

EFL STUDENTS' FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY: AN INVESTIGATION INTO LEARNERS AND TEACHERS' ATTITUDES

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Abstract: This study investigates the foreign language anxiety of EFL students at some upper secondary schools in Thua Thien Hue province. Specifically, it aims to explore students' attitudes towards foreign language anxiety and teachers' attitudes toward their students' foreign language anxiety. The study employed questionnaire, autobiography and interview to collect data. The questionnaire was delivered to 150 students from two upper-secondary schools in Thua Thien Hue province. Meanwhile, eight of these students were selected to write autobiography and six English teachers from these schools were invited to participate in the interviews. Data from the questionnaire was analyzed quantitatively and presented in charts and tables, while information from the autobiography and interviews was transcribed and analyzed qualitatively. The study found that students had high level of foreign language anxiety. They were affected by foreign language anxiety both negatively and positively, with negative effects outweighing positive ones. The findings also indicated that teachers accepted and had the tendency to have both positive and negative attitudes toward their students' foreign language anxiety. The teachers also attempted to create comfortable classroom atmosphere and adjust their teaching methods so as to tackle their students' foreign language anxiety. The study suggested that both students and teachers should accept foreign language anxiety as part of the foreign language learning; more importantly, teachers should support and help students to overcome foreign language anxiety.

Key words: Foreign language anxiety, students' attitudes, teachers' attitudes

1. Introduction

It is believed that anxiety is a normal emotion which one person has experienced at least once in his life (Swift, Cyhlarova, Goldie, & O'Sullivan, 2014). According to Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986), anxiety may be described as a feeling of tension, nervous feeling and worry connected with arousal of the autonomic nervous system. While some people become worried and scared when facing anxiety, others feel more motivated. Hence, it seems that anxiety has both negative and positive aspects affecting human life.

Concerning the effects of anxiety on learning, Kennedy (2015) claimed that anxiety was responsible for lack of comprehension and learning. In other words, anxiety significantly affects learning and ability to grasp ideas. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) stated that anxiety can be a difficult problem for some people to achieve in science or mathematics and in foreign language learning. Particularly, he declared the majority of students feel anxious in classroom contexts. According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1991), they believed that higher anxiety in language classrooms could lead to a number of negative impacts on students'

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language learning. For instance, it is reluctant for students to raise their voice or take part in classroom language activities. Besides, they often have problems in understanding complex language structures. Moreover, foreign language anxiety (FLA) has a bad connection with test results. Horwitz et al. (1986) indicated FLA was considered as specific situation anxiety. They also divided FLA into three main types consisting of Communication Apprehension, Test anxiety, and Fear of Negative Evaluation. In addition to these types of anxiety, English class anxiety was mentioned in their Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS).

It can be seen that FLA is a natural part in language classes and directly affects students' foreign language learning. Besides, teachers also have a remarkable impact on students' FLA. According to Tran and her coworkers (2013), students and teachers are directly involved in the language learning and teaching process, so the studies of their perceptions and attitudes towards FLA are crucial. Therefore, they need to afford to find strategies to manage it.

Crookall and Oxford (1991) claimed although FLA cannot disappear in classroom, teachers would play a vital role to reduce students' FLA. First of all, teachers must accept students' FLA as a natural factor in language classes. Secondly, in Young's (1991) opinion, teachers can use their own personality or class activities to motivate language class environment. Especially, Tallon (2008) believed that teachers mainly encourage and show students how to overcome their FLA. He also stated that teachers had better cooperate with students to find effective ways to reduce FLA in language classes. Moreover, students have to accept the existence of FLA in language classes and should be guided to encounter FLA (Crookall & Oxford, 1991).

There is very little research on investigating teachers' and students' awareness of and attitudes towards FLA. 30 years ago, Rosenfeld (1978) carried out the study involved sociological teachers' awareness of student anxiety. Recently, Tran and coworkers (2013) focused on understanding its status and insiders' awareness and attitudes toward FLA.

