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Teaching experience and its role in foreign language teachers' anxiety

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TEACHING EXPERIENCE AND ITS ROLE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS' ANXIETY

Key words: teacher anxiety, teaching experience, autonomy, classroom interactions

Introduction

A profession of a foreign language teacher can be categorized as one of the most over-stressed nowadays. Being a professional language teacher may cause some problems related to physical and psychological well-being. There are some influential factors that determine a level of anxiety experienced by teachers such as numerous requirements and responsibilities assigned to them, expectations towards their work, autonomy in taking decisions, interactions with authorities, superiors and students. The profession of a language teacher is extremely demanding since a teacher is believed to prepare his/her students to obligatory foreign language exams. For many of such reasons, teaching may be regarded as an anxiety-arousing occupation. From my observations I can say that anxiety frequently develops in these teachers who have the idealistic approach towards their profession and do not possess adequate supplies to manage a particular situation. It can be stated that anxiety is the outcome of both situational factors and individual qualities. If such anxiety accompanies a language teacher for a long time his/her professional competence may be threatened. Undoubtedly each language teacher, whether more or less experienced, has his or her own ways of coping with anxiety.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1. Review of literature

In the times of affective and humanistic approach to foreign language teaching anxiety has become a concept thoroughly researched. Horwitz and Young [1991, in: Ellis 1994] noticed on the basis of correlation studies that anxiety most frequently

appears while learning and communicating in the foreign language. They concluded that anxiety may derive from learners' competitive nature. Tests and relationships with a teacher are often regarded as a reason for anxiety. Moreover, as Horwitz and Cope observed [1989, in: Ellis 1994] anxiety is proved to be limited only to listening and speaking since it requires learners to act spontaneously. Some authors, for example Oxford [1992], claim that anxiety is related to culture shock which is experienced by a learner in a situation when his or her identity is endangered. There are three main sources of anxiety identified by Gardner and Smythe [1975], namely communication apprehension, tests and fear of negative evaluation. There are many studies that are devoted to the impact of anxiety on learning process. MacIntyre and Gardner [1991] noticed that anxiety influences three stages of language learning: input, processing and output. They also observed that there is a correlation between anxiety and performance in a foreign language. Interestingly enough, such a correlation was not found in the learners' first language. Classroom anxiety highly correlates with achievement in a foreign language. In any research on anxiety some basic factors should be taken into consideration: ability level, learning stage and learner's age. The research conducted by Ely [1986] provides the evidence for a weak correlation between classroom participation and anxiety level. As to ability level Spielberger [1962, in: Ellis 1994] claims that anxiety is described as facilitating only in high-ability students. It raises the issue of regarding anxiety as a consequence of low achievement. It was also suggested that anxiety may have distinctive impact at different stages of learning a foreign language and it is more facilitating at higher levels [Scovel 1978]. Low initial proficiency, low motivation and high general anxiety may result in interference with second language learning. There is a controversy around a distinction between debilitating and facilitating anxiety. Though the former is regarded as being common in foreign language learning the existence of the latter is still disputable. This type of anxiety may appear only while performing manageable tasks [Scovel 1978: 67]. Undoubtedly, a small amount of tension is useful in learning a second language, however the researchers prefer to call it attention rather than anxiety. Furthermore, Arnold [1999] makes a point that one may take into consideration the possible existence of helpful anxiety only in formal learning situations. In natural language acquisition anxiety should be excluded.

