

ANXIETY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING: PROFICIENCY AND GENDER UNDER SCRUTINY

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Abstract

Second language learning anxiety has been the most widely studied emotion in SLA (second language acquisition), it is said to be one of the most disputed and complex concepts, as there are various internal and external factors that influence it. There are numerous types of language anxiety described in this paper, the ones that can be considered as the most relevant, harmful or helpful anxiety and trait or state anxiety. Besides, the causes of anxiety in language learning are difficult to pinpoint but in this work, special heed will be paid to the teaching style and learners' personality. Several studies have produced inconsistent results when it comes to the two most ambiguous variables in language anxiety, namely gender and proficiency in second language learning anxiety. In an attempt to analyse this issue, this study aims to investigate the differences in anxiety depending on students' proficiency and gender. The participants of this study were forty-four high school students of a foreign language (English) in Spain and the study collected the data on language anxiety through a questionnaire modified from Dewaele, Franco Magdalena and Saitos' (2019) version. In the proficiency section the groups were divided into three regarding their level of English: high, medium and low. The study found that language anxiety in different levels of proficiency did not have clear enough results to have a consistent conclusion, as the results do not completely coincide with previous studies. But it is crucial to mention that the most striking result was the fact that the medium proficiency students had the highest anxiety level. The analysis of the relationship between language anxiety and gender did not show significant differences between male and female students. For the situations in which the students feel anxious, the teacher should act in a beneficial manner in order to have an effective positive impact on the learning environment and students' motivation. All in all, this study shows that, so as to examine anxiety in foreign language learning, a lot of variables need to be considered because there are many that affect anxiety directly.

Key words: language anxiety, gender, proficiency, high school students.

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1. Introduction: Anxiety in L2 learning

Second language learning is considered to be an extremely complex process which involves a lot of variables, for instance, social elements, the learners' psychological traits and the learning environment among others. Many of these aspects are linked to the internal factors that are seen as part of the learner's own personality, even though, there are some that are also related to external factors such as social aspects. Undoubtedly, although language learning and use are interactive activities that interact with other factors, it can be affirmed that there is a remarkably strong influence of the personality of an individual when it comes to the process of second language learning. Additionally, self-esteem and language abilities can either ease or disrupt our learning. Learner-intrinsic factors will always exert an influence, whether positive or negative which depends on factors such as anxiety or personality (Hu & Wang, 2014, p.122).

Around the nineteenth century, Darwin thought anxiety was an emotional reaction that was stimulated after an organism felt physically under threat: "Anxiety and fear primarily perform to alert of potential danger and produce physiological and psychological reactions" (Darwin, 1872, p.100, as cited in Stephenson, 2006). At the beginning of the twentieth century, Freud (1920) thought that anxiety was akin to 'fear' or 'fright' (as cited in Stephenson, 2006).

Anxiety is one of the most influential emotions that affect foreign language learning, the latter being defined by Kramer Moeller and Catalano (2015, P.327) as "the teaching or learning of a nonnative language outside of the environment where it is commonly spoken." MacIntyre (1999, p. 27) defined anxiety as "the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language.

Language anxiety being a complex emotion has attracted the attention of second language acquisition (SLA) researchers, teacher educators and teachers all around the world (Daubney, Dewaele & Gkonou, 2017, p.1). Certainly, language anxiety has been the most widely studied emotion in SLA, maybe because it is considered to be both a forceful and a persistent experience (MacIntyre, 2017, p.11). Language acquisition studies have focused more on learners than on teachers, even though teachers have also been found to be

susceptible to anxiety and therefore react nervously (Daubney, 2010, as cited in Gkonou, Daubney & Dewaele, 2017). Nevertheless, in this paper I will analyse students' anxiety because, since it is a complex emotion, I wanted to scrutinize whether two variables, proficiency and gender, affect it or not.

1.1. A brief review of the concept anxiety

According to Gkonou, Daubney and Dewaele (2017), the probability of anxiety constraining language learning is self-evident to many language learners and teachers. A large number of students state anxious feelings when starting to learn a new language and many teachers also report not only their students' anxiety in language learning but also their own (Horwitz, 1986). Scovel (1978) warns that without specifying the type of anxiety that is being examined, its role in second/foreign language learning cannot be understood. Horwitz *et al.* (1986) discussed that a particular type of anxiety labelled *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety* was principally responsible for most of the negative effects of anxiety on second language learning and achievement.

Scovel (1978) stated that positive relationship and no negative or even no relationship were found between language anxiety and achievement in several studies in the field (Chastain, 1976; Swain & Burnaby, 1976; Tucker *et al.*, 1976). Scovel (1978) made use of these unreliable research studies evidence, so as to conclude the necessity to classify the type of anxiety that needs to be studied before asserting that anxiety has a negative effect on language learning.

Scovel (1978) pointed out the fact that the term anxiety is too simple to explain the complex link between second language learning and anxiety. There are plenty of types of anxiety and some of them are more probable to affect language learning than others.

1.2. Different kinds of language anxiety

1.2.1. State or trait anxiety

Throughout the history of research of anxiety in language learning, various kinds of anxiety have been disclosed, two of the most studied ones being state and trait anxiety. Anxiety sometimes is originated as a result of a particular situation or event which is known as situational or state anxiety, but it can also be a personality trait. Language anxiety can begin with temporary experiences of fear in a position in which the student has to produce the language; in this context, anxiety is just a passing state. Occasionally, language anxiety reduces over time, as shown in studies of students learning French (Desrochers & Gardner, 1981). Nonetheless, language anxiety does not ease over time for all students. If frequent episodes make students correlate anxiety with language performance, anxiety becomes a trait rather than a state (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993). After language anxiety has derived into lasting trait, it can have pervasive repercussion on language learning and language performance (Arnold, 1999).

State anxiety is described by Spielberg (1966, p.12) as a transitory state or condition of the organism that changes its magnitude and disappears over time. Spielberger (1983) shows an example of state anxiety as the apprehension encountered before taking a test. On the contrary, trait anxiety, has been defined by Levitt (1980, p.11) as a steady status that does not have any time limitation, and is an established factor of personality, referring to an “acquired behavioral disposition that predisposes an individual to perceive a wide range of objectively non dangerous circumstances as threatening” (Spielberger, 1966, p.16).

Ömen (2010) points out that levels of state and trait anxiety might be used as a basis for an individual’s generalized non-clinical anxiety level, as they can portray one’s general and context specific anxiety reactions. Ömen (2010, p.21) states that “therefore, a general view on an individual’s attitude towards possible anxiety provoking stimuli can be obtained via levels of state and trait anxiety”.

