ANXIETY IN PEOPLE WHO STAMMER IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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RESUMEN

Este estudio hace uso de un método original para describir los niveles de ansiedad en el aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera en una muestra de veinticinco personas con tartamudez. Las respuestas se comparan con una serie de respuestas proporcionadas por un grupo de personas que no tienen este problema.

Palabras clave: tartamudeo, aprendizaje de una segunda lengua, ansiedad.

ABSTRACT

Foreign language learning is an important part of education all around the world, but may provoke a specific form of anxiety affecting students who are otherwise capable and confident (Horwitz et al. 1986). One group of people who may be adversely affected by foreign language classroom anxiety is people who stammer (PWS). Stammering affects around 5% of children and about 1% of the adult population.

Although PWS may experience foreign language learning distinctly from people who do not stammer, there is no previous work on levels of anxiety in PWS in foreign language learning. The responses of 25 English-speaking PWS on an adapted form of Horwitz's Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale were compared with those of Horwitz's respondents, to establish if a connection exists between reported levels of anxiety and years spent studying a foreign language, as well as describing the perceived effectiveness of learning in PWS. Results indicate that PWS report more anxiety than the comparison group, and that PWS do not report feeling more disfluent than other learners.

Keywords: stammering, foreign language learning, anxiety

1. INTRODUCTION

Psychological research has confirmed that anxiety commonly causes interference in cognitive functioning, which in turn may impede task-based activities and learning (Wigfield and Meece (1988), Eysenck et al. (2007)). The specific form of anxiety experienced by students in foreign language classes was first highlighted and investigated by Horwitz et al. (1986), who described foreign language classroom anxiety as having three components: communication apprehension, fear of negative social evaluation, and test anxiety. All three were observed in otherwise capable and confident students, suggesting that foreign language classroom anxiety is unique, specific to the context, and affects students who would otherwise present very low levels of anxiety. Foreign language classroom anxiety has been reported to be widespread (Horwitz, 2000), affecting significant numbers of students.

The repercussions of experiencing such anxiety are considerable since it is now an essential experience for billions of people (Graddol, 2004). The knowledge of at least one foreign language is crucial, not only for employment purposes, but also for social and cultural reasons. The ability to communicate in foreign languages can provide access to a base of knowledge that can have a profound influence upon individuals.

Many forms of foreign language teaching are based around a communicative approach in which students are encouraged to produce both written and spoken discourse while simultaneously learning grammatical rules and vocabulary. Students are also required to express themselves, and their personality, in a completely new language; a process that may cause a degree of uncertainty and hesitation in many. This presents a set of circumstances that are unique in the academic sphere (Dörnyei, 2006, Horwitz et al. 1986). Since foreign language learning is of such importance, it is imperative that suitable methodologies are developed to stimulate learning in all students, particularly those with individual differences that may make foreign language learning particularly challenging.

PWS may be adversely affected by foreign language classroom anxiety. Stammering is a disorder of speech fluency characterised by a

high frequency of breakdowns in the smooth forward flow of speech (Guitar, 2006). Besides affecting speech, stammering can have a serious psychological impact, to the extent that many exhibit symptoms of social anxiety disorders and often develop avoidance behaviours. Approximately one percent of any population stammers, and cases have been documented across many different cultures and languages.

It has not been possible to find any previous work related to levels of anxiety in PWS in foreign language learning, in spite of the fact that PWS may experience foreign language learning differently from people who do not stammer (PWDNS). Given the complicated, multi-dimensional natures of stammering, anxiety and foreign language learning, any differences between the two groups are likely to be influenced by a combination of variables.

It is possible that PWS may not be disadvantaged in foreign language learning. A class for beginners in which students are not expected to produce complicated speech might provide an opportunity for PWS to forget perceived difficulties of their mother tongue and experience a fresh start in another language, a possibility also suggested by Weiss (1979). All members of a beginners' class will experience some difficulty, with errors and breakdowns in fluency being commonplace. The lower expectations and reduced linguistic demands of such an environment could allow PWS to experience language in a new way.

Similarly, a new phonetic system and different intonation could allow PWS to realise that a troublesome initial consonant in one language may not always present the same challenges in another. This could show that language can be amenable, reducing fear and avoidance.

Despite having difficulties with oral expression, PWS can be linguistically adept. PWS are often aurally perceptive, having found the role of listener comfortable than that of speaker. PWS also describe the practice of constantly thinking ahead during conversations in an attempt to avoid problem words or constructions. This can result in developing extensive vocabularies and a subtle appreciation of grammatical forms. This can occur on both conscious and unconscious levels and can be seen as a form of linguistic

exercise, refining the processes of word retrieval and utterance construction, mechanisms that are fundamental in foreign language learning. This elevated awareness of, and hypersensitivity to, the intricacies of communication could have a positive effect in the foreign language classroom.