1.2. Some issues relevant to teacher's profession

1.2.1. Correlates of teacher anxiety

Teachers' success like any cognitive or affective activity cannot be achieved without certain degree of self-esteem [Brown 1987]. This self-judgment is described as the correlate of anxiety because these two phenomena are interdependent. Low self-esteem is a frequent feature of an anxious teacher who is easily irritated and sensitive to criticism. Furthermore, such a person is not able to accept personal mistakes and

attempts to gain attention and compliments from other people. It may happen that an anxious teacher aims at gaining students' authority by humiliating and criticizing them. Another correlate of anxiety is beliefs which refer to psychological states in which a person accepts particular issue as true or not. Beliefs may be either strongly held or subconscious. Both forms are related to the way one perceives the world and to his personal self-image. Language teachers may hold many unrealistic beliefs about learning and teaching process. One of them is that his or her passion for languages is shared by all the students who should learn a foreign language at the same rate as he or she had in the past. Furthermore, some language teachers tend to think that their learning style and teaching methods are universal and guarantee success to all the learners. Finally, it is worth mentioning competitiveness as another correlate of anxiety. Competitiveness serves as a source of facilitative anxiety since it stimulates personal growth. A language teacher who makes his or her students involved in language contests or compares his/her teaching achievements with other teachers becomes positively anxious and motivated towards his/her teaching.

1.2.2. Sources of teacher anxiety

A language teacher faces in his/her profession a number of various problems that contribute to anxiety arousal. One of them is related to the roles that a teacher is expected to fulfill such as that of manager, assessor, controller, resource and many others. A teacher should serve as a source of guidance and counsel, to act as a director of learning. In addition, he or she as a member of school society is supposed to involve in extra-curricular activities and school life. Moreover, a teacher should perform the role of culture mediator maintaining the link between the school and society. Finally as Blount and Klausmeier [1968] notice, a teacher is regarded as a member of the profession who is expected to take into consideration vocational ethics and responsibilities. There are two problems which may appear in fulfilling all these roles. Firstly, frequently there is a conflict of roles that a teacher has in his work or between the roles in professional and private life. Secondly, there are too many roles that a teacher is expected to fulfill. These expectations come from school authorities, students and from their parents. It seems crucial for a teacher to understand that it is impossible to fulfill all the roles equally well. If a teacher aims at absolute perfection of the roles sooner or later he/she will become anxious and consequently disappointed about teaching.

Banach [1997] yields an insight into the attitudes of Polish teachers. For them the greatest problem is the lack of financial resources. This may also apply to foreign language teachers in Poland who are frequently forced to withdraw from their concept of teaching. From Banach's study it can be noticed that for many teachers school syllabus is overloaded and impossible to introduce in a classroom. Furthermore, any novelty in the Polish educational system is difficult to implement due to authorities or parents' disregard. A good example may be an introduction of the European Language

Portfolio. The document is supported by the Polish ministry of education as a tool for autonomy and motivation enhancement, however it is not implemented in many schools due to reluctance of school authorities. A new project is also disregarded by students' parents for whom the priority in language education is the ultimate attainment of their children on a final exam and not developing their competence by building up motivation and self-assessment skills. Teachers in the Banach's study also expressed their view on cooperation with students. It turns out that many teachers are dissatisfied with their relationships with learners who are not active and misbehave. Moreover, teachers are not able to approach learners individually since there are too many students in a classroom. Tucholska [1996], in turn, reports in her study on another important issue, namely the feeling of fatigue due to excessive working. Working time is not established since teachers are frequently obliged to perform additional and unplanned tasks after lessons.

A very important aspect of teachers' work is social support. In the teaching profession, a problem seems complex. The school environment involves a variety of people, namely authorities, colleagues and students' parents. Chodkiewicz [2006] notices that a social support which is provided to teachers may be helpful in analyzing and solving professional problems. Moreover, it also motivates to further development and enhances the feeling of belonging. It may happen, however, that teachers display a tendency to compete rather than integrate and cooperate. Gruszczynska [2005] claims that teachers may avoid searching others' support if they cannot function in the atmosphere of rivalry and feel less competent than others. Such a behavior may lead to confidence decrease and consequently to anxiety emergence.