It is undeniable that the existence and effects of FLA on English speaking test anxiety. There are a large number of studies about FLA conducted such as Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986), Crookall and Oxford's (1991), Tallon's (2008), Gocer's (2014) and so on. However, most studies about FLA had not been explored widely in the Vietnamese context and had not investigated students' attitudes toward foreign language anxiety and teachers' attitudes toward students' anxiety, apart from the studies of Tran and co-workers (2012, 2013, 2015) and Le (2016). These studies only focused on FLA on lower-secondary schools and tertiary context. As a result, the current researcher found it necessary to conduct research to investigate foreign language anxiety of EFL students at some upper secondary schools in Thua Thien Hue province. It is expected that the study can help students and teachers realize FLA and its effects on learning foreign language. From that, they can co-operate to deal with FLA in order to improve the results.

This research therefore aims to address the following questions:

1. What are students' attitudes toward foreign language anxiety?
2. What are English teachers' attitudes toward students' foreign language anxiety?

2. Literature review

2.1. Foreign language anxiety and the FLCAS

Horwitz et al. (1986) stated that anxiety is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension and worry related to a stimulation of the autonomic nervous system. Anxiety is considered a negative feeling since it can cause some complications and failure. When it comes to learning a foreign language, anxiety is getting inevitable. Although most people are afraid of anxiety, others do not feel that. Anxiety for a certain amount of time can make students prepare themselves for the test and enhance their learning performance more effectively, yet it does not have positive effects on the students who have high test-anxiety (Nicaise, 1995).

Learners need many preparations and spend a long time preparing and challenging in language learning, so each individual has troubles in learning a second/foreign language and anxiety is one of those. According to Hashemi (2011), anxiety that learners experience while learning a foreign language is called second/foreign language anxiety. Besides, English language learners who are not native speakers of English may encounter problems with English language learning process and it turns out an undesired situation. So, this process may create anxiety among learners. Khattak, Jamshed, Ahmad and Baig (2011) stated that students' feeling of stress, anxiety or nervousness may slow down or cause problems for the achievement of their language learning and performance abilities.

Horwitz et al. (1986) described language learning 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" (p. 127). Horwitz and her colleagues built up the FLCAS based on their own clinical experiences, self-reports from students and evidence winnowed from reviews of similar instruments as well. There are 33 items using 5-point Likert-type scales with options ranged from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" in the finalized version of the FLCAS. The anxiety level of foreign language learners can be measured by this instrument. The score in the 5-point Likert scale identifies whether learners' FLA level is high or low.

2.2. Students' attitudes towards foreign language anxiety

According to Tran et al. (2013), students considered a certain level of FLA to be natural and they acknowledged both the good and the bad aspects of FLA. However, the level of FLA was still beyond their control, thus causing more negative than positive effects on their learning (p. 16).

On the one hand, foreign language anxiety and students' attitudes towards English language learning have a negative correlation and influence upon each other (Hussain, 2011). This was supported by Stark and Paltridge (1996) who also reported that there is a strong correlation between learners' attitude and the language learning process. Similarly, the inside classroom environment and the students' feelings, experiences and perceptions are also interrelated (Dunn & Harris, 1998). According to Twenge (2000), a possibility of classroom environmental threat makes learners increase language anxiety. On the other hand, positive attitudes would help learners begin to have an interest in foreign language learning (Twenge, 2000). The connection between attitudinal variables with foreign language learning makes learners have motivation for learning the second language (Naiman, 1978).

2.3. Teachers' attitudes towards students' foreign language anxiety

It is claimed by the teachers that FLA has both positive and negative points relying on its degree, but they could not judge which aspect dominated (Tran et al., 2013). While the majority of teachers underestimated the importance of FLA, so they had not taken it into account in their teaching seriously (Tran et al. 2013), others believed that it is important to address anxiety directly when dealing with FLA, so that teachers and students should be trained to tackle foreign language anxiety (Crookall & Oxford, 1991). Young (1991) found instructor-learner interactions as one of the six main potential sources of FLA. She claimed that teachers' methods of correcting learners' mistakes and their attitudes towards students' language learning play a vital role in addressing students' FLA.

