Déjà Vu All Over Again: A Response to Saito, Horwitz, and Garza

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, TWO OF US PUBLISHED a manuscript in this journal entitled “Foreign Language Learning Differences: Affective or Native Language Aptitude Differences?” (Sparks & Ganschow, 1991). In that manuscript, we introduced to the foreign language (FL) field the Linguistic Coding Differences Hypothesis (LCDH) and responded to a manuscript about anxiety and FL learning by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986). In the LCDH, FL learning is based primarily on one’s native language learning ability (i.e., language aptitude), students’ anxiety about FL learning is likely to be a consequence of their FL learning difficulties, and students’ language learning ability is a confounding variable when studying the impact of affective differences (e.g., anxiety, motivation, attitude) on FL learning. We suggested that any hypothesis that views affective variables as causal factors in learning a FL must be approached with caution. Since that time, we have conducted numerous empirical studies that have supported the basic premises of the LCDH (for a review of these studies, see Ganschow & Sparks, in press; Ganschow, Sparks, & Javorsky, 1998; and Sparks, Ganschow, Artzer, Siebenhar, & Plageman, 1998). Other researchers have conducted studies that support the tenets of the LCDH (e.g., Humes-Bartlo, 1989; Olshtain, Shohamy, Kemp, & Chatow, 1990; Papagno, Valentine, & Baddeley, 1991; Service, 1992; Service & Kohonen, 1995).

In a recent article published in this journal, Saito, Horwitz, and Garza (MLJ, 83, 1999, pp. 202–218) introduced the concept of FL reading anxiety and reported the results of a preliminary study of reading anxiety. In that study, they found that reading a FL was anxiety-provoking for some students, that reading anxiety varied by target language, that FL reading anxiety increased with students’ perceptions of difficulty in reading the FL, and that students’ FL grades decreased in conjunction with their levels of FL reading anxiety and general FL anxiety. Some of Saito et al.’s findings (e.g., reading a FL was anxiety-provoking for some students) are not surprising. However, their explanation for these findings, for example, that anxiety is responsible for a decrease in FL grades, is misguided in our view. In fact, Saito et al.’s hypotheses about FL reading anxiety are almost identical to Horwitz et al.’s (1986) hypotheses about general FL anxiety. For several years, we have studied the issues of FL learning problems and also affective differences, particularly anxiety, in FL learners. Based on our research findings, we have taken a position contrary to Saito et al.’s on

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the issue of anxiety and FL learning. Our response focuses on four points: evidence from recent research in reading acquisition, problems inherent in the authors’ Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS), problems in research design, and failure to control for students’ level of language ability in research studies on affective variables.

**RESEARCH IN READING ACQUISITION**

There is a considerable body of research on reading acquisition in both English and other languages. Findings show clearly that reading words and reading comprehension are based on students’ skill in processing language. It is well known, for example, that reading acquisition in English is best predicted by phonological processing skills, in particular phonemic awareness, and that failure to develop phonemic awareness leads directly to significant problems with word decoding and indirectly to reading comprehension problems. (For a review of this literature, see Gough, Ehri, & Treiman, 1992; Rieben & Perfetti, 1991; and Stanovich, 1988, 1998.) The relationship between reading difficulty and poor phonological processing skills is also apparent in other languages, such as Danish, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Turkish, and Swedish (e.g., Alegria, Pignot, & Morais, 1982; Caravolas & Bruck, 1993; Cossu, Shankweiler, Liberman, Katz, & Tola, 1988; Leong & Joshi, 1997; Olofsson & Niedersoe, 1999; Oney & Durgunoglu, 1997; Porpodas, 1999). Even in nonalphabetic languages (e.g., Chinese), research has shown that phonological processing skills are important for learning to read (Hu & Catts, 1998; Suk-Han-Ho & Bryant, 1997). Furthermore, findings indicate that the development of word decoding and reading comprehension are similar in first language (L1) and second language (L2; Geva, 1999) and that FL word recognition (i.e., word decoding) plays a significant role in FL reading comprehension (Koda, 1992, 1996).