Another source of anxiety is related to professional development. It is not sufficient nowadays to be a university graduate to be regarded as a professional teacher. There is a constant pressure on teachers to raise their qualifications. According to Szempruh [2001] teachers are obliged to systematic learning and pursuing professional development. An effective teacher is supposed to advance in interpersonal relations and pedagogical abilities [Janowski 2004]. To be perceived as a successful language teacher he/she should be a member of some professional organizations for teachers to be updated with methodology of language teaching. Various associations and courses provide challenges for teachers, but primarily they aim at supporting them in their vocation. Teachers attending workshops and courses are able to self-develop and evaluate objectively their progress as teachers. They can also evaluate teaching innovations and decide about their implementation in a classroom.

The primary requirement for the profession of a foreign language teacher is appropriate level of language skills. Nowadays the expectations towards language teachers are very high. At more advanced levels teachers may encounter students who display extensive language knowledge. Furthermore, at present students have numerous opportunities to obtain the knowledge (e.g. by means of Internet and traveling) and apply it in real life situations. Thus, improving his or her language skills seems indispensable for language teachers. Additionally, the English language is constantly changing and a teacher is expected to keep up with these changes. These expectations come not only

from students but also their parents and school authorities that require from language teachers keeping portfolios reflecting their professional development. Teachers are expected to understand all varieties of standard speech and as to pronunciation they are obliged to be comparable to a native speaker of a target language. Moreover, they are supposed to be capable of using extensive vocabulary at a proficient level and express their ideas without any limitations. They also should be able to read all varieties of target language literary works as effortlessly as in their native language [Rivers 1972]. All these requirements may be difficult to fulfill for some teachers. Those who constantly develop professionally and improve their language have higher self-esteem than those who are stagnated. It seems that the first category of teachers appreciate teaching and in the long run avoid a professional burn-out. Stagnated teachers who do not pursue professional development are more likely to experience anxiety resulting from a low self-esteem and the lack of confidence.

1.2.3. Teacher's experience

Teacher's anxiety is to a great extent rooted in his or his/her personality. In other words, either you are predisposed to be anxious or not. There are, however, other factors that need to be considered such as teaching experience that has an impact on the teacher's personality. Undoubtedly, personality is not a fixed feature that a person possesses but it evolves all the time. The more teaching experience a teacher has the more he or she is immune to anxiety provoking situations. Definitely there is a difference between more and less experienced language teachers in terms of their approach to such situations. More experienced teachers rely on intuition in taking decisions. They seem to understand an anxiety provoking situation and apply appropriate solutions to avoid its consequences. More experienced teachers focus mainly on becoming more effective in teaching and improving their professional skills. Their practical knowledge has been tested in various unpredictable situations over the years. However, a danger that might appear on the way is professional burn-out that is manifested with reluctance and anxiety. On the contrary, less experienced teachers cannot so easily adapt to constant changes in a situation. They act according to fixed rules and their theoretical knowledge gained at university courses. Frequently, the rules that they know are detached from reality. It seems that for beginning language teachers the greatest problem is classroom discipline. Lindgren [1980] claims that these teachers should be provided with useful suggestions on how to manage such anxiety provoking situations. Each teacher needs some time to understand that discipline is a complex issue related to his/her relationship with learners or his/her self-confidence. Another problem of junior teachers is related to their professional ambitions. In the Polish reality a significant number of the graduates of the English Philology do not intend to become teachers of English as teacher's profession has still a low social status. They are rather determined to work as translators and interpreters or pursue their career in business and technology where a good command of English is an advantage. For these

reasons, working as a language teacher is treated by the university graduates as a temporary occupation. When their adventure with teaching turns out to be too long-lasting and the feeling of success cannot be achieved they start becoming more and more anxious. Consequently, they may regard students as hypothetical threat and obstacle on the way to their ultimate success. Inexperienced teachers are also more likely to develop anxiety as a result of communication with headmasters and senior teachers. In this situation the feeling of inferiority may appear due to the lack of knowledge and interpersonal skills. Moreover, if a teacher is negatively evaluated by supervisors or colleagues his/her self-esteem may be impaired.