2.4. Review of related studies

There is a growing number of studies worldwide and in Vietnam as well, being conducted to investigate different aspects of FLA. For example, Vitasari, Abdul Wahab, Othman, & Awang (2010) explored the sources of anxiety among Malaysia students with five main sources being reported including study anxiety, class presentation anxiety, test anxiety, language anxiety, and mathematic anxiety. Moreover, Gopang, Bughio, and Pathan (2015) conducted a study to investigate foreign language anxiety among students in Pakistan. The results showed that there was no significant difference in the level of FLA between majoring and non-majoring students, and between male and female students. In Vietnam, Tran et al. (2013) conducted a study to understand FLA's sources and effects from insiders' perspectives. The sources included learner-related factors, followed by external factors, teacher-related factors, and then the complexity of the English language. The study also found that FLA affected students' learning attitudes and emotions. Le (2016) studied foreign language anxiety (FLA) of EFL students at Gio Linh high school, she did not focus on student's attitudes toward FLA. As a result, this study was conducted to investigate students' anxiety, specifically the students' and teachers' attitudes toward FLA in the context of some high schools in Vietnam.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Participants

Participants in this study were 150 10th-grade students randomly selected at two upper-secondary schools in Thua Thien Hue province and their six English teachers. These two groups of participants provided sufficient data to help responding to the three research questions.

3.2. Data collection

Questionnaire, interview and autobiography were employed to collect data for the research. Although these data collection instruments have their own strengths and weaknesses, they worked well for research on language anxiety (Annum, 2015).

The student questionnaire was actually the FLCAs designed by Horwitz et al. (1986). There are 33 items in this questionnaire and these items are divided into three sub-groups: positive attitude (12, 13, 14, 22, 28, 32), negative attitude (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 15, 16, 18, 20, 23, 24, 27, 29, 33) and mixed attitude (11, 17, 19, 21, 25, 26, 30, 31). The researcher

translated the FLCAs into Vietnamese to facilitate the students' understanding. The questionnaire was delivered to 150 students to find out the range of students' FLA concerning whether the students' foreign language anxiety is high or low. More importantly, the questionnaire could provide information about students' attitudes towards foreign language anxiety.

In order to further explore the students' attitudes towards their own anxiety, the researcher asked 8 students to write autobiography with 3 prompts provided in order to clarify what they had responded in the questionnaire concerning their attitudes. Moreover, interviews including 3 questions were conducted to investigate teachers' attitudes towards students' FLA.

3.4. Data analysis

It is argued that a combination of quantitative and qualitative data analysis would create an understanding of both measured impact and process (Dorneyi, 2007; Rao & Woolcock, 2003). In the current study, data from the questionnaire was analyzed quantitatively and presented in tables, while information from the autobiography and interviews was transcribed, coded in themes and analyzed qualitatively. Discussion was also made in relation to the available literature on learners' foreign language anxiety.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Students' range of FLA

Before exploring the students' attitudes towards FLA, a closer look at the students' range of FLA is essential in order to know if students' anxiety is high or low.

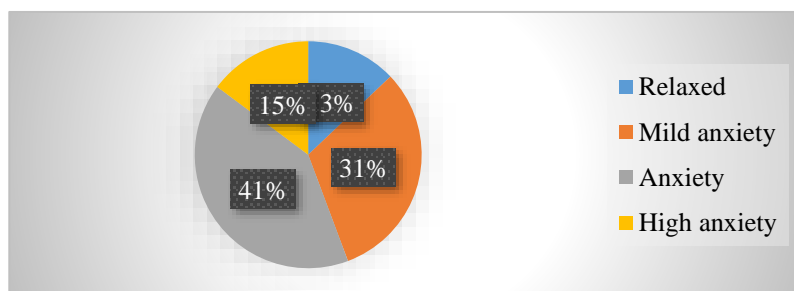


Chart 1. Students' range of foreign language anxiety

Chart 1 shows that almost half of the students (41%) had anxiety about foreign language learning while 15% and 31% had high and mild anxiety, respectively. Only 13% of the investigated students felt relaxed when learning English. In general, it can be seen that students' anxiety varies in different ranges. Previous studies also found the similar results. Wu (2011), for instance, identified students' foreign language anxiety as follows: 16,48% of high-anxiety, 69,23% of mid-anxiety and 14,29% of low anxiety.