1.2.2. *Helpful and harmful anxiety*

Another well-known distinction when it comes to anxiety is that between helpful (*facilitating*) anxiety and harmful (*debilitating*) anxiety. As the labels themselves make it clear, helpful anxiety is classified as a kind of anxiety that helps the individual improve learning and performance in the target language, while harmful anxiety is related to insufficient and unsatisfactory learning and performance of the individual (Stephenson, 2006).

Some authors proposed that distinct quantities of helpful anxiety and harmful anxiety may be detected in the same individual at the same time. For instance, Alpert and Haber (1960, p. 213) asserted that “an individual may possess a large amount of both anxieties, or of one but not the other, or of none of either” (as cited in Stephenson ,2006). It has also been suggested that helpful anxiety and harmful anxiety may perform simultaneously (Scovel, 1978, as cited in Stephenson ,2006).

1.2.2.1. Harmful anxiety

Despite the fact that various researchers claim that a positive influence of anxiety exists, most language research implies a negative relationship between language anxiety and performance. As mentioned above, the negative kind of anxiety is also called debilitating anxiety because it negatively affects learners’ performance in a lot of manners, both indirectly and directly. On the one hand, indirectly through worry and self-doubt and on the other hand, directly by reducing participation and creating overt avoidance of the foreign language. Harmful anxiety can be connected to a decrease of motivation, to negative attitudes and beliefs, and to difficulties in language performance (Arnold, 1999).

Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) stated that the strongest (negative) correlate of language achievement is anxiety. Studies describe the negative correlation of anxiety with the following:

- Grades in language courses.
- Proficiency test performance.
- Performance in speaking and writing tasks.

- Self-confidence in language learning (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993).
- Self-esteem, i.e. the judgment of one's own worth (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986).

The relationship between language anxiety and language performance is definitely not plain. Young (1991) asserted that usually language anxiety is related in a very negative way to one skill but not to another. Ganschow, Sparks, Anderson, Javorsky, Skinner and Patton (1994) stated that high anxiety may be the *result* of language learning problems rather than the *cause*.

1.2.2.2. Helpful anxiety

Additionally, other research studies conveyed the idea that language anxiety was actually helpful or facilitating in many manners, such as alerting students (Scovel, 1978). According to Arnold (1999) helpful anxiety is linked to:

- High language proficiency and self-confidence among a hand-picked group of excellent language learners.
- Oral production of difficult English structures among native Arabic-speakers and Spanish-speakers.
- Good grades in language classes for students in regular French, German and Spanish classes but not for students in audio lingual classes.

Language researchers maintain different perspectives about the significance of the influence of helpful anxiety. Horwitz (1990) explained that anxiety can only be helpful for really simple learning tasks, but that it does not affect positively in what is classified as complicated learning such as language learning. Young (1991) made a study and interviewed language learning experts (for example Rardin, Omaggio Hadley, Terrell and Krashen) about their thoughts about the helpfulness of language anxiety. Rardin answered that there is always a positive aspect of anxiety operating, but that we can only notice it when a negative imbalance happens. Omaggio Hadley responded that in language learning

a certain amount of tension may be useful, although, she refuses to name “anxiety” to that experience. Correspondingly, Terrell decided to use the term “attention” rather than “anxiety” for that tension. Finally, Krashen stated that there can be no helpful aspect to anxiety in language acquisition, which almost by definition demands anxiety to be in level zero, even though he believes helpful anxiety may be present in language tasks in formal language learning situations. Definitely, the researchers still do not agree when it comes to the existence of helpful anxiety (Arnold, 1999).

1.3. Ways to identify language anxiety

As Arnold (1999) explains, sometimes teachers and researchers may be able to deduce language anxiety from the results of tests on general anxiety. Nonetheless, this way of identifying it is not recommended (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993) due to the view researchers have. They believe language anxiety is a specific phenomenon that is preferably assessed directly and individually. A number of instruments exist for the purpose, the best known of which is the ‘Foreign Classroom Language Scale’ or FCLAS by Horwitz (1986). The FCLAS was created to obtain the specific anxiety attitude of a student in a foreign language situation. This concrete instrument combines three related anxieties, communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, but the truth is that it is more than the sum of these parts (Aida 1994; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986). Language anxiety is often effortlessly predictable even without an instrument like the FCLAS. However, as a result of the variety of cultures, behaviors differ, and as explained before, what may seem like anxious behavior in one culture may be considered to be normal behavior in another one. The following points are probably signs of language anxiety according to Arnold (1999):

- General avoidance: ‘Forgetting’ the answer, showing carelessness, cutting class, coming late, arriving unprepared, low levels of verbal production, lack of volunteering in class, seeming unable to answer even the simplest questions.
- Physical actions: Squirming, fidgeting, playing with hair or clothing, nervously touching objects, stuttering or stammering, displaying jittery behavior, being unable to produce the sounds or intonation of the target language even after repeated

practice.

- Physical symptoms: Complaining about a headache, experiencing tight muscles, feeling unexplained pain or tension in any part of the body.
- There are other signs which may indicate language anxiety, determined by the culture: over studying, perfectionism, social avoidance, conversational withdrawal, lack of eye contact, hostility, monosyllabic or non committal responses, image protection or masking behaviors (exaggerated smiling, laughing, nodding, joking), failing to interrupt when it would be natural to do so, excessive competitiveness, excessive self-effacement and self-criticism ('I am so stupid').

1.4. Causes of anxiety

In a situation classified as threatening and beyond one's capacity to manage the threat, anxiety is seen as a natural consequence. Guiora (1983, p.8) stated that foreign language learning is a "profoundly unsettling psychological proposition" due to the threat learners' self-concepts and world-concepts receive, which are not commonly faced when communicating in the individual's native language (as cited in Kralova & Petrova, 2017).

A large amount of foreign language learners seems to have high speaking anxiety and report their insufficient speaking ability as the toughest barrier in foreign language communication (Bila, 2005). They are usually afraid of being humiliated and disapproved as an authority. Sometimes, we can perceive speaking in a foreign language as a "threat to peoples' self-concept, self-identity, and ego, which they have formed in their first language as reasonable and intelligent individuals" (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986, p.125).

MacIntyre (1995) asserts that FLA (foreign language anxiety) is a powerful obstacle to any kind of foreign language learning. However, the controversy whether anxiety is a cause or a consequence of deficient language command still continues.