2. Empirical part

2.1. Description of the research

2.1.1. The purpose of the research

The study aimed at discovering an extent to which this phenomenon is present in the teachers teaching English as a foreign language in Poland. The primary aim was to compare the level of anxiety in three groups of language teachers representing different seniority. Hence, the question posed by the researcher: Is teaching experience a factor that has any influence on the anxiety level experienced by language teachers? A hypothesis that put forward by the researcher was that there is a strong correlation between teaching experience and the level of anxiety. The secondary purpose of the research was to investigate the factors that have an impact on anxiety experienced by teachers of English.

2.1.2. Subjects

The group of twelve teachers of English participated in the study. All of them were working as teachers in four secondary schools in Wrocław. The subjects represented three types of teachers of different seniority: pre-service (Group 1), junior (Group 2) and senior (Group 3). Each group consisted of four subjects. The pre-service teachers were undergraduates of the English Philology at University of Wrocław at the last year of their studies. Their teaching experience ranged from seven months to a year and a half. The average teaching experience amounted to one year. Three subjects from this group chose teaching FL methodology as their specialization and had obligatory teaching practice in primary and secondary schools. One subject had translation specialization and did not cover any methodological courses at university; however he expressed his passion for being a teacher. The junior teachers were employed at school for at least three years up to five years. An average teaching experience for this group amounted to four years. All of them were trained for teachers and obtained

their MA degree in second language acquisition. The last group comprised qualified teachers all of whom were language teaching college or university graduates. They were prepared to teaching profession having covered all methodological courses and participating in numerous workshops for language teachers. All of them were employed as teachers for at least twenty years. The average teaching experience for this group amounted to twenty two years.

2.1.3. Materials and research procedure

The subjects were requested to respond to the anxiety questionnaires that were designed by the researcher. The first questionnaire included in Appendix 1 focused on potential symptoms of anxiety. On its basis the researcher intended to establish a level of anxiety across the three groups of teachers. The questionnaire comprised fifteen questions related to teachers' self-esteem and attitude to his/her profession. The respondents' task was to evaluate an extent to which a given statement applies to them by means of a five point Likert Scale.

The second questionnaire included in Appendix 2 focused on the potential sources of teacher anxiety. The researcher deliberately did not include open-ended questions so as to control and direct the subjects' responses. However, the respondents were allowed in the instructions to share their reflections by writing them in a blank space at the bottom of the questionnaire. The questionnaire included twenty one statements to which the subjects had to express their attitude on a five point Likert Scale. The statements were formulated in such a way that they described positive qualities and situations instead of negative ones. The first five points concentrated on how the respondents perceive themselves as teachers ("me as a teacher" part). They referred to teacher authority and competence. The points from 6 to 9 focused on students and such aspects as their motivation, cooperation and general attitude towards their language teachers ("teacher and students" part). The points from 10 to 12 concerned teacher-parent relationship ("teacher and parents" part). The next five points were related to school environment, its management and functioning ("teacher and school" part). Finally, the last four points concentrated on education policy and language teaching materials ("teacher and language education policy" part). The teacher anxiety questionnaire was written in the first person so as the subjects could easily identify themselves with the statements. The first pilot version of the questionnaire was tested on one senior teacher. Since there were some problems related to ambiguity of the statements the researcher corrected the mistakes and prepared a final version of the questionnaire. The subjects obtained the questionnaire by e-mail and had two days for its completion.

After collecting the questionnaires results the researcher assigned the points to the respondents' answers. The points ranging from 0 to 4 corresponded to the five point Likert Scale included in the questionnaire. The highest number of points, namely 4 points, was assigned for "never" option and 0 points for "always" option. All the

points from the first questionnaire were added and a mean was calculated for each teacher and then for particular groups of teachers: pre-service, junior and senior. The obtained result expressed a level of anxiety characteristic of a given group. The similar procedure was applied for the data obtained from the second questionnaire. On the basis of the data the mean was also calculated for the individual subject and then for particular group of teachers.

