

Young Adolescent Students' Foreign Language Anxiety in Relation to Language Skills at Different Levels

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Abstract

This study examines the foreign language anxiety of young adolescent students in relation to language skills at different levels. Data was collected from 160 Turkish participants who are learning English as a foreign language by the use of a modified version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz et al., 1986). Results of this study reveal that the foreign language anxiety experienced by young adolescent students differs in relation to levels of instruction and to basic language skills. Foreign language anxiety is reported in receptive skills at beginner levels and then in productive skills as the levels advance. Based on the present findings, it is suggested that students' level of instruction and the type of consequential anxieties they may experience in relation to skills should be taken into account when foreign language curricula and in-class activities are prepared.

Key Words: Foreign Language Anxiety, Level of Instruction, Productive Language Skills, Receptive Language Skills, Grammar

Introduction

For some time, researchers, language teachers, and even language learners themselves have been interested in the possibility that anxiety inhibits language learning (Horwitz, 2001, p. 112). Anxiety is commonly described as a state of apprehension, a vague fear that is indirectly associated with an object (Hilgrad, Atkinson, & Atkinson, 1971). Therefore, psychologists distinguish several categories of anxiety. Typically, anxiety as a personality trait is differentiated from a transient anxiety state (Horwitz, 2001, p. 112). The type of transient anxiety brought on by situations involving threat is called *state anxiety* while another type, which is constantly felt by some individuals regardless of threats generated within their environment, is called *trait anxiety*. State anxiety is considered a normal feeling, whereas trait anxiety is identified as a *personality trait* that requires therapy. According to Oxford (1999), students may experience state anxiety in foreign language classes when they are asked to speak, but it diminishes as their foreign language skills and levels of learning increase. In some students, however, state anxiety turns into trait anxiety and never diminishes. When anxiety experienced in foreign language classes becomes permanent, it adversely affects performance and achievement in foreign languages.

Foreign Language Anxiety

MacIntyre (1999) suggested a type of anxiety called *situation specific anxiety* which is experienced only in a particular and specific situation. According to MacIntyre, foreign language anxiety is a situation specific anxiety that relates to environments of foreign language learning, and that is felt when one is required to use a foreign language. According to Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986), foreign language education is a complex process, which involves learners' self-perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors particular to environments of foreign language learning. Individuals who do not have difficulty expressing themselves and comprehending others in their native language have difficulty doing the same in a foreign language, and they perceive all kinds of acts to be performed in a foreign language as a threat to their self-perception. Language anxiety ranks high among factors influencing language learning, whatever the learning setting is (Oxford, 1999), and it has become central to any examination of factors contributing to the learning process and learner achievement (Hurd, 2007, p. 488).

Given that foreign language anxiety pertains to performance evaluation in academic and social environments, it may also be related to the three different types of anxiety seen in cases of performance: *communication apprehension*, *test anxiety*, and *fear of negative evaluation*. Communication apprehension is a type of shyness that is felt when communicating with people and that manifests itself through anxiety. Fear of negative evaluation, which stems from an individual's conviction of being evaluated negatively, leads the individual to avoid others' evaluations and evaluative situations. Defined as a type of performance anxiety that arises from fear of failure felt in academic evaluation environments, test anxiety is the third anxiety type associated with foreign language anxiety (Horwitz & Young, 1991). These three types of anxiety and the degree of foreign language anxiety are worthy of consideration, and the categorization of anxieties are helpful in describing foreign language anxiety. Nevertheless, foreign

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language anxiety does not simply consist of their combination. Horwitz et al. conceived foreign language anxiety 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” (as cited in Batumlu & Erden, 2007, p. 25–26).

Foreign Language Anxiety and Language Skills

People are often anxious about their ability to function in a foreign language, particularly in oral/aural situations, which leads to a type of anxiety termed communication apprehension (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Unlike reading and writing which allow for contemplation and correction, listening and speaking demand high levels of concentration in a time frame not controlled by the student. When there is only one chance to successfully process the input or output, the pressure on student increases (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Young, 1991).