4.2. Students' attitudes towards FLA

Table 1. Students' attitudes towards positive statements about FLA

No.	Statements	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
		2	I don't worry about making mistakes in language class	26.4 %
5	It wouldn't bother me at all to take more foreign language classes.	29.9 %	34.6 %	35.5 %
8	I am usually at ease during tests in my language class	23.7 %	24.2%	52.1 %
11	I don't understand why some people get so upset over foreign language classes.	42.7 %	21.2 %	36.1 %
14	I would not be nervous when speaking the foreign language with native speakers	31.3 %	22.5%	46.2 %
18	I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class	23.1 %	29.4 %	47.5 %
22	I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for language class.	40.7 %	27.3 %	32.0 %
28	When I'm on my way to language class, I feel very sure and relaxed.	47.4 %	20.4 %	32.2 %
32	I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language.	48.0 %	18.8 %	33.2 %

Table 4.1 presents 9 statements describing FLA positively. The data in Table 4.1 indicates that from 23.1% to 48.0% of the students agreed with these statements while the percentage of students showing their disagreement is higher, ranging from 32.0% to 56.5%. In other words, the students had the tendency to show disagreement rather than agreement with statements illustrating learners' positive attitudes.

Specifically, only 23.1%, 23.7%, 26.4% and 31.3% of the students felt at ease when speaking English in class, doing English tests, making mistakes in class, and speaking English with native speakers, respectively. In the same line, only 29.9% of the students would not feel bothered to take more foreign language classes. The percentage of students agreeing with statements 22, 28 and 32 is just a little higher. While 40.7% did not feel anxious about having to prepare very well for the English lessons, 47.4% felt relaxed when going to the English class, and 48,0% felt comfortable with native speakers around.

Data from students' autobiography also indicates similarities when only a few students expressed positive attitudes towards FLA. In fact, two among the eight students writing autobiography acknowledged the positive side of FLA; they considered FLA as one of the main factors that motivated them to practice and achieve a high score in learning English. It is true that students would prefer learning foreign languages if they have a positive attitude towards different aspects related to language learning (Naiman, 1978; Twenge, 2000).

Table 2. Students' attitudes towards negative statements about FLA

No.	Statements	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
		1	I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class.	57.2 %
3	I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class.	52.4%	20.6 %	27.0 %
4	It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language.	66.1 %	8.7 %	25.2 %

6	During language class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.	26.9 %	43.6%	29.5 %
7	I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am.	74.3 %	10.9 %	14.8 %
9	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class.	77.5 %	10.6 %	11.9 %
10	I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class.	64.9 %	17.0 %	18.1 %
12	In language class, I can get so nervous that I forget things I know.	31.2 %	20.7 %	48.1 %
13	It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class.	36.4 %	16.5 %	47.1 %
15	I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.	70.8 %	14.3 %	14.9 %
16	Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it.	54.6 %	17.8 %	27.6 %
17	I often feel like not going to my language class.	23.2 %	52.4 %	24.4 %
19	I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	32.8 %	28.6 %	38.6 %
20	I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in language class.	52.4 %	19.0 %	28.6 %
21	The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get.	25.7 %	44.8 %	29.5 %
23	I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do.	72.1 %	19.1 %	8.8 %
24	I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students.	58.6 %	17.9 %	23.5 %
25	Language class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.	25.2 %	49.0 %	26.0 %
26	I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes.	27.8 %	46.4 %	23.2 %
27	I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class.	46.6 %	32.9 %	20.5 %
29	I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says.	75.6 %	12.9 %	11.5 %
30	I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak a foreign language.	36.9 %	41.3 %	21.8 %
31	I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language.	24.4 %	50.8 %	24.8 %
33	I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	62.0 %	24.0 %	14.0 %

Table 2 presents 24 statements describing FLA negatively. A large number of the students showed their agreement with 13 statements, ranging from 52.4% (statement 3: *I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class*; and statement 20: *I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in language class*) to 77.5% (statement 9: *I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class*) The students also agreed with the rest of the statements though with lower percentages, ranging from 23,2% (statement 17: *I often feel like not going to my language class*) to 46.6% (statement 27: *I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class*).