2.2. Discussion of the results

Since the study aimed at discovering an extent to which anxiety is present in the teachers of English firstly the data obtained from Questionnaire 1 was analyzed. The graph presented below illustrates the compilation of data in the three categories of respondents.

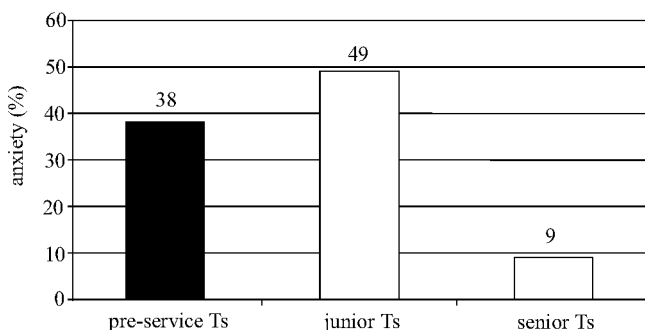


Fig. 1. Anxiety level in three groups of teachers (Ts)

Contrary to the hypothesis formulated in point 2.1.1 there is no strong correlation between the variables, namely teachers' experience and the level of anxiety. Unpredictably, the subjects from the junior teacher group displayed a higher level of anxiety than pre-service teachers. The mean score for the latter group was 49 points on the questionnaire in comparison to 38 points in the former group. There might be two explanations of this fact. The subjects revealed in a blank space on the questionnaire forms that pre-service teachers are still idealistic about the profession. They claimed that the ultimate success of a teacher cannot be quickly attained. They believed that it is a matter of time when they improve their interpersonal skills and become more self-confident towards students and school authorities. The subjects from the group representing junior teachers emphasized in the interview that they lost their enthusiasm for teaching when they realized that they were helpless and a final success they intended to achieve did not come. The mean score for the last group of subjects representing senior teachers was only 9 points. This result is not unpredictable since a common source of anxiety is novelty and commencing a work as a teacher for the first time may be a reason for experiencing strong negative emotions. A new teacher is expected to

confirm his or her abilities and appropriately perform the roles assigned to the profession. However, each day the teacher becomes more acquainted with the nature of his/her occupation. Having worked for more than twenty years in the profession the teachers know various strategies of coping with anxiety. The senior teachers from the study had no problems with their self-esteem. They were willing to face new challenges and take risk in work. They perceived themselves as dedicated, ambitious teachers, full of enthusiasm and optimism. They also felt comfortable at public speeches. However, it can be inferred on the basis of the additional comments placed by two senior teachers that though they worked out their ways of dealing with anxiety over twenty years, they did not display such a high level of enthusiasm than at the beginning of their teaching career. In order to have an insight into teacher anxiety and its sources in particular groups the results from Questionnaire 2 were analyzed. The diagram below illustrates compiled data for particular group of subjects.

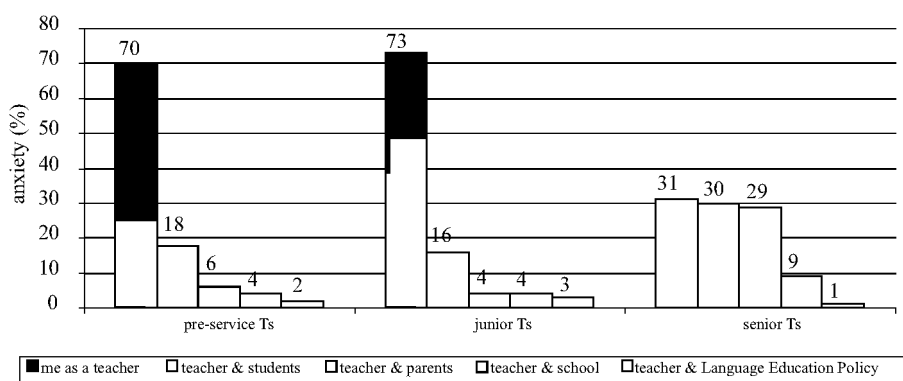


Fig. 2. Anxiety level in three groups of teachers (Ts)