As regards the main causes of anxiety, many kind of distinctions have been made in this area, but the most common one is the division made between learners' personality and attitudes towards learning, and teaching styles and learning atmosphere.

1.4.1. Learners' personality and attitudes towards learning

There are different individual features that may affect students' anxiety level. According to Hu and Wang (2014), the following lines are focused on the most recurrently quoted ones on the field.

- A. *Self-esteem*: it is seen as a self-judgment of both worth and value, established among feelings of efficacy, that is, a feeling of interacting efficiently with the environment in a concrete situation. If we make a comparison between highly anxious language students, we can conclude that those with high self-esteem may be able to handle their anxiety in a better manner than those who have low self-esteem, the former therefore delivering better performance.
- B. *Introversion*: it is said that since extroverts are normally stereotyped as being outgoing and talkative and, consequently, better in language learning, there is more probability that they participate in an open manner in the classroom and search for opportunities to practice. On the other hand, introverts may be categorized as less astute language learners, since they appear to be too close, too self-restrained. Students who have trouble socializing and are shy, and take the evaluation seriously are considered to be more highly anxious.

Students who have the capacity to indulge moderate levels of confusion and more risk-taking, are less anxious than perfectionist students. Considering language is arbitrary, it is not obligatory to make a connection between words, meaning and pronunciation. Ambiguity is a basis of language, that is why it needs students to take risks throughout the process of learning to deduce the meaning. Students who look for efficiency and perfection usually have higher levels of anxiety.

1.4.2. Teaching styles and learning atmosphere

Teachers' goal is to create a democratic, friendly, relaxed and harmonious learning environment. Students are advised to take controlled risks to learn under a pleasant atmosphere without any force, in which teachers are friendly and there to help because if the teacher is too serious, students might feel nervous and afraid. Besides, teachers should support and cheer students more usually, and should not criticise them as well as they

definitely should not expose them to laughter. Furthermore, teachers need to have a clear objective view about the students and make use of the right strategies to realise their aims.

Students are encouraged to feel relaxed with the use of music, laughter and games and are normally supplied with different styles of class activities such as group activity, cooperative study and research study, as these may help to reduce anxiety among their students.

Likewise, teachers need to use different types of educational situations such as trust situations, success situations while turning passive learning into active, so that students can intentionally participate in the class activities proposed to improve their learning results and language competence. If the environment in class results to be uncomfortable, cold and unhelpful, learning anxiety might more likely arise among the foreign language learners (Hu & Wang, 2014).

2. Studies dealing with specific variables

In the following lines I will introduce the two variables that were analysed in the study, the two most controversial variables in this field.

2.1. Proficiency studies

With respect to proficiency, according to Garau and Marcos Llinás (2009) very few studies have been carried out concerning the differences between anxiety levels and proficiency levels (Ewald, 2007; Kitano, 2001; Sparks & Ganschow, 2007). Gardner et al. (1981), after carrying out their own research, stated that anxiety lessens in students who have more experience and whose proficiency raised.

Additionally, the relationship between FLA and foreign language proficiency continuous being controversial, as FLA and foreign language achievement seem to be “communicating vessels” with causality in either direction (Sparks & Ganschow, 1991; MacIntyre, 1995; Kralova, Skorvagova, Tirpakova & Markechova, 2017).

Lower levels of language anxiety are often associated with higher levels of self-perceived language proficiency (i.e. Santos, Cenoz & Gorter, 2015). These approaches are clearly subjective (Dewaele *et al.*, 2008), because the students who are anxious about using their

languages may underestimate their proficiency, whereas the ones who feel less anxious might overestimate it (MacIntyre, Noels & Clément, 1997). Ewald (2007) suggests that the learners who are more advanced also experienced anxiety throughout their lifetime, although most of them enjoyed their advanced foreign language courses.

Due to the contradictory results on proficiency levels and language anxiety and the deficiency of studies examining this issue until now, we can conclude that this is an issue well worth analysing.

2.2. Gender studies

In the case of gender, we can state that it seems to be an extremely controversial factor. According to Gargalianou, Muelhfeld, Urbig and Witteloostuijn (2015), prior research has repeatedly reported gender differences in language anxiety (i.e., Reid, Keerie & Palomares, 2003). Various studies found men to experience more FLA than women (Campbell & Shaw, 1994; Kitano, 2001), whereas some others documented the opposite (Arnaiz & Guillén, 2012; Donovan & MacIntyre, 2005; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Furnham & Haeven, 1999; Machida, 2001). Still others support that there are no significant gender differences in FLA (Dewaele, Petrides & Furnham, 2008; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004). As a conclusion to this ambiguity, Wang (2010) believes that “unknown variables” (Wang 2010, p. 96) or “unknown factors” (Elkhafaifi, 2005, p. 214) might be able to explain the correlation of gender and FLA.

While gender has become a crucial explanatory variable in sociolinguistic and socio-psychological research (Dewaele, Petrides & Furnham, 2008), studies based on gender differences in FLA have hitherto yielded inconclusive findings which leads to the conclusion that more research is needed in this field.

3. Study

The focus of this study was first to examine the possible differences regarding FLA depending on students' proficiency, and second, the study sought to investigate the relation between anxiety and gender. Due to the low amount of studies made which deal with these variables in FLA, this investigation sought to shed some light on these controversial relationships.

3.1. Sample

A total amount of 44 high school students, 25 female students and 19 male students, participated in the study. Students participated voluntarily and were asked to sign an informed consent form. All names and results were kept confidential. They were students of a high school situated in a town called Elgoibar, in Gipuzkoa and the participants' age ranged from 15 to 17, 22 of them being 15, 19 of them being 16 and two of them 17. A large amount of participants was Spanish (Basque), but there were also other nationalities including one Argentinian and one Moroccan. Based on the learners' last results in an English test carried out at school, they were divided into three main language levels: high proficiency (22), medium proficiency (7) and low proficiency (15).

3.2. Instrument

The questionnaire used in this study was taken from the webpage "Iris Digital Repository" and was created by Dewaele, Franco Magdalena and Saito (2019) (see appendix). Nevertheless, the instrument was modified in order to achieve only the results of the anxiety scale, because the original instrument had another section named enjoyment scale and some extra questions for the background information. The present study, started with the background information section from which the participants' information was retrieved. Following this, the participants were asked to respond to a language anxiety level questionnaire. The questions regarding this matter were the following:

1. Even if I am well prepared for the English class, I feel anxious about it.
2. I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do.
3. I can feel that the other students speak English better than I do.
4. I do not worry about making mistakes in the English class.
5. I feel confident when I speak in the English class.
6. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English class.

7. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation.
8. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class.

To answer all these questions, the participants had a table to complete with the answers, *Strongly disagree, Disagree, Undecided, Agree and Strongly agree*. The fourth and fifth questions were reversed in order to do the study, as their indication of the degree of anxiety is contrary to that of the other questions. As explained before, the questionnaire was used to analyse two different variables regarding anxiety, one of them based on gender and the other on proficiency. For the distinction that needed to be done for the study about proficiency, I decided to create three groups established with their last exam's results. That is why, the participants who got a mark between (0-4.9) were brought together in the low proficiency (LP) group, the students who achieved a (5-7.9) were put in the medium proficiency (MP) group and lastly, the ones who acquired the highest grades (8-10) were gathered in the high proficiency (HP) group.

3.3. Procedure

The students were from three different classes of the same year (last year of secondary school). In order to fulfil the questionnaire, I explained all the questions to the participants as their English level was not good enough to understand the questions in detail and they spent 15 minutes completing the questionnaire.

4. Results & Discussion

In the tables that can be seen below, the percentage of answers for each question were calculated and some of the most remarkable items were analysed. There were eight different questions so as to examine their level of anxiety, the students needed to choose within five possible answers which would determine the amount of anxiety that the participants may suffer from. The possible answers of the questionnaire, from *Strongly disagree* to *Strongly agree* are directly correlated with the level of anxiety, so the more they agree with the questions the higher level of anxiety they might experience.

For the sake of clarity, even though the charts are going to illustrate all the possible choices the participants had when completing the questionnaire, the groups were divided into three, and that can be seen in the figures. The first group was formed by the students who *Strongly Disagree* and *Disagree* as they both revealed a low anxiety level, the second group only included the *Undecided* percentage and the last group combined the participants who *Strongly Agree* and *Agree* because they both disclosed high levels of anxiety. In this study, I will start by analysing the relationship between students' English proficiency and FLA.

4.1. Proficiency results

4.1.1. High proficiency

Table 1: High proficiency results

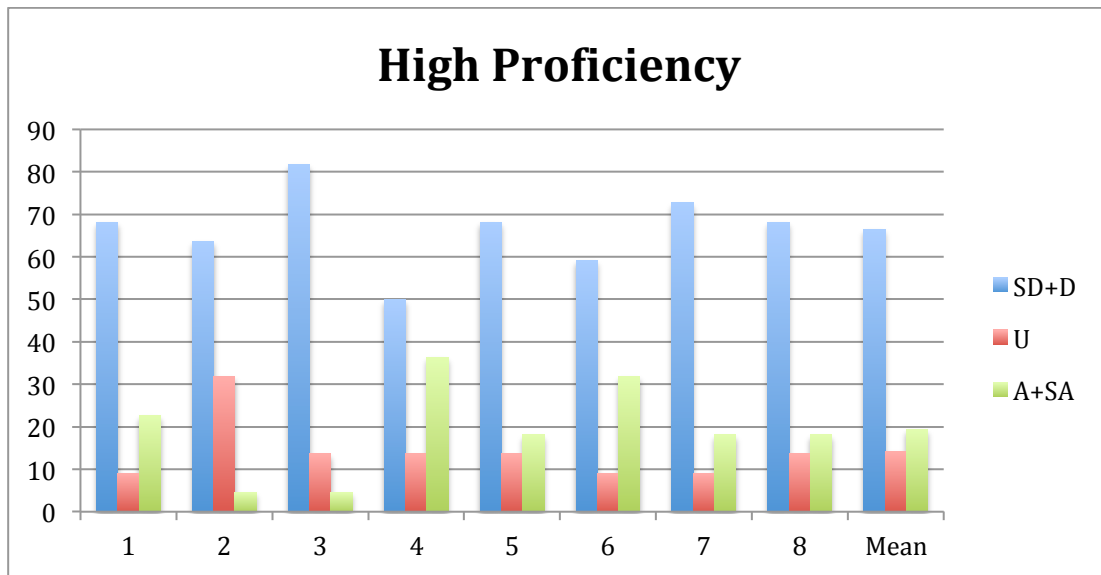
HP (%)	SD	D	U	A	SA
1	36.36	31.82	9.09	22.73	0
2	9.09	54.55	31.82	4.55	0
3	31.82	50	13.64	4.55	0
4	13.64	36.36	13.64	22.73	13.64
5	13.64	54.55	13.64	9.09	9.09
6	4.55	54.55	9.09	22.73	9.09
7	18.18	54.55	9.09	9.09	9.09
8	18.18	50	13.64	13.64	4.55
Mean	18.18	48.29	14.20	13.63	5.68

According to the average of the high proficiency students group, it can be observed that the average percentages of the answers in the table are really high in the *Strongly disagree* option (18.18 %), and much more on the *Disagree* one (48.29 %), with makes a total of 66.3 %, a percentage that can be considered to be really high. And not even the 20 %

(19.2 %) of the answers agree with the statements we gave related to anxiety. Besides, it could be considered that the amount of *Undecided* answers is not remarkable, as it is only 14.2 %.

Moreover, if we take a look to Figure 1, there is a clear high response in *Strongly Disagree* + *Disagree* that can be related to low anxiety among high proficiency students. Whereas the *Undecided* responses are low and the *Agree* ones even lower. The items that show the most significant difference in this figure are the third and the seventh. These items reveal that high proficiency students do not tend to feel their heart pounding when they are called on in a foreign language class and also that they do not normally start to panic when they need to speak in the foreign language in class.