This study used a quantitative methodology to describe the relationship between anxiety in PWS in language classes, and the variable of years spent studying a foreign language. This is justified by the absence of previous study in the area, and also by the suggestion that PWS may not learn effectively in foreign language classes due to the presence of high levels of anxiety. Any disruption caused by stammering and/or anxiety could leave PWS at risk of underachieving or not acquiring sufficient knowledge in a foreign language to communicate effectively.

The research questions were:

Do PWS feel they are more anxious and disfluent than other members of a foreign language class?

Do PWS report that their levels of anxiety in foreign language learning decrease over time?

The hypotheses:

PWS describe themselves as displaying higher levels of disfluency than other members of foreign language classes.

PWS report higher levels of anxiety than people who do not stammer.

Anxiety in PWS diminishes over time as the length of foreign language study increases.

2. METHODOLOGY

The participants were people who stammer, who were members of the British Stammering Association (BSA) and/or clients of the Leeds Stammering Centre (LSC).

An adapted form of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) and validated by Horwitz (1986) was used. The FLCAS has been employed extensively

in research into levels of anxiety in foreign language learning by Tallon (2009) and Katalin (2006), among others. Three additional items (PWS Items) were added to the final scale:

1. I feel that I learn as effectively in my foreign language classes as in other classes.
2. I don't consider myself to be more disfluent than others in a foreign language class.
3. I think that foreign language learning is no easier or harder than learning any other subject.

These were designed to discover if participants considered there to be a difference between foreign language learning and learning in other classes, and to allow them to indicate their feelings towards the perceived disfluency displayed by themselves and classmates in foreign language classes. The three PWS items were combined with the adapted FLCAS to form a new scale consisting of 29 items.

Participants were recruited through email contact with the BSA and the LSC to complete the online questionnaire using Google Survey. Twenty five responses were obtained over the 36 day period of data collection.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The current responses are analysed and then compared to responses provided by a group of students who do not stammer, as presented by Horwitz et al. (1986).

3.1 Do PWS feel they are more disfluent than other members of a foreign language class?

The data in figure 1 do not support the hypothesis that people who stammer describe themselves as displaying higher levels of disfluency than other members of foreign language classes. The responses indicate a division in opinion, with almost equal numbers agreeing and disagreeing with the statement "I consider myself to be no more disfluent than others in a foreign language class". This may

reflect the different personal attitudes held by many PWS towards the severity of their stammer.

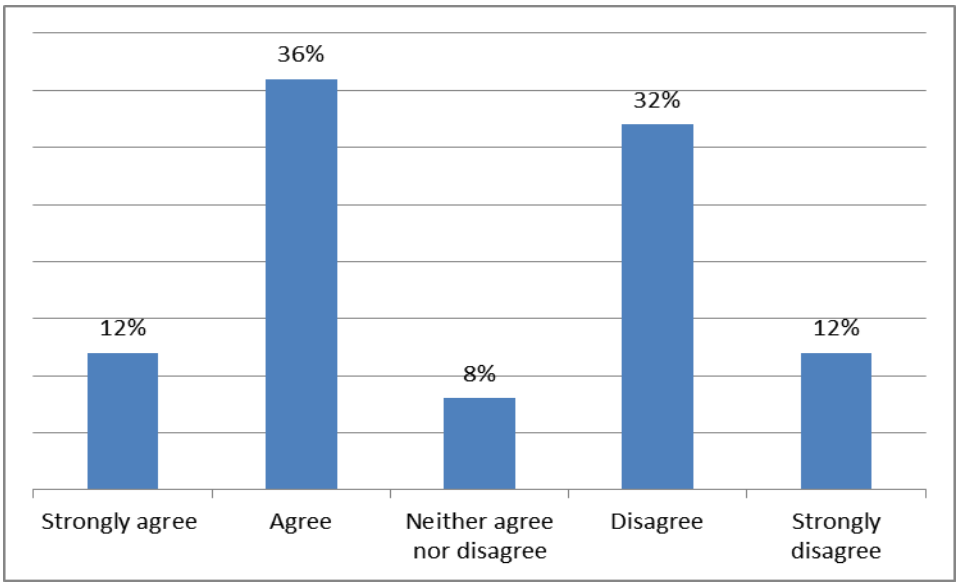

Figure 1. Item 28: I consider myself to be no more disfluent than others in a foreign language class

3.2 Anxiety in PWS diminishes over time as the length of foreign language study increases.

This second hypothesis can only be tentatively accepted given that the results presented in table 1 and figure 2 suggest that anxiety levels in PWS appear to increase steadily before beginning to decrease after roughly ten years of study.