Consequently one is faced with the following questions: If improving students’ productive skills is delayed until advanced levels, would foreign language anxiety not be encountered at beginner levels? Is foreign language anxiety observed within the context of productive skills only? Can anxiety be encountered in receptive skills since they also are essential skills for the realization of communication? Since the acquisition of receptive skills, by nature, comes first in foreign language learning, it goes without saying that anxiety related to these skills should be observed at beginner levels and that the occurrence of productive-skills-related anxiety, proportional to the progress through the stages of learning, should be discovered. Another factor that cannot be overlooked in order for the four basic skills to be fully acquired is grammatical competence. At which levels does anxiety toward grammar occur more? Research regarding foreign language anxiety should also focus on the answers to these questions. However, such studies have so far examined the anxiety–learner achievement relationship, anxiety in relation to individual differences, influences of anxiety on foreign language learners, and how anxiety affects the acquisition of foreign language skills, and they have mainly either focused on a single group of skills or have made comparisons between two groups.

Much emphasis has been placed on the relationship between the skill of speaking in a foreign/second language and anxiety (Lucas 1984; Phillips 1992; Price 1991). Recent research explores other language skills too, however: for example, writing (Cheng, Horwitz & Schallert 1999), reading (Saito, Horwitz & Garza 1999), and listening (Elkhafifi, 2008). In studies related to foreign language anxiety, students generally report that speaking in the foreign language classroom produces the highest level of anxiety. Lee (1999) discusses the relationship between second language reading and foreign language acquisition from pedagogical and cognitive perspectives. Leki (1999) suggests that writing is generally thought to be the least anxiety-provoking situation. Although listening activities are generally considered not to be anxiety provoking, current research has shown that listening activities may also cause anxiety (Campbell, 1999). VanPatten and Glass (1999, as cited in Bekleyen, 2004) have investigated the effects of anxiety on students who take grammar courses and they found that some students feel a certain amount of anxiety in grammar courses due to various factors.

Research Aim

Although in the studies presented above some of the sources of anxiety have been revealed, based on the hypothesis that anxiety may vary depending on several factors, this study concentrates on the relationship between anxiety, language skills, and levels of instruction.

The participants in this study were 11-13 year old students. Since some researchers assume that “foreign language anxiety is more relevant to language learning among adults” (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991), studies about the role of anxiety in children's language learning are fairly rare. Young (1994) provides a list of thirty-three studies on language anxiety dating from 1945 to 1994, but among them there is only one study (Swain & Burnaby, 1976) that addresses the language anxiety of young children. Even after 1994 very few studies of language anxiety with a main focus on young children can be found (Batista, 2006; Chan & Wu, 2004; Chen, 2006; Cheng, 2007; Haekyung, 2006; Katalin, 2006).

The aim of this study is to present how young adolescent students’ anxieties may be profiled within the frame of the basic language skills and grammar, and to reveal whether the anxieties experienced within the context of skills alter as levels of language learning advance. In this sense, the research question is as follows:

Does foreign language anxiety in relation to language skills vary depending on students' levels of instruction?

Participants

The participants of this study were the fifth, sixth and seventh grade students of Ankara University Development Foundation Primary School¹. English is taught as a foreign language at this private school, where fifth grade (age 11) students attain elementary level (A2 of the Common European Framework Reference²), sixth grade (age 12) students attain pre-intermediate level (A2+ in CEFR), and seventh grade (age 13) students attain intermediate level (B1 in CEFR). Data was collected from 55 fifth graders, 48 sixth graders, and 57 seventh graders, which comes to a total of 160 participants.

Although these students started learning English as a foreign language in the first grade (age 6), since students usually begin experiencing foreign language anxiety at the stage of simultaneously utilizing both oral and written language skills, students in first grade up to and including the fourth grade (age 10), in which the students gradually attain the level A1 of CEFR, were excluded from the study. Also, in Turkey eighth grade (age 14, B1+ in CEFR) students generally exhibited a high degree of anxiety due to an important public examination (the Secondary School Student Selection and Placement Examination) they had to take at the end of that school year. Because this situation could influence the credibility of the data to be collected, students from this grade were not included in the study, either.