There are no significant differences between the group of pre-service and junior teachers. The reasons for anxiety related to how a teacher views himself/herself (“me as a teacher” part) seem to be most important for Group 1 and Group 2. In this part the teachers identified two main sources of anxiety, namely their inability to prepare students to their final exams and numerous duties outside school. These two reasons are related to time pressure that many teachers experience in their work. Frequently, language teachers face a problem whether they should focus on preparing students to the language exams by covering uncountable number of impractical tests or on teaching a real foreign language. As to “teacher and students” part of the questionnaire the subjects in Group 1 and Group 2 provided similar answers. Within this category the teachers most often marked two anxiety sources, namely the lack of respect from students and the lack of cooperation. It is worth noticing that a point referring to motivation of students to learning a foreign language was not marked by any subject from both groups. It may suggest that nowadays students are aware of the importance of foreign languages. As far as the third part of the questionnaire is concerned, it is

visible that the teachers did not have many anxiety-provoking situations related to their students' parents who generally appreciate teachers' effort, show them respect and give support. The relationship with school authorities and colleagues is not also the main source of anxiety. The only source of any anxiety identified in this part of the questionnaire was school management. The comparatively similar results were obtained in the 'teacher and language education policy' part. The teachers seem to accept the education reforms introduced to the Polish schools. They are also satisfied with the language course books. However, they express their disappointment as to the status of teachers in Poland whose salaries are still not satisfactory. They also complained about the language syllabus that is overloaded and consequently impossible to implement.

Analyzing the anxiety sources in the senior teachers group one may notice some striking differences between their results and the results of two other groups. Firstly, the subjects from this group did not find as many anxiety sources in the "me as a teacher" part as the pre-service and junior teachers. This fact may be positively interpreted. Their additional comments enclosed to the questionnaire reveal that over the years they worked out various ways of dealing successfully with anxiety. Unlike Group 1 and Group 2, the teachers in Group 3 evaluated highly their language competence. They also expressed their satisfaction with the career path they chose. They did not complain about too many duties assigned at school and outside school. This discrepancy between the groups related to overload of duties may be easily explained. Pre-service and junior teachers are young and inexperienced in a profession. They spend much time on language resource preparation and lesson planning. Their senior counterparts in turn have an ability to improvise and lesson preparation is not so time-consuming. Furthermore, inexperienced young teachers being in their late twenties or early thirties frequently decide to start a family and raise children, which contributes even more to their problems with reconciling a family life with school duties. As to the relationship of the senior teachers with the students and parents they seem to provide more anxiety-provoking situation than it was the case with the pre-service and junior teachers. This may be put down to a professional burn-out that some teachers experience and inability to motivate students to learning a foreign language. However, no significant difference was noticed between the groups as to teachers' attitude to school and language education policy.

The senior teachers provided many valuable comments in a blank space on the questionnaire. Some of them were related to their ways of dealing with anxiety. It seems that the ability of coping with anxiety-provoking situations in a school setting comes with time. The teachers reported that they kept a folder with back up notes and extra activities for the students when they noticed that they were bored with a course book. They also made use of lesson plans they had previously prepared and participated in numerous workshops, seminars and conferences. Some of the workshops were devoted to teacher's assertiveness, communication and effective classroom management.

3. Final thoughts

The results of the study confirmed the assumption that secondary school teachers experience the feeling of anxiety. Therefore, they validate the presumption that anxiety seems to be an inseparable element of teacher profession. Regardless, the teachers educational background all the subjects displayed certain level of anxiety.