It is noticeable that the students tended to agree most with negative-attitude statements describing speaking anxiety (statement 9: 77.5%: *I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class*), peer pressure (statement 7: 74.3%: *I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am* and statement 23: 72.1%: *I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do*) and the worry about being unable to understand what the teacher says (statement 15: 70.8%: *I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting* and statement 29: 75.6%: *I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says*).

It can be seen that students showed more agreement with statements describing anxiety negatively than those positively. In the autobiography data, student C claimed that, “I think there are both beneficial and harmful sides of anxiety in studying English but the bad side overwhelms the good one.” Or Student D asserted her unfavourable views towards English, “The anxiety about learning English in class makes me and other students feel like a nightmare. I think that English lessons and classroom environment did not interest us.” Similarly, student F shared his view, “I have a negative attitude towards FLA rather than a positive one because anxiety makes me feel depressed and not find the interest in learning English like other subjects.” It is true that there is a negative effect of FLA on students’ attitudes (Hussain, 2011) and a strong correlation between learners’ attitude and the language learning process (Stark & Paltridge, 1996). The classroom environment has also been claimed to be interrelated with the students’ feelings, experiences and perceptions (Dunn & Harris, 1998).

It is also evident that even with negative-attitude statements receiving low percentages of agreement, they did not obtain much disagreement either. A considerable number of the students expressed their neutral attitudes instead (e.g., Statement 17: 52.4%: *I often feel like not going to my language class*; Statement 25: 49%: *Language class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind*; Statement 31: 50.8%: *I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language*). Neutral or mixed attitude is a combination of students’ negative and positive attitudes towards FLA. More than one-third of the students writing autobiography claimed having a mixed attitude towards FLA in both its negative and positive aspects. For example, student A shared his view: “I see that FLA makes me feel stressful and not have motivation in learning language. However, thanks to this anxiety, I can focus more on studying English”. Or student B admitted that anxiety made his learning language more difficult but “if students did not feel anxious at all, they might not try anymore because they thought they were good enough in English and did not need to try more. This causes them to become less progressive.” This finding is similar to Tran et al.’s (2013) study, where nearly half of the students in their study had mixed attitudes because they realized that FLA forced them to enhance their English proficiency and motivate their English learning attitude.

4.3. Teachers’ attitudes towards students’ FLA

The study found that English teachers showed both negative and positive attitudes towards their students’ FLA.

As admitted the teachers being interviewed, students’ FLA “is a normal feeling while learning English since most of the students experience anxious situations”, and “they can learn

English better thanks to FLA”. This is a positive view on FLA. Sharing similar viewpoints, 3 other teachers agreed that FLA “[made] students feel more serious about language learning” and therefore “[placed] invisible pressure on them to spend more time studying English after class.”

Nonetheless, the teachers also presented their negative attitudes. For example, as teacher C said, “a majority of students experience FLA, so they are always afraid of English tests and speaking English in class. This has resulted in their becoming increasingly discouraged with learning foreign language.” In the same line, teacher E complained, “FLA has put pressure on some students in exams, making them unable to get satisfactory results even though they had been doing well in the language learning process. There are even some students who are so scared that they sweat or shiver when communicating with foreigners or speaking in foreign language classes.”

It is obvious that teachers accepted FLA and had the tendency to have both positive and negative attitudes towards their students’ FLA. Their comments also indicated possible impacts of FLA on their students’ foreign language learning. Findings from Tran et al.’s (2013) study supported this when the teachers said that FLA had both positive and negative sides depending on its level; they expressed both facilitating and debilitating comments on FLA but there was no evidence to prove which aspect prevails.