Years Spent Learning Foreign Language	1-3	4-7	8-11	12 – 15	16+
Mean Anxiety Score	86.1	89.1	109.1	97	71

Table 1: Anxiety score and years spent learning

This suggests that PWS require ten or more years of foreign language learning before anxiety levels begin to decrease. There may be a similar relationship between the two variables in a group of PWDNS; however, further research is needed to establish this.

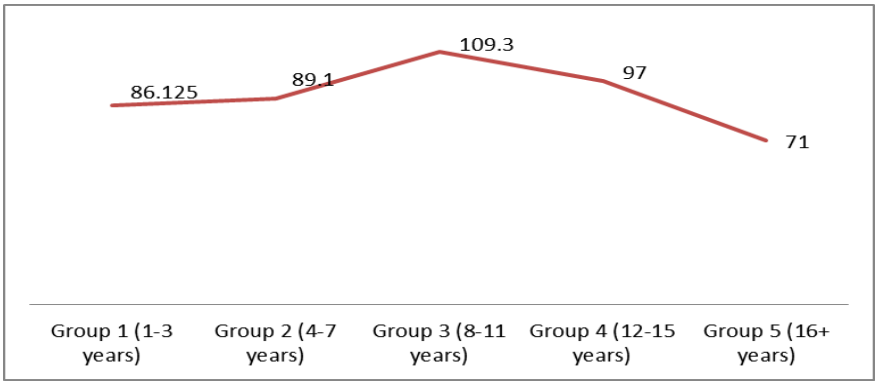

Figure 2: Anxiety score and years spent learning

3.2 PWS report higher levels of anxiety than PWDNS

The findings only partially support this hypothesis. Responses from this group of PWS and a group of PWDNS indicate that both groups present practically identical sets of responses to many items. Comparative analysis of responses to the two sub-sections within the FLCAS describing communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation indicates that PWS report higher levels of communication apprehension than PWDNS. This is reversed in responses from both groups to items concerning fear of negative evaluation. This implies that PWS feel more anxious during communicative situations than PWDNS, while also suggesting that they attribute less importance to being evaluated positively by classmates.

	Mean score of PWS	Mean score of PWDNS (Horwitz et al.)
Overall	76.6	77.3
Sub-section: Fear of negative evaluation	43.1	45.3
Sub-section: Communication apprehension	35.5	32

Table 2: Overall anxiety score and sub-scale scores

In addition to comparing the average scores of the two sub scales contained within the FLCAS, the responses to three individual items were analysed to provide a better understanding of areas where the two groups presented similar or differing responses.

Item 1: I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class.

Figure 3 shows that the responses given by the present participants and those given by participants in the Horwitz et al. study are extremely similar.

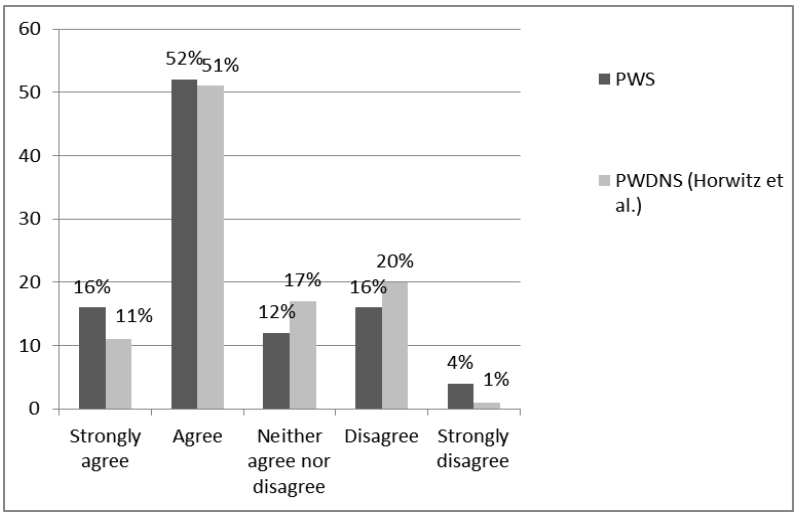

Figure 3: Responses to item 1

Item 11: It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class.