The study revealed that there is some relation between teaching experience and the level of teacher anxiety. The senior teachers turned out to be much less anxious than the pre-service and junior teachers. However, it seems justifiable to conduct a similar study with a greater number of teachers to confirm the results. Furthermore, the teachers in the study were all teachers of English. Thus it seems advisable to examine the teachers representing various foreign languages. In Poland the English language has a high status and the teachers do not have to motivate students to English learning as much as other teachers teaching German, French or Russian.

The subjects in the study identified various reasons for anxiety. Among the main factors that contribute to anxiety emergence there were numerous requirements and responsibilities assigned to them, expectations towards their work and interactions with students. Since some aspects of teacher's anxiety were not thoroughly examined it seems advisable to yield more insight into some specific aspects of anxiety related to teacher-school and teacher-students interactions. Such an aspect is for instance teacher's autonomy in taking decisions. It would be beneficiary to continue the study and to confront the results obtained from the teachers with the results from their students who could evaluate the level of anxiety experienced by these teachers and what impact it has on particular stages of a lesson.

The level of anxiety could be also investigated in terms of a potential source of a success or a failure in this profession. Some anxious language teachers decide to change a job due to their misunderstanding and disregard. It seems necessary to provide these teachers with the guidance from psychologists and more experienced colleagues in order to eliminate their inhibitions. There is also a need to support these teachers to improve their linguistic skills that are frequently below the students' expectations, especially as regards foreign language pronunciation.

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Appendix 1

The questionnaire on the symptoms of anxiety

Number	Statement	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.	I am a dedicated teacher.					
2.	I realize my ambitions.					
3.	I am an enthusiast and optimist as to my profession.					
4.	I am a self-confident and successful person.					
5.	I like public speeches and feel comfortable when others look at me.					
6.	My voice at public speeches is calm and well audible.					

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7.	I possess a high level of language skills.					
8.	I can improvise in a classroom.					
9.	I demand much from my students.					
10.	I can talk to my students on all the issues.					
11.	If I made a mistake I tell my students about it.					
12.	I am a popular teacher in my school.					
13.	I am authority for my students.					
14.	I smile to my students.					
15.	I like challenges and taking risk in my work.					

Feel free to write any additional comments on any of the above mentioned points.

Appendix 2

The questionnaire on the potential sources of anxiety

Fill in the questionnaire marking in the blank boxes to what extent a given statement applies to your person. If you have any additional comments on any of the below mentioned points please write them in the space below.

Number	Statement	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.	I am able to prepare well my students to final language exams.					
2.	I serve as a very good language model for my students.					
3.	I am satisfied with the career path that I chose.					
4.	I am assigned too many duties at school.					
5.	I have too many duties outside school.					
6.	My students respect me as a teacher.					
7.	My students appreciate my effort.					
8.	My students are cooperative.					
9.	My students are motivated to foreign language learning.					

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10.	My students' parents respect me as a teacher.					
11.	My students' parents appreciate my effort.					
12.	I can count on support of my students' parents.					
13.	My school is managed well.					
14.	My headmaster respects me as a teacher.					
15.	My headmaster appreciates my effort.					
16.	I can count on my colleagues' support.					
17.	It is believed that being a language teacher has a high status in my school.					
18.	It is believed that being a language teacher has a high status in my country.					
19.	I like the changes in the education system that are being introduced.					
20.	The syllabus for language courses is well planned.					
21.	The course book for language courses is well designed.					

Feel free to write any additional comments on any of the above mentioned points.

Summary

Teaching Experience and Its Role in Foreign Language Teachers' Anxiety

Twelve teachers of English representing three groups of different seniority: pre-service, freshmen and senior responded to the anxiety questionnaire to establish the relationship between the anxiety level and their teaching experience. The senior group is reported to have experienced less anxiety than other teachers. Some influential factors which determine a level of this specific anxiety were identified, for example expectations towards their work, autonomy in taking decisions, interactions with authorities, superiors and students. Finally, the article discusses practical ways of coping with teacher anxiety in a classroom.