The interviewed teachers also attempted to help reduce their students’ FLA because they thought teachers should be responsible for students’ anxiety when learning foreign languages. Most teachers agreed that they should help students by creating comfortable classroom atmosphere or adjusting their teaching process. As teacher A said, “Teachers should create a comfortable classroom environment, allowing students to understand the need for learning the English subject and give them excitement when learning English.” Similarly, teacher F recommended, “As a teacher, I should care and pay attention to the concerns of my students when learning a foreign language. I encourage them by offering encouragement and praise, and strive to create the most comfortable atmosphere that helps them to be confident and to overcome their own shyness and lack of dynamism.”

5. Conclusion and implications

The study found that a majority of students had the feeling of anxiety in foreign language learning. There is a variety of levels in students’ foreign language anxiety consisting of anxiousness, mild anxiety, high anxiety and relaxed. Secondly, students’ attitudes towards foreign language anxiety were described. Almost all of the students considered a certain level of FLA to be natural, and they admitted having both the positive and negative attitudes of FLA. Nevertheless, negative anxiety overweighs positive one. Finally, all teachers had awareness of students’ FLA and expressed both positive and negative attitudes towards their students’ FLA and made efforts to minimize the students’ FLA.

The current study suggests some implications for teaching practice and student learning. For teaching practice, firstly, as teachers play a vital role in supporting and guiding students’ learning process, they had better pay more attention to understanding the existence of FLA in students and broaden their horizons about FLA. Secondly, in curriculum planning, teachers should meet more students’ needs and concerns. Thirdly, teachers should guide students how to

overcome FLA by their own experience. Besides, communicative activities like pairwork, small group work, stimulations and structured exercises are effective methods that teachers should employ in language classes. For student learning, the first thing is that students had better accept their FLA, which plays a vital role in helping them overcome their own FLA. Students should also make plans to improve their language learning so that they would not fear learning English any more.

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ÁP LỰC TÂM LÝ KHI HỌC NGOẠI NGỮ: NGHIÊN CỨU THÁI ĐỘ CỦA NGƯỜI HỌC VÀ GIÁO VIÊN

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này điều tra sự lo lắng của học sinh khi học ngoại ngữ tại một số trường trung học phổ thông tỉnh Thừa Thiên Huế. Cụ thể, nghiên cứu tìm hiểu thái độ của cả học sinh và giáo viên đối với loại áp lực tâm lý này của người học. Nghiên cứu sử dụng bảng hỏi, tự truyện và phỏng vấn để thu thập dữ liệu. Bộ câu hỏi được phát cho 150 học sinh đến từ hai trường THPT của tỉnh Thừa Thiên Huế. Đồng thời, tám học sinh trong số này được lựa chọn để viết tự truyện và sau đó sáu giáo viên tiếng Anh từ các trường này được mời tham gia phỏng vấn. Dữ liệu từ bảng hỏi được phân tích định lượng và trình bày dưới dạng biểu đồ và bảng biểu, trong khi thông tin từ tự truyện và phỏng vấn được ghi chép và phân tích theo phương pháp định tính. Nghiên cứu cho thấy học sinh chịu áp lực tâm lý cao khi học ngoại ngữ. Các em chịu ảnh hưởng cả theo mặt tiêu cực và tích cực, trong đó tác động tiêu cực nhiều hơn tác động tích cực. Kết quả nghiên cứu cũng chỉ ra rằng giáo viên chấp nhận và có cả thái độ tích cực và tiêu cực đối với sự lo lắng về ngoại ngữ của người học. Giáo viên cũng cố gắng tạo ra bầu không khí thoải mái trong lớp học và điều chỉnh phương pháp giảng dạy để giảm thiểu sự lo lắng về ngoại ngữ của học sinh. Nghiên cứu cho rằng cả học sinh và giáo viên nên chấp nhận sự lo lắng về ngoại ngữ như một phần của việc học ngoại ngữ; quan trọng hơn, giáo viên nên hỗ trợ và giúp học sinh vượt qua tâm lý lo lắng về ngoại ngữ.

Từ khóa: Lo lắng về ngoại ngữ, thái độ của học sinh, thái độ của giáo viên