Korean EFL Learners’ Anxiety in the Elementary English Classroom*

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Kim, Iksang & Ko, Kyounghee. 2012. Korean EFL Learners’ Anxiety in the Elementary English Classroom. *The Journal of Studies in Language* 28.2, 219–240. This study examines the English anxiety of 323 Korean elementary students in order to investigate the level of anxiety, factors contributing to the anxiety, and the differences of anxiety across such backgrounds as level, grade, gender, and language experience. The data were collected using the Korean version of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). The results reveal that the Korean elementary students experience significantly lower level of anxiety than the adolescent or adult subjects in other studies. In addition, the study presents four factors leading to English classroom anxiety. They include anxiety & fear, confidence & comfortableness, competition & comparison, and avoidance & apathy. The study also shows some significant group differences. The more proficient in English, the less anxious the students are. The more exposed to English-speaking world, the less anxious. Boys are more anxious than girls. Among the grades, in particular, there is a significant difference only between third and sixth grades. (Jeju National University)

Key words: anxiety, Elementary English, EFL, classroom anxiety, Korean learners

1. Introduction

Anxiety is one of the most important affective factors influencing foreign language learning no matter what the learning setting is. Those who have difficulty comprehending others and expressing themselves in

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a foreign language perceive a learning task to be performed in the foreign language as a threat to their self-perception. A lot of learners often claim to have a mental block against learning a foreign language, although they may be good learners in other situations (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986: 125). Serious language anxiety may cause other related problems with self-esteem, self-confidence, and risk-taking ability, ultimately hampering L2 proficiency (Crookall and Oxford, 1991). Researchers as well as language teachers have been interested in the investigation of foreign language anxiety (FLA). As a result, a large body of research on the effects of FLA has provided strong evidence about the negative and detrimental effects of FLA on language learning.

Among the abundant research, however, only a few studies have reported children’s FLA. Mackenzie and Gardner (1991) state that foreign language anxiety is more relevant to language learning among adults than children. Then, are young children impervious to FLA arousal? Although children may experience less anxiety than adults, there are strong evidences for the existence of FLA among young children and the negative effects on their language learning and performance (Swain and Burnaby, 1976; Silva, 2010). According to Silva (2010), 11-13 year-old children were able to report the FLA they experienced. Furthermore, Woodrow (2006) notes that English language learners from Confucian Heritage Cultures including Korea, China and Japan are more anxious language learners than other ethnic groups. These findings enable the researcher to assume that Korean EFL children are highly prone to undergoing FLA and at the same time they are able to report their anxiety.

Targeting Korean children learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), this study purports to examine elementary school children’s anxiety level from grade 3 (9 years old) to grade 6 (12 years old). To achieve the goal, the following research questions were proposed. To what extent do students experience anxiety in English language classrooms and what are the factors of their anxiety? What are the relationships between students’ anxiety and their English proficiency? Are there any differences of anxiety across gender or grade? What effect does overseas experience (the study in the English-speaking countries) have on the theoretical construct of Foreign Language