Thus, Saito et al.’s (1999) findings that reading is anxiety-provoking to some students and that anxiety increases with students’ perceptions of their reading difficulties are not unexpected. However, their suggestion that FL reading problems might be due to anxiety is premature because they did not determine their participants’ level of reading skill. Our research has shown consistently that students with significantly lower levels of native language skills (i.e., reading, spelling, vocabulary) and FL proficiency have higher levels of anxiety about FL learning (Ganschow et al., 1994; Ganschow & Sparks, 1996; Sparks & Ganschow, 1996; Sparks, Ganschow, Artzer, Siebenhar, & Plageman, 1997).

**FOREIGN LANGUAGE READING ANXIETY SCALE**

An examination of questions on the FLRAS indicates a possible confounding interaction between language skills and anxiety. This finding is similar to our earlier criticism of Horwitz’s Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS; Horwitz et al., 1986), where we suggested that there may be a confounding interaction between an affective variable (e.g., anxiety) and a student’s expressive/receptive language skills (i.e., listening, speaking, verbal memory). All 20 questions on the FLRAS involve comfort level with either the decoding (i.e., reading words) or comprehension aspects of reading. For example, item 2, “When reading (the FL), I often understand the words but still can’t quite understand what the author is saying,” indicates potential difficulty with reading comprehension. Item 9, “I usually end up translating word by word when I’m reading (the FL),” indicates potential difficulty with decoding skill. Like Horwitz’s earlier and more general anxiety scale, 10% of the questions appear to involve comfort level with decoding only; 35%, comfort level with comprehension only; and 55%, comfort level with both decoding and comprehension. The Appendix presents items on the FLRAS with a breakdown of the reading components we observed. Thus, given the potential for interaction between reading skill and anxiety, the authors of the FLRAS cannot be certain whether their scale is measuring FL reading anxiety, FL reading skill, or both.

**PROBLEMS IN RESEARCH DESIGN**

Saito et al. (1999) investigated whether levels of reading anxiety vary according to target language. They concluded that whereas general FL anxiety did not differ by target language, FL reading anxiety did. Although this research question has much merit, the study’s design does not allow the authors to answer the question conclusively because the students were not randomly placed in the three FL classes. Thus, the study’s internal validity is weakened because group membership was biased; that is, students selected a FL in which to enroll in relation to preference, interest, graduation requirement, and so forth (Campbell & Stanley, 1963; Krathwohl, 1993). Without randomization, the authors cannot assume that the groups were equivalent in language skills, motiva-
tion to enroll in a FL, or level of FL reading anxiety. Any specific conclusion that a given FL is associated with higher levels of FL reading anxiety cannot be supported in this study.

MEASURING VARIANCE IN LANGUAGE SKILLS

Perhaps the primary problem in Saito et al.’s (1999) study is their failure to measure and control for their participants’ level of native language reading or FL reading skill (i.e., decoding, comprehension). Students’ level of reading skill could have been measured in several ways, for example, by administering a standardized measure of reading or by using ACT Reading scores. To be fair, Saito et al. did suggest that “it is difficult to be sure whether anxiety is the cause or effect of the difficulties observed” (p. 215). They also stated that their participants “experienced anxiety as a result of actual difficulties in text processing” (p. 215). However, tests of reading skills were not adminis-
tered to the participants; thus, Saito et al. did not determine whether their participants had difficulty with text processing. They also stated that the “large number of students who reported anxiety over reading causes us to believe that many of the anxious students have normal language processing capabilities” (p. 215). However, this statement is a hypothesis. Saito et al. do not know whether the students in their study had “normal language processing capabilities” because they did not measure those capabilities.

Au (1988) maintained that failure to control for FL proficiency in affective studies is a “serious methodological weakness.” For several years, we have suggested that FL researchers who study affective variables must measure and control for their participants’ level of native language skill and FL proficiency. Only by including language variables in their studies will researchers who investigate affective variables be able to discern the contribution made by affective differences in FL learning.

