her anxiety. The strong volition possessed by Lien and the other students in Group One distinguished them from those in Group Two and Group Three.

The students in Group Two expressed reluctance to study English although they found it necessary to learn it. Their problem was that although they could not abandon EFL learning, they still found themselves unwilling to study. For example, Lan knew that she should try to study English: 'I do not like studying English, but it is unquestionably an important and necessary subject, so I must study it' (Lan, Aut, L13-14). However, Lan's volitional control was not strong enough to help her overcome difficulties in pursuing her goal: 'Several times I have set a clear plan but I have always postponed implementing it' (Lan, Aut, L47-48). Although Lan was aware that she was weak at English and needed to study further, she admitted that 'knowing is one thing, doing is another thing' (Lan, Aut,

L50). Similarly, Trang asserted 'I very much want to study English deeper', and made many plans to improve her English. However, she confessed:

Trang I know I have to overcome my weaknesses, but I keep delaying implementing it until now ... my plan is still on paper, I have still failed to implement it. (Trang, Aut, L7-8, L48-49, L54-55)

Another student, Di, reflected: 'I assert that I want to study English well very much'. However, his volitional control was similarly not strong:

Di I have applied different ways to study English, for example spending one hour a day on English, but I could only do so for a few days then I gave up because I found it difficult; or I tried to watch films in English but then I did not understand anything and switched to Vietnamese subtitles. (Di, Aut, L23, L25-27)

Compared to the students in Group One, the students in Group Two had weaker volition. Therefore, although they understood the importance of English, their anxiety made them reluctant to carry out their plans for EFL learning.

The students in Group Three expressed no interest in EFL learning, but studied it because of the course requirements. Nhat, Quoc, and Thuan tried to pass exams without any intention to study English for knowledge. What they did to manage their anxiety was to cope with it in the short term. For example, Nhat reported:

Nhat I found my heart beating very fast whenever I heard the teacher say 'be ready ... I will call some of you to go to the blackboard to do the exercises' or 'I will call you to stand up and let us know the keys to the exercises.' At such times I turned round and round doing the exercises or finding keys, preparing answers so that if I was called on I would not be embarrassed. (Nhat, Aut, L56-59)

Quoc coped with his anxiety by 'playing games or asking friends to go out for coffee' (Quoc, Aut, L22-23), and Thuan did similar things. These students had no plans for EFL learning once their required courses in the university ended. Another of the students in Group 3, Duy reported:

Duy I do not know how to cope with anxiety. I have neglected studying English for quite a long time. Now I have to spend time studying other subjects as well, so it can be said that I have abandoned learning English. It has affected my GPA, but I don't know what to do. Actually I have done nothing to overcome my anxiety and have never thought that I have to focus on studying English to improve my proficiency. Everybody wants to be able to study English well, not excluding me. But I cannot



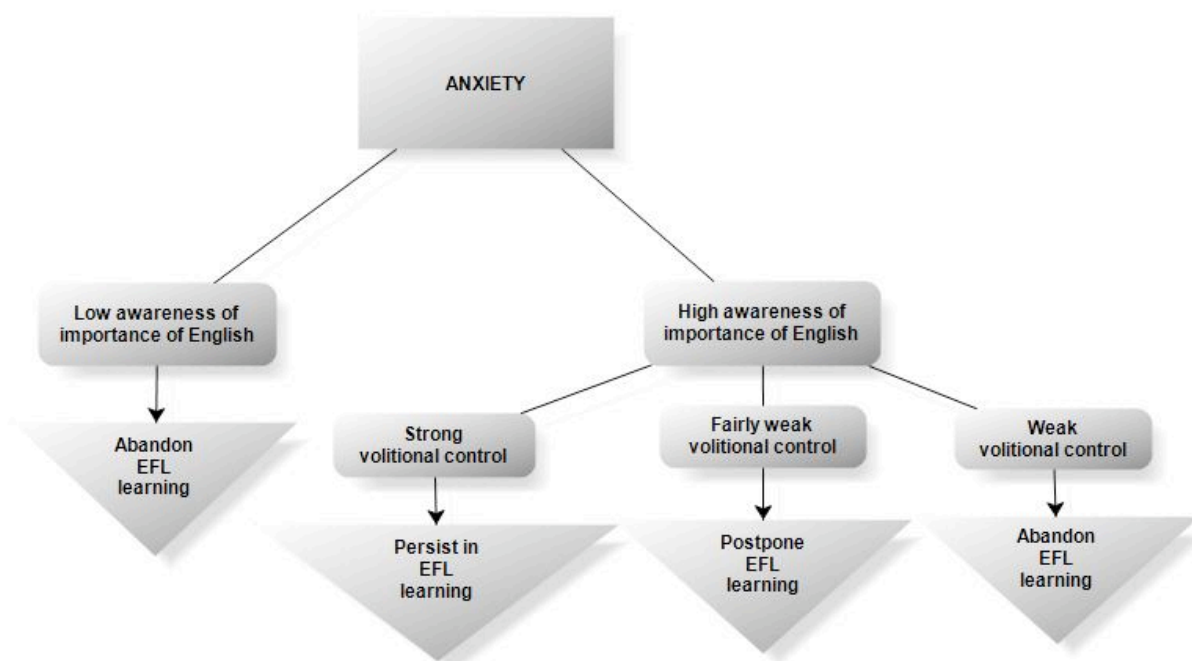
do it. It may be because I have never tried my best, and I am easy to surrender to difficulties. (Duy, Aut, L34-39)

Duy wanted to manage his anxiety and to study English well, but he did not act on these intentions. These four students did not want to feel anxious about studying English, and they presumed that if they had better English proficiency, their anxiety would be reduced; however, they did nothing to improve their proficiency, nor did they try to manage their anxiety in the long term.