Procedure and method

The *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale* (FLCAS), which was devised by Horwitz et al. (1986) and considered by several researchers as a "valid" and "credible" measuring instrument, was used as the data collection instrument in the research. However, the FLCAS does not focus on the skills individually since it aims to measure students' in-class anxiety in general. For this reason, the FLCAS questions were first modified so as to separate the skills (see appendix A) and then translated into Turkish. It was also simplified because the original scale was designed for adult students.

The scale administered consisted of a total of 20 questions, four each on speaking, listening, reading, writing, and grammar skills, respectively. The internal consistency reliability of the original scale is 0.93 while the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the 160 participants, the sample group for the modified Turkish version of the scale, was found to be 0.829, suggesting that the reliability of the instrument was satisfactory. The statistical analysis of the research was carried out using the software SPSS 15.0. The limit of significance was accepted as $p < 0.05$ throughout the statistical analysis, and the findings obtained were discussed in accordance with the limit of significance.

The questionnaire was given to the participants by their English teachers during their regular lessons. As the participants were young, in order to make sure they understood what was being asked they were given a full lesson period (40 minutes) to answer the questionnaire.

In order to analyze the data gathered from all participants, the questionnaire was divided into five subscales (for example 1st, 6th, 11st and 16th questions formed the subscale for the *speaking anxiety*). Then each subscale was statistically analyzed in order to find out the differences between different levels.

Findings

The findings of the research are discussed according to foreign language skills. Each group of skills is discussed separately and the anxieties toward them are examined for all three levels. The result charts show that students, with reference to being anxious, answered "never" when the average values lay between 0 and 0.5; "sometimes" when they lay between 0.5 and 1.0, and "always" when they lay between 1.0 and 1.5.

The Differences between Levels of Instruction in Relation to Speaking Skills

The questionnaire data show that, in relation to speaking skills, seventh grade students are more anxious than sixth and fifth graders (as shown in Figure 1).

¹ The Turkish school system is an 8-3 frame. According to this system, compulsory primary education lasts 8 years (between the ages of 6 and 14), with the first 5 years being called the primary stage and the next 3 years being called the secondary stage. This is followed by the last three years of school (lycée).

² To find out more about the levels of CEFR you can visit the official web site of Council of Europe http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/CADRE_EN.asp

Their anxiety occurs most when they are “required to speak without having prepared in advance.” The situation in which fifth grade students feel the least anxiety is “other students laughing at them when they speak in a foreign language.”

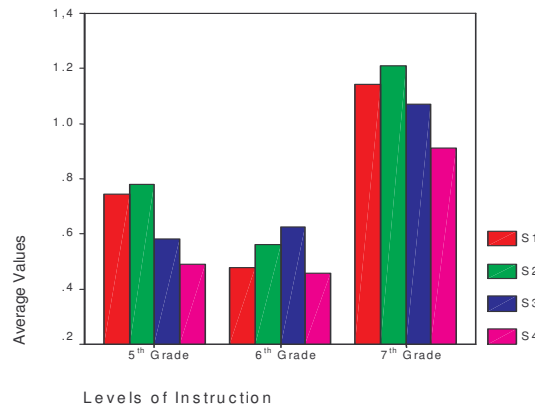


Figure 1: The differences between levels of instruction in relation to speaking skill anxiety

The Differences between Levels of Instruction in Relation to Listening Skills

In relation to listening skills, fifth grade students are more anxious than sixth and seventh graders (as shown in Figure 2). In response to every question about anxiety relating to listening skills, fifth grade students stated they were anxious. From among these cases, only “the anxiety of being unable to understand what is said by one who speaks the target language as her or his native language” is experienced by seventh grade students. These findings also indicate the communication apprehension that will be discussed later.