WHAT’S THE HARM?

Saito et al. (1999) reported that they were unable to “identify any material on first language reading anxiety even though first language reading difficulties are well-known” (p. 203). We suggest that they were unable to locate studies on anxiety and L1 reading skill because anxiety as a causal factor in L1 reading acquisition is not a viable hypothesis. Voluminous evidence has implicated cognitive processes, specifically language skills, as the primary causal factor in L1 reading acquisition and reading problems. At this time, there is also no reason to expect that the relationship between word reading and reading comprehension is different in L1 and L2 (Geva, 1999).

Developing effective reading comprehension skills in L1 requires efficient word recognition (decoding) skills and some measure of proficiency in the L1. If anxiety is accepted by FL educators as a primary causal factor in FL reading differences, our concern is that researchers will not develop or seek out new (or different) teaching methodologies that have the potential to teach students with language skill differences. For several years, we have suggested that the largest part of the variance in FL learning is accounted for by language skills because learning a FL is the learning of language (e.g., Sparks & Ganschow, 1995). In our view, FL researchers should include the contribution of language skills when investigating students’ affective differences in reading and comprehending a FL.

NOTES

1 For example, item 1 on the FLCAS is “I never feel sure when speaking in class.” We suggested that this item could be related to a student's level of oral expressive language skill. We examined each of the 35 questions on the FLCAS and found the following: 60% of the questions involved comfort level with expressive language, receptive language, or both; 15% involved verbal memory skills; and 12% involved speed of processing verbal stimuli.

2 We have suggested that FL researchers who propose that affective variables play a causal role in FL learning could invalidate our theory (the LCDH) by finding that (a) there are no native language differences between students who have affective differences; (b) an unsuccessful FL learner’s affective differences do not routinely affect his or her performance in other academic areas, especially language-based subjects (e.g., English, social studies); and (c) students with significantly weaker native language skills and higher levels of anxiety can have their anxiety reduced and still become as proficient in a FL as students with significantly stronger native language skills.

REFERENCES


### APPENDIX

**FLRAS Items with Reading Components**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Decoding</th>
<th>Comprehension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I get upset when I’m not sure whether I understand what I am reading in (French, Russian, Japanese).</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. When reading (French, Russian, Japanese), I often understand the words but still can’t quite understand what the author is saying.</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. When I’m reading (French, Russian, Japanese), I get so confused I can’t remember what I’m reading.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. I feel intimidated whenever I see a whole page of (French, Russian, Japanese) in front of me.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. I am nervous when I am reading a passage in (French, Russian, Japanese) when I am not familiar with the topic.</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. I get upset whenever I encounter unknown grammar when reading (French, Russian, Japanese).</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. When reading (French, Russian, Japanese), I get nervous and confused when I don’t understand every word.</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. It bothers me to encounter words I can’t pronounce while reading (French, Russian, Japanese).</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9. I usually end up translating word by word when I’m reading (French, Russian, Japanese).</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. By the time you get past the funny letters and symbols in (French, Russian, Japanese), it’s hard to remember what you’re reading about.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. I am worried about all the new symbols you have to learn in order to read (French, Russian, Japanese).</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I enjoy reading (French, Russian, Japanese).</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. I feel confident when I am reading in (French, Russian, Japanese).</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Once you get used to it, reading (French, Russian, Japanese) is not so difficult.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. The hardest part of learning (French, Russian, Japanese) is learning to read.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. I would be happy just to learn to speak (French, Russian, Japanese) rather than having to learn to read as well.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. I don’t mind reading to myself, but I feel very uncomfortable when I have to read (French, Russian, Japanese) aloud.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>18. I am satisfied with the level of reading ability in (French, Russian, Japanese) that I have achieved so far.</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. (French, Russian, Japanese) culture and ideas seem very foreign to me.</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. You have to know so much about (French, Russian, Japanese) history and culture in order to read (French, Russian, Japanese).</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>