These discussions support, or can be explained, by volitional theory, which emphasises the function of volition in restraining motivation to keep learners on track. Volition theory conceptualises motivation as generating learners' engagement in tasks, where volition controls intentions and impulses to keep learners persistent in realising their goals, thereby maintaining their motivation (Corno, 2001; Kuhl, 1985). Because these anxious students were found to have lost interest in learning EFL, it can be said that they had limited intrinsic motivation, that is, they did not study English for the inherent satisfaction of the activity itself. Rather, it was the extrinsic motivation arising from their awareness of the importance of English that encouraged them to learn English. In this case, the importance of English created motivation for the students to set a goal for EFL learning, and volition ensured they kept this motivation in mind to help them persist in implementing their goals.

Those students who had strong volitional control, for example, the students in Group One, were able to stick to their plans; whereas, those students with weaker volitional control, for example, the students in Group Two, still wanted to study English but tended to be distracted. Comments along the lines of 'I will think about it tomorrow' demonstrate how they postponed implementing their plans. The third group of students who had weak volitional control tended to abandon EFL learning altogether.

In justifying the importance of volition, Corno asserts that 'volition becomes important partly *because* [italics in the original] intentions are fragile and people often waver on commitments' (Corno, 2001: 196). In relation to this study, it was the awareness of the importance of English that motivated the students to engage in EFL learning in the first place, but it was volitional control that helped some of them overcome their anxiety and stick to their goals, or to decide to pursue EFL learning in the long term. Without motivation, there would be little need to self-regulate to manage anxiety to keep on studying. But even with strong motivation, students might still be subdued by anxiety if they did not possess strong volition. Figure 1 on the following page summarises these findings.



**Figure 1 – Anxiety and students’ decisions about EFL learning**

It can be seen from their autobiographies that these university students perceived that they were now more independent and self-reliant in learning than they were when studying at high school. The students assumed that university students should be more independent and responsible for their learning, and they reported that external factors did not affect them much. This can be partly seen in the responses of six students to the question about whether they felt relieved to discover that many students were anxious about studying English. Five of the six students interviewed did not really feel relieved, or only felt a bit easier because they did not want to stay in the same group with other anxious students who they supposed must have low proficiency. Interestingly, one student (Duyen) affirmed that she did not feel relieved at all because ‘other students care about their businesses, and me ... I think, I don’t think with this level it is easier for me to get a job because if I stand out from the crowd it will be better’ (Duyen, Int, L119-121). Furthermore, they all assumed that their anxiety was mainly due to internal factors, specifically their low English proficiency, while external factors did not play a significant role. They affirmed their belief that in managing anxiety, students themselves were the most responsible because they had to rely on themselves to solve their problems before asking for support from others. This finding corroborates the importance of volitional control in students’ decisions about EFL learning. That is, given students’ independence in their studies, it is logical that volition was found to have strongly influenced their determination to study English, while external factors other than the awareness of the importance of English (i.e., motivation) could not be clearly identified, or did not emerge explicitly from the data.

## Conclusions and implications

This group of anxious university students endured a lot of ups and downs during their EFL learning. However, the overall effects of anxiety on them, specifically on their decisions about EFL learning, were different. Based on the results from this small sample, the students' level of FLA was not a good predictor of whether they would abandon EFL learning. Rather, the degree to which FLA affected each student's determination to study English was influenced by two prominent factors: (i) awareness of the importance of English, and (ii) volition control. When students had a high awareness of the importance of English coupled with strong volition, they were unlikely to be overwhelmed by FLA.

The findings of this study suggest that students should be informed about the importance of learning English early in their schooling so that they can develop and maintain strong motivation to study English, and that it is useful to reconfirm students' awareness of the importance of English into their tertiary studies. This motivation will help students set achievable goals for their EFL learning. In addition, given that volitional strategies are trainable (Corno, 2001), while students themselves should strengthen their volitional control, attention, especially from teachers, should be paid to promoting volitional strategies for them. Such attention will assist students to overcome obstacles in EFL learning, including anxiety.

Most of the students who participated in this study emphasised their independence in their studies in general, and in EFL learning in particular, thus extrinsic motivation such as external regulation (i.e., behaviours that are performed to satisfy an external demand or reward contingency, for example, parental demand) (Ryan & Deci, 2000) hardly played a role in their determination to study English. However, given the limited number of participants, it may be premature to conclude that this factor is not important. Further research with a larger number of participants should facilitate identification of other issues, and therefore may provide a more comprehensive picture of the factors that influence anxious students' decisions about studying a foreign language. Also, given that motivation plays an important role in language learning (Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei, 1990), and that it was specifically found to assist the anxious students in this study in their determination to study English, future research should address the role of motivation in managing FLA. These focuses will assist in finding ways to reduce the affective consequences of FLA, which in turn will be helpful in promoting success in foreign language teaching and learning.

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