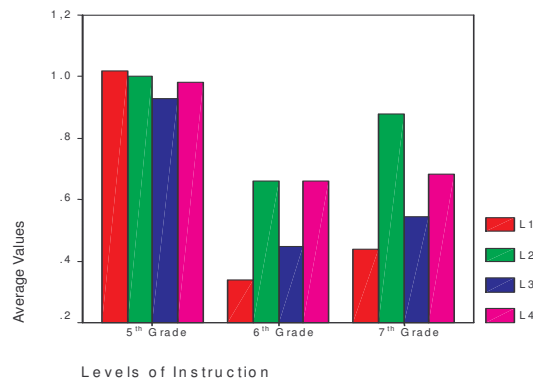


Figure 2: The differences between levels of instruction in relation to listening skill anxiety

The Differences between Levels of Instruction in Relation to Reading Skills

In relation to reading skills, fifth grade students are more anxious than sixth and seventh graders (as shown in Figure 3). In response to every question about anxiety related to reading skills, fifth grade students stated they were anxious. Fifth grade students also reported that they experienced a general feeling of anxiety while doing reading exercises in the classroom. Students of all three levels stated they did not feel “anxiety in regards to being asked questions during reading.”

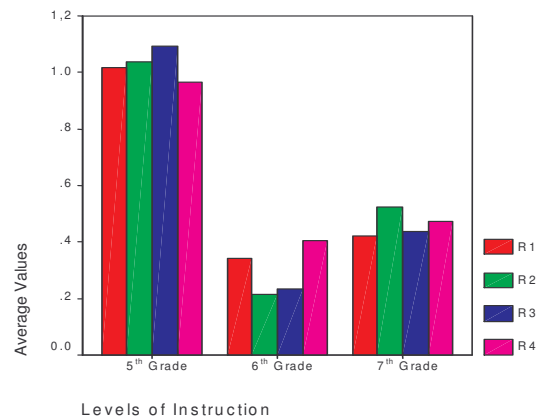


Figure 3: The differences between levels of instruction in relation to reading skill anxiety

The Differences between Levels of Instruction in Relation to Writing Skills

In relation to writing skills, seventh grade students are more anxious than sixth and fifth graders (as shown in Figure 4). Apparent for all three levels is “the anxiety toward the intensiveness of writing exercises in foreign language classes.” This might be explained by the fact that students see writing exercises as a kind of test and that the correction of errors is more thorough in written production than in oral production. For this reason, these findings may be associated with fear of negative evaluation.

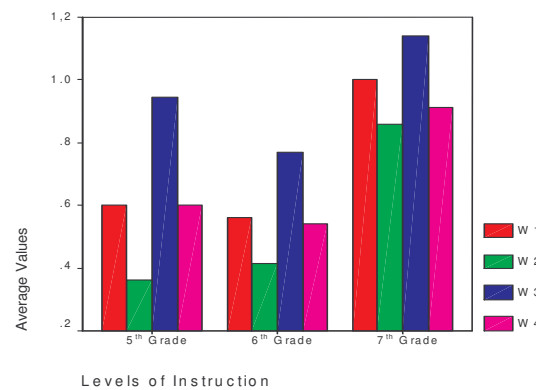


Figure 4: The differences between levels of instruction in relation to writing skill anxiety

The Differences between Levels of Instruction in Relation to Grammar

In relation to grammar fifth, sixth, and seventh grade students hold nearly the same degree of anxiety (as shown in Figure 5). Still, “the conviction that the instructor is ready to correct each and every grammar mistake” produces anxiety in students of all three levels. These findings may be associated with fear of negative evaluation.

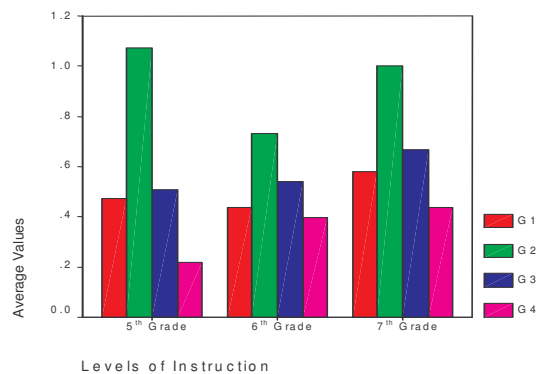


Figure 5: The differences between levels of instruction in relation to grammar anxiety

Discussion

Most young adolescents deal with stressful issues; among the most common causes of stress are their relationships with friends, peer pressure, peer acceptance, social anxiety, negative attitudes and self perception. As they begin their rapid physical, emotional and social changes, they begin to question adult standards and the need for parental guidance (Lingren, 1995 as cited in Batista 2006, p.8). With change comes erratic behavior which in turn affects students' performance at school. Students begin to question everything, including the need to study a language which is not their own.