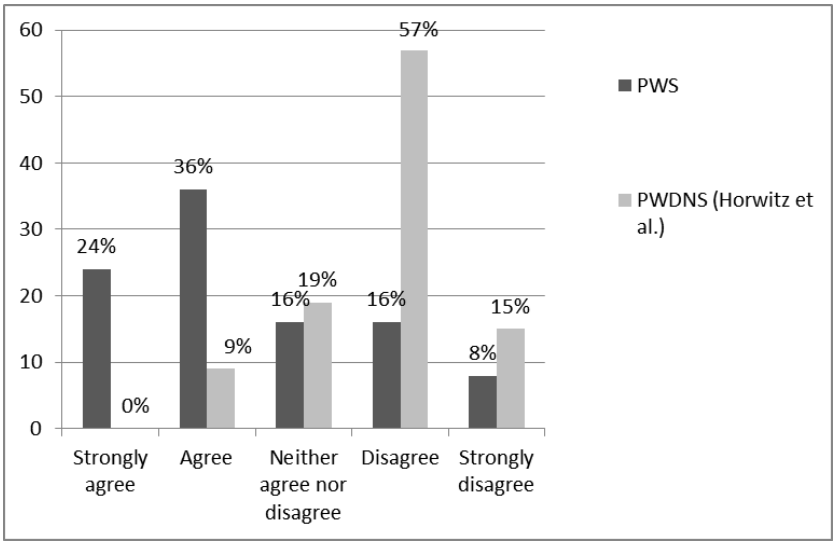

Figure 4: Responses to item 11

The distribution of responses to item 11 displayed in figure 4 from both groups of participants differs dramatically. 60% of participants in the present study either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement “it embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class”. The responses provided by the group of students in the Horwitz et al. study bear no resemblance, with only 9% agreeing with the statement.

Item 19: I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students.

Figure 5 shows that 36% of the participants in the present study strongly agreed that they felt very self-conscious about speaking a foreign language in front of classmates. Only 3% of the Horwitz et al. participants strongly agreed. This suggests that PWS experience more intense anxiety whilst speaking in front of classmates in foreign language classes than PWDNS.

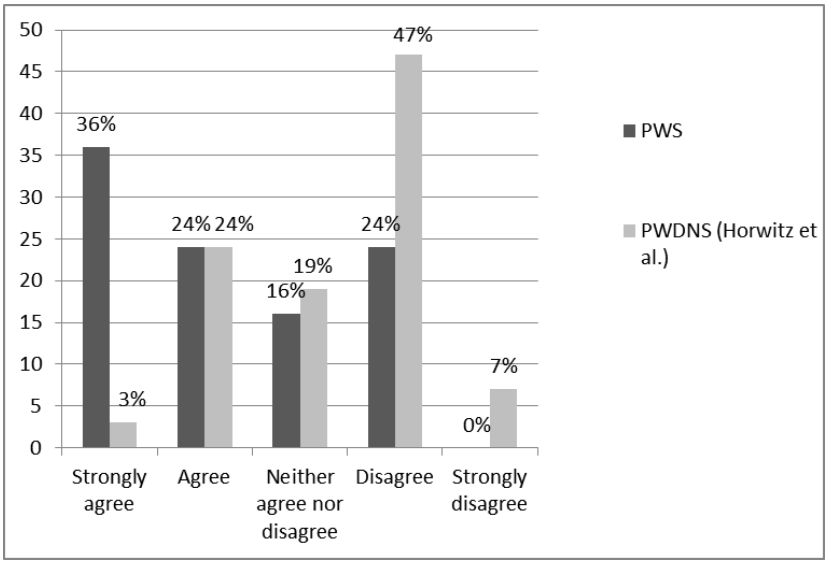

Figure 5: Responses to item 19

4. CONCLUSIONS

An adapted version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale was used to describe levels of anxiety in foreign language learning in a group of people who stammer from the United Kingdom. The responses this group of people provided can be seen as an important starting point for further investigation in the area.

In addition, novel theories grounded in anecdotal evidence were put forward which suggest that, despite indications to the contrary, people who stammer may be effective foreign language learners in the right context. Furthermore, it is possible that foreign language learning could provide a means for some PWS to approach speaking and communication from a new perspective, which, in turn, may have positive effects on levels of fluency.

Further research could involve a qualitative approach based in semi-structured interviews with small groups of participants to obtain in depth detail regarding the experiences of PWS in foreign language learning. A starting point would be to conduct interviews with young people who stammer who are in the process of learning a foreign language. This could draw attention to issues with teaching methodologies or classroom management that could provoke or intensify anxiety in PWS. Equally, positive experiences of foreign language learning could be highlighted, offering greater insight into areas that PWS enjoy, or deem to benefit their learning.

Based on the evidence provided by this study and preceding ones, it appears that anxiety is a problem for a number of people in foreign language learning and that it may inhibit effective learning. Anxiety in PWS may show a different pattern from other learners, which indicates a need to adapt teaching styles or methodologies used in foreign language classrooms to support PWS in achieving their full potential. There is a need for more research in the area as it is imperative that PWS are encouraged and stimulated to participate in foreign language learning, not only because of the numerous professional opportunities it may present, but also because of the potential for personal development it can offer.

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