Figure 1: Average results among high proficiency students



4.1.2. Medium proficiency

Table 2: Medium proficiency results

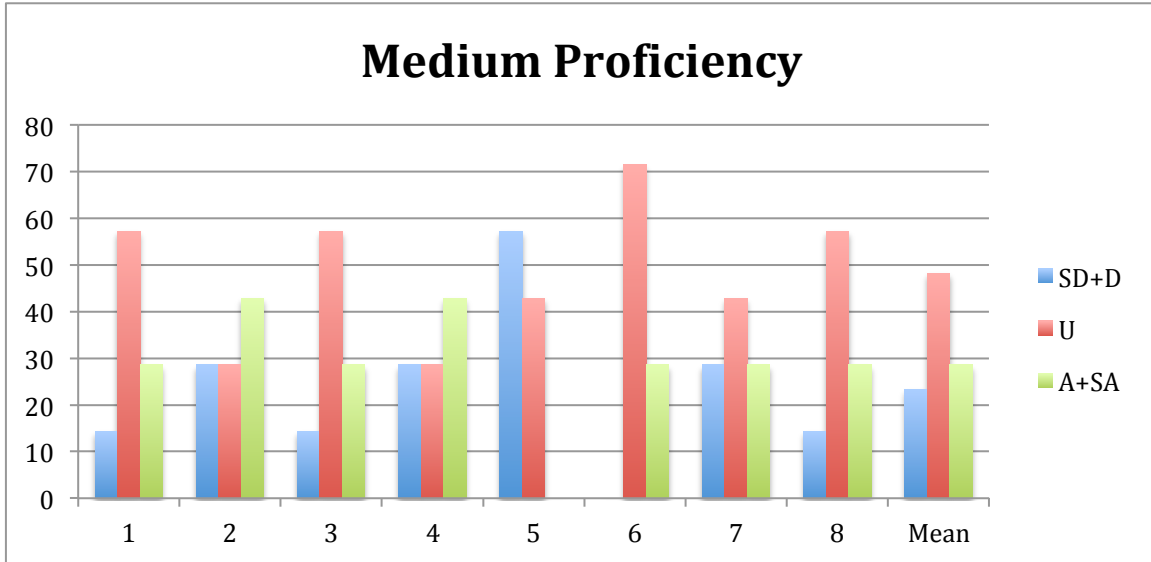
MP (%)	SD	D	U	A	SA
1	0	14.29	57.14	28.57	0
2	0	28.57	28.57	42.86	0
3	0	14.29	57.14	28.57	0
4	0	28.57	28.57	42.86	0
5	0	57.14	42.86	0	0
6	0	0	71.43	28.57	0
7	0	28.57	42.86	28.57	0
8	0	14.29	57.14	28.57	0
Mean	0	23.21	48.21	28.57	0

The table above is about the students who were in the medium proficiency group, whose results reveal that the average percentages of the answers are inexistent in the *Strongly Agree* and *Strongly Disagree* (0 %) options, and that the *Disagree* (28.57 %) and *Agree* (28.57 %) choices have practically the same value. However, it is worth noting that the highest percentage is observed in the *Undecided* (48.21 %) option.

Figure 2 below shows that the undecided category is predominant in five out of the 8 items, which is why it is also predominant when obtaining the mean of the anxiety category. The only two items where the other two options are more popular are items two and four. Besides, the items that can be highlighted because of their high percentage in the *Undecided* ones are the third, the sixth and the eighth. A cause of this may be the fact that the uncertainty level of the students who belong to this group is considerably high. Moreover, the third item shows that the medium proficiency students do not have a clear idea when deciding whether their heart pounds or not when they speak in the English class. Additionally, according to item six, they are also not quite sure about their nervous feeling and confusion

when speaking in the foreign language class. And finally, they do not also have a clear view of their embarrassment level when volunteering in class.

Figure 2: Average results among Medium proficiency students



4.1.3. Low proficiency

Table 3: Low proficiency results

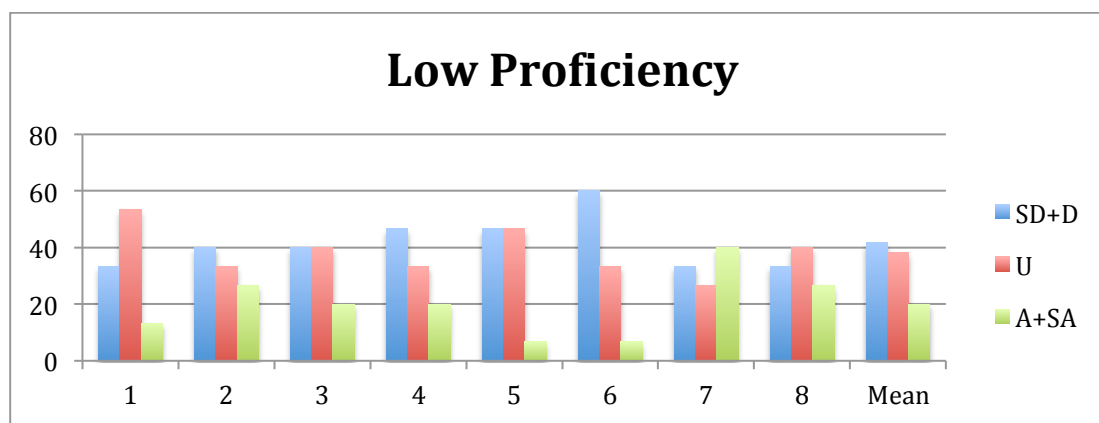
LP (%)	SD	D	U	A	SA
1	0	33.3	53.33	13.33	0
2	13.33	26.67	33.33	26.67	0
3	13.33	26.67	40	20	0
4	0	46.67	33.33	13.33	6.67
5	6.67	40	46.67	6.67	0
6	13.33	46.67	33.33	6.67	0
7	20	13.33	26.66	40	0
8	13.33	20	40	20	6.67
Mean	9.99	31.66	38.33	18.33	1.66

To finish with, in the low proficiency students' results, the high percentage of both the *Disagree* (31.66 %) and the *Strongly disagree* options (9.99 %) is remarkable. As in the case of the high proficiency students' results, in this table we can observe that between the *Agree* (18.33 %) and the *Strongly Agree* (1.66 %) ones, the total amount does not even reach 20%. Likewise, the group of students who chose *Undecided* is rather high (38.33 %).

Additionally, Figure 3 shows that by converting the five groups into three, the differences between them are less evident. The addition of the *Agree and Strongly Agree* options happen to obtain the lowest percentages, whereas the *Undecided* and the *Strongly Disagree + Disagree* options are the most popular ones and are very close to each other among Low proficiency students.

Regarding the individual items where more outstanding differences are found, the most remarkable ones are the first item, which shows a high percentage of *Undecided* students, and the sixth item that shows a high percentage of *Disagree* choices. The first one reveals that low proficiency students do not have a clear thought on whether they feel anxious or not even if they are prepared for a foreign language class. Besides, the sixth item shows that low proficiency students do not tend to get nervous and confused when they are speaking in English. To finish with, the fifth item has a really interesting result, as the *Undecided* and *Disagree* percentages are basically the same, which means that a quite high percentage of students who have a low proficiency level feel confident when they speak in English in class and another pretty high percentage is not sure whether they feel confident or not.