One might assume that young children may not experience language anxiety in the same way that adults do. Such an assumption can be readily contested by Swain and Burnaby's (1976) study. They discovered that the state of being anxious has a high negative correlation with target language scores, illustrating not only the existence of language anxiety among young children, but also the detrimental effects of anxiety on their language learning and performance. Further, a number of relevant studies which have examined the prevalence of anxiety disorder among children show that children are not impervious to anxiety arousal.

For example, Hills (1972) claims that test anxiety appears at about the second grade (age 7) and then increases year by year. Hembree (1988), who integrates the results of 562 studies by meta-analysis to show the nature, effects, and treatment of academic test anxiety, also reports that test anxiety and performance are significantly correlated at grade 3 (age 8) and above. Foxman (2004) highlighted common fears in children, among which test and school performance anxiety showed predominantly in children between the ages of 9-12. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1999) estimates that about 13% of American children and adolescents aged 9 to 17 experience some kind of anxiety disorder. This figure is often considered to be an underestimation, since children may not be able to describe state of anxiety, even though they are intensely anxious. This is why the anxiety disorder of children is viewed as a silent problem (Chavira, Stein, Bailey & Stein, 2004). MacIntyre and Gardner (1991, p.94-95) posit "foreign language anxiety is more relevant to language learning among adults". (Haekyung, 2006, p.3)

Based on these assumptions, the 11-13 year old students who formed our participants were likely to report the foreign language anxiety they experience. Although the findings about speaking skills anxiety seem to indicate communication apprehension, the reason why 'other students laughing at them when they speak in a foreign language' does not provoke anxiety in 10 and 11 year old students is not their lack of ability to communicate but, perhaps is the fact that they are far more familiar with being at the receiving end of communication.

The findings about reading skills anxiety indicate that anxiety felt toward reading skills is not related to test anxiety or fear of negative evaluation. Saito, Horwitz and Garza (1999) found that those who perceived reading in the target language difficult, experienced more anxiety than those who did not.

It is harder to interpret the results about writing skills anxiety as the sources of writing anxiety are quite diverse (Leki, 1999). For some students poor writing skills may be the cause of anxiety whereas for others a perfectionist personality may be the source. On the other hand, for some learners the thought that they are going to be evaluated by someone else creates an anxiety-provoking atmosphere. Leki points out another flaw of writing courses that causes anxiety: Until fairly recently, writing courses were seen as ways of practicing grammar. This is still the case in some language courses. However, paying extra attention to grammar may cause fear of failure, which leads to anxiety.

VanPatten and Glass (1999, as cited in Bekleyen, 2004) have investigated the possibility that some students are afraid of not performing as well as the other students in the class. Their level of anxiety increases as their instructors criticize their answers. Some students, on the other hand, feel threatened by the amount of materials presented in a given period of time. If too much grammatical information is presented in a short time, the students may feel apprehensive. Another factor that causes anxiety is fear of evaluation. Teachers' methods of evaluation may be another anxiety-provoking factor. Some teachers who generally use the communicative approach in the classroom and put the emphasis on discussion, vocabulary development or listening may nevertheless adopt a totally traditional approach in the exams, with most of their questions focusing on grammatical features. Students who experience such an inconsistency generally feel that the lessons did not serve the purpose of learning grammatical structures. Moreover, some students come to foreign language courses expecting to learn the grammatical features of a language and feel frustrated when the lesson is based on a communicative approach (Bekleyen, 2004).

Limitations and future directions

Several limitations of the present study should be borne in mind. In the broadest sense, the findings are based on respondents' perceptions and beliefs and not on samples of actual classroom interaction. The reason for using self-report despite its certain limitations is the fact that it is one of the major tools used to collect personality data (trait anxiety, need for achievement, locus of control, and so forth) (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986, p. 532). Daly (1991) further states that "the most common method used in measuring communication apprehension is through the use of self-reports" (p. 4).

As this study was only a starting point, the findings may lead to other studies in which, the inclusion of open ended questions to the instrument, and the use of other instruments like classroom observations would triangulate the data.

Future studies might also benefit from larger numbers of participants in order to increase the reliability of the results. Replication of the study with different groups of language learners and in different learning contexts is necessary to understand the extent to which the results can be generalized for foreign language students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study reveals that the foreign language anxiety, experienced by young adolescent Turkish students, differs in relation to levels of instruction and basic language skills. Foreign language anxiety is reported in receptive skills (listening and reading) at beginner levels and then in productive skills (speaking and writing) as the levels advance. This might be explained by the common practice of paying more attention to receptive skills. Placing emphasis on listening and reading comprehension exercises by which students get accustomed initially to the phonetics and structure of the target language, hence of not addressing productive-skills-related mistakes as much at beginner levels. Additionally, the fact that emphasis is placed on fluency rather than accuracy of production at the beginner levels of foreign language education may also be one of the reasons. Students whose receptive skills improve as their foreign language learning levels progress may feel fear of failure since they may be striving to be as competent in productive skills; in other words, they may have determined a too high goal for themselves.

The findings which suggest that beginner-level students are relatively more anxious seem to contradict MacIntyre's (1999) conception that foreign language anxiety is an anxiety felt only when one is required to produce in a foreign language. Yet, it should be kept in mind that the age of the participants in this study differs from that of MacIntyre's. As students' levels of foreign language advance, the anxiety they feel with regard to comprehension—an aspect of communication—diminishes, and their anxiety toward production increases. These findings also, seem to contradict Oxford's (1999) idea that students may experience state anxiety when they are required to speak in foreign language classes, but it diminishes as their foreign language skills and levels of learning increase. This result may also have been affected by the participants' age. Moreover, while certain differences in degrees of anxiety in terms of the four basic skills are identified, significant differences in degrees of grammar-related anxiety were not observed. This finding accords with the fact that the teaching methodology lays more emphasis on fluency and communication than on accuracy. Though skill-specific anxieties seem to be related to communication anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, there was no evidence of test anxiety among participants. This might be explained by the attitudes of the teachers, and the foreign language teaching methods practiced at the school where the research was conducted,

It is suggested that level of instruction and the associated anxieties students might experience in relation to the four language skills be taken into account when foreign language curricula and in-class activities are prepared. Concurrent instruction of the four language skills starting from beginner levels, as well as stressing that the acquisition of all of the skills is equally important, may overcome the imbalance in pedagogical attention attached to each group of the skills in relation to levels, which, in turn will enable students not to focus on only one aspect of communication.

As this study indicates, young adolescent students experience language anxiety and this anxiety could have much more adverse effects in their future lives. People with more anxiety-provoking experience in the past are more likely to become anxious about similar situations later, and children can have serious problems later in learning language if these difficulties are not dealt with earlier.

A large number of studies on improving foreign language skills can be found in the literature of the field, and various techniques and classroom practices suggested by researchers to reduce anxiety have been used in the classroom. Taking these studies and suggestions into consideration may affect both the advancement of foreign language skills and the success of anxious students at different levels.

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Appendix A

Modified Version of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)

1. I feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class.
2. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language.
3. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my reading class.
4. I keep thinking that the other students are better at writing than I am.
5. I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every grammar mistake I make.
6. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class.
7. I would not be nervous listening in the foreign language to native speakers.
8. The more I study for reading, the more confused I get.
9. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to write in a foreign language.
10. I don't worry about making grammar mistakes in language class.
11. I always feel that the other students speak the language better than I do.
12. Even if I am well prepared for listening, I feel anxious about it.
13. When I'm in reading class, I feel very sure and relaxed.
14. It would bother me to take more writing class.
15. Grammar class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.
16. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language.
17. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says.
18. I get nervous and confused when I am reading
19. I feel confident when I write in foreign language class.
20. In language class, I can get so nervous I forget the grammar rules I know.