Figure 3: Average results among Low proficiency students



4.2. Gender results

4.2.1. Female

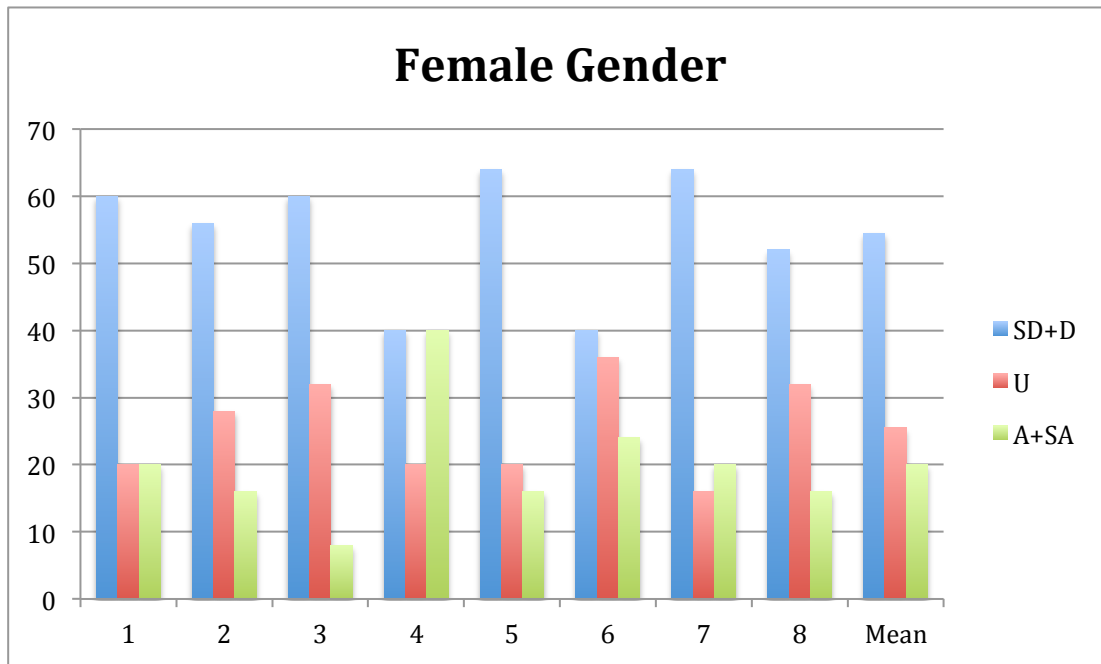
Table 4: Female participants' results

FG (%)	SD	D	U	A	SA
1	28	32	20	20	0
2	12	44	28	16	0
3	20	40	32	8	0
4	12	28	20	32	8
5	8	56	20	8	8
6	4	36	36	20	4
7	12	52	16	12	8
8	12	40	32	16	0
Mean	13.5	41	25.5	16.5	3.5

To start with, concerning the female participants who took part in the study, a high percentage of them did not agree with the statements presented in the questionnaire: *Disagree* (41 %) and *Strongly Disagree* (13.5 %). Besides, only 20 % of the female students agreed with the items: *Agree* (16.5 %) and *Strongly Agree* (3.5 %), whereas the amount of *Undecided* answers was higher and reached 25.5 %.

What's more, in the graphic below we can clearly observe that a large number of female students does not agree with the statement which indicates that their anxiety is low. The group *Strongly Agree* + *Agree* is much smaller and is followed by the *Undecided* one. Items 5 and 7 are the ones that show the most significance difference in Figure 4. These items reveal that female students tend to feel confident when speaking in English in class and that also they do not have a tendency to start to panic when they have to speak without any preparation.

Figure 4: Results of Female participants by item (3 categories)



4.2.2. Male

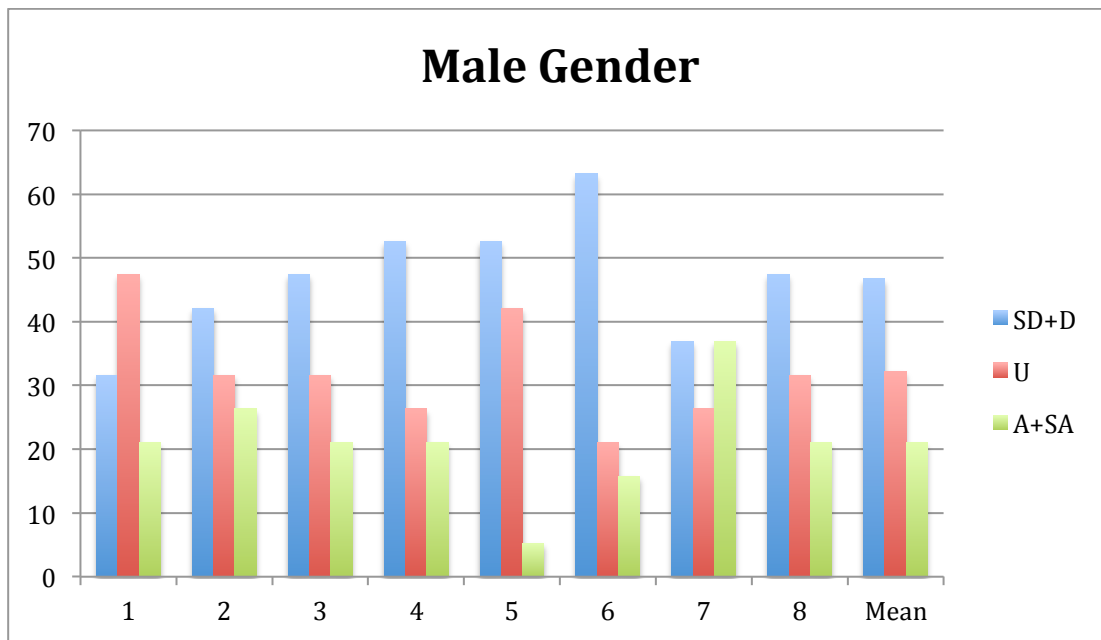
Table 5: Male participants' results

MG (%)	SD	D	U	A	SA
1	5.26	26.32	47.37	21.05	0
2	5.26	36.84	31.58	26.32	0
3	21.05	26.32	31.58	21.05	0
4	0	52.64	26.32	10.53	10.53
5	10.53	42.11	42.11	5.26	0
6	10.53	52.64	21.05	10.53	5.26
7	21.05	15.79	26.32	36.84	0
8	15.79	31.58	31.58	21.05	0
Mean	11.18	35.53	32.23	19.07	1.97

Additionally, in the male students' results (Table 5 above) we are able to observe that the majority of them have either gone for the *Strongly Disagree* (11.18 %) or *Disagree* (35.53 %) option. And just as in the female participants' average, in the male students' percentages only 20 % agreed with the questions: *Agree* (19.07 %) and *Strongly agree* (1.97 %), whereas the *Undecided* percentage is 32.23 %.

Likewise, the items that need to be highlighted in Figure 5 are the fourth, fifth and sixth ones. The fifth one shows that male participants do not normally worry about making mistakes in foreign language class and the fifth one explains that they tend to feel confident when they speak in class. Besides, the sixth one, which has the highest percentage of all, reveals that male students do not tend to get nervous and confused when they speak in the foreign language class.

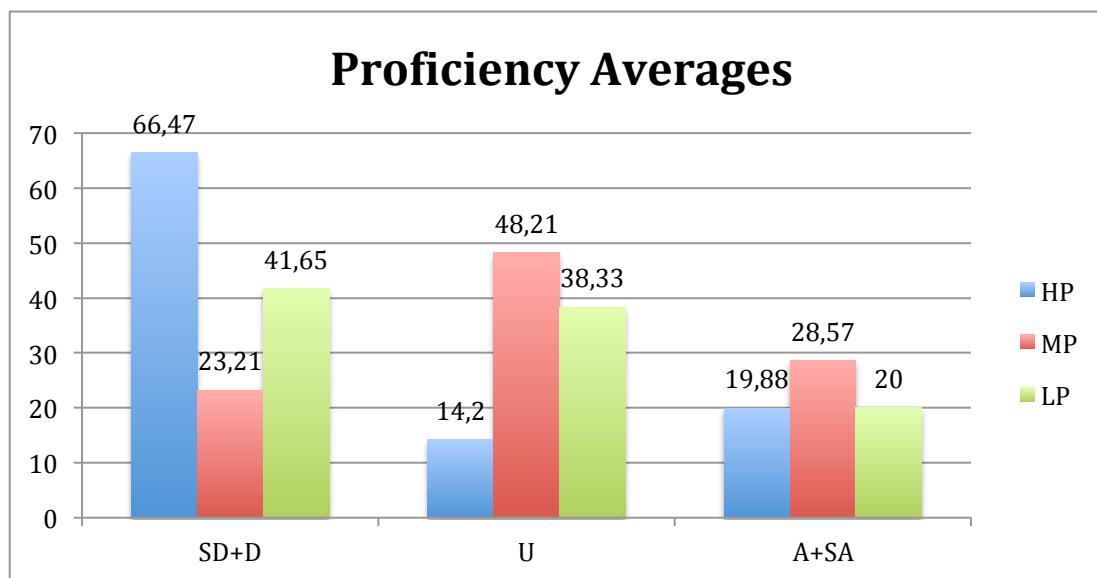
Figure 5: Results of Male participants by item (3 categories)



4.3. Differences between the groups

4.3.1. Proficiency differences

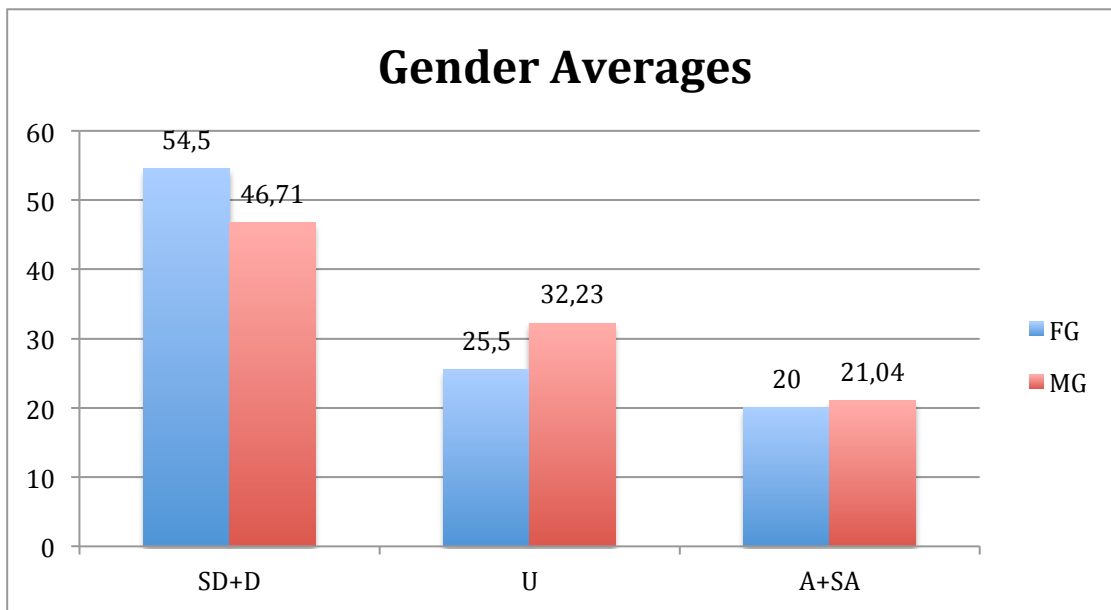
Figure 6: Differences between the different proficiency groups



The proficiency averages reveal the real differences between the three proficiency groups. To start with, it is outstanding that the high proficiency group is the one that shows the lowest level of anxiety, while the one that agrees more is the medium proficiency group, consequently being the group that has the highest level of anxiety. Besides, the low and medium proficiency groups have a high amount of answers within the *Undecided* category, which means that they would be in the middle of the anxiety continuum, although there is a difference of 10 % between them. Lastly, the average of the *Agree + Strongly Agree* category strikingly shows that there is a similar percentage of students who acknowledge to feel anxious in the English class. Since the language competence differences between these two groups are obvious, this is a question to be addressed in the conclusions. It is important to highlight that 1 out of 5 students, irrespective of their competence, feel anxious when it comes to speaking in English, which means that teachers should take into account the great variability among students irrespective of their English command.

4.3.2. Gender differences

Figure 7: Differences depending on gender



Despite the fact that the differences in Figure 7 may be considered not too outstanding, once the five different options are turned into three, we can observe some differences between the female and male participants' results, although in both of them those who disagree are clearly the majority.

The female group has more or less 8 % more participants than the male group who do not feel anxious in the foreign language classroom. Moreover, there is a difference of 7 % in the *Undecided* choice with the Male group scoring higher in the scale. And to finish with gender differences, there is a slight difference of 1 % between both groups in the option *Agree + Strongly agree*, which allows us to conclude that no large differences are found in this category. All in all, the level of anxiety is a bit higher among the male students.

4.4. Discussion

This study examines the possible differences of language anxiety across proficiency levels, likewise, it also analyses the connection between language anxiety and gender.

On the one hand, in regard to the first variable, the group that has the highest level of anxiety is the medium proficiency one, results that do not concur with previous studies such

as the ones by Llinás and Garau (2009) and Kitano (2001). The study by Llinás and Garau (2009) concluded that the higher the language proficiency level, the higher the anxiety levels, the same as the study by Kitano (2001) which found significant differences among beginners and advanced learners of Japanese in terms of anxiety. The first difference between their study and mine is the amount of students who participated in it is much bigger in both of them (more than 130) and, more importantly, the fact that the participants were university students. Therefore, the age of the participants may be one of the variables that needs further attention when analysing FLA, as differences may be found when comparing secondary education and university students.

Llinás and Garau (2009) mentioned that one explanation to the statement “the higher the proficiency level, the higher the anxiety levels” may be the fact that lower level students needed to study Spanish as a mere requirement, while the advanced ones took Spanish as their major or minor. For the higher proficiency levels, learning the foreign language was clearly more than a requirement they needed to fulfil because they had it as major and this may have an impact, whereas in my study all students had English as a compulsory subject.

As is the case in the present study, in Llinás and Garau (2009) the high proficiency group was the less anxious, whereas the most striking result is that the medium proficiency group turns out to have higher levels of anxiety than the low proficiency group, which does not coincide with any of the studies made before in this field.

On the other hand, when it comes to the second variable, gender, we can see some differences in the results but there seems to be little differences between both groups. These results coincide with the study of Marzec-Stawiarska (2014) because it did not show statistically significant differences between both groups. The results of the studies by MacIntyre (2002) and Matsuda and Gobel (2004) also match with the present study as they did not observe any statistically significant gender-related differences.

5. Conclusion

The results of previous studies (Llinás & Garau, 2009; MacIntyre, 2002) seem to indicate that proficiency and gender are relevant variables and that their connection with anxiety needs to be examined in depth.

In the case of proficiency, previous studies have reached different conclusions. With reference to the present study, the high proficiency students' results show that they have great confidence, as a very little amount of them suffer from anxiety (19.8 %), whereas the majority of them agree on not having anxiety in their English classes (66.4 %). Therefore, it can be concluded that those students who have high marks are less likely to be negatively affected by anxiety. However, 20 % still suffers from anxiety and this is something that teachers should bear in mind when deciding how to manage the feelings of the students who have reached a high proficiency level, as not all of them behave in the same way.

What's more, medium proficiency students have the highest level of anxiety as reflected by this study: this might be due to the pressure they feel about passing the subject, as in the end, they are people who tend to be in the borderline between pass and fail. Consequently, the high proficiency students tend to have a more developed knowledge and confidence, whereas the medium proficiency students do not. This may be the reason why the percentages of those who chose the Undecided option are really in the low and medium proficiency groups.

Strikingly, the low proficiency students have a low anxiety level, similar to the high proficiency students' percentage, but in my opinion this could be the answer to the bad attitude of the students who do not normally pass and may not really care about what is going on in the English class. In any case, this hypothesis needs more research.

I believe that people who feel more anxious, in this study, the medium proficiency group students, need extra motivation and confidence to suffer less from anxiety and to perform better in their foreign language learning classes. This could also be applied to the people in the low proficiency groups, as they need extra motivation to confront the classes and change their attitude towards the foreign language. Likewise, self-esteem has a great importance in this area too, and the teacher should try to encourage the students, concretely

the ones who are in the borderline so that they feel more secure and more willing to participate in their English classes.

With respect to the pedagogical implications to be drawn from this study, I would like to highlight the following. Teachers should aim at creating a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere in their everyday class environment, as this could help all the students to feel in a better mood and may help to decrease their feelings of anxiety. There is a general agreed idea between educators that the most important motivational strategies are related to teachers adopting appropriate teacher behaviours, to the enthusiasm showed for the job, and to being good professionals and creating good relationships with their students (Lamb *et al*, 2017). Besides, Padwad and Dixit (2017, p.151) state “teacher motivation and learner motivation are intrinsically and fundamentally linked to each other in mutually consolidating or damaging relationships”.

Additionally, there are some highly valued strategies across all contexts examined so far, which are promoting learners’ self-confidence and selecting and presenting tasks effectively (Lamb *et al*, 2017). Nevertheless, recent works (i.e. Bernaus & Gardner, 2008) have concluded that the relationships between teachers’ motivating strategies and their learner responses turn out to be extremely complex, which is why there are no simple recipes.

When it comes to the question of whether anxiety happens to be helpful or harmful, this study was not able to answer it, because we would have needed interviews to delve into this question. In any case the results prove that every individual is different and as mentioned above, there are a lot of variables that affect each one in a different manner, starting with the personality and attitude of the learner and continuing with the class atmosphere, teachers’ behaviour, and so on. Furthermore, in my opinion, future investigations should analyse whether language anxiety facilitates foreign language learning and leads to higher levels of proficiency, or language anxiety undermines it and leads to lower levels of foreign language learning.

Finishing with the results of the gender groups, it could be concluded that no significant differences were found between female and male participants in this study. All in all, the

level of anxiety is basically the same in both groups, which seems to indicate that teachers should not take any special strategy to deal with students' anxiety because of their gender.

The limitations of the present study were various and because of that, I believe that in future investigations the assessment of language anxiety should include the use of interviews, discussion groups and/or personal diaries, as this would allow researchers to obtain some qualitative information to contrast with the scores on the different scales. Likewise, the results should be interpreted with caution due to the problematic nature of using course grades as a measure of achievement. It is crucial to mention the fact that for the studies to be more generalizable and significant, the amount of participants should be increased: the higher the number, the better.

To conclude, people should not talk about a single best way to learn a foreign language, because in the end, each learner will react in a different manner to the language learning environment using their language skills, language-learning experience, personality traits, affective factors, learning strategies, and personal circumstances. Nevertheless, language teachers should guide learners to find their own voice in the foreign language and on how to learn the foreign language and its culture through a general understanding of the important role emotions play in a pleasant foreign language learning experience.

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7. Appendix

QUESTIONNAIRE: Learning foreign languages and anxiety

This research is being conducted as part of a study on foreign language acquisition and anxiety carried out at the University of the Basque Country. This study wants to explore the relationship between proficiency and anxiety in the English as a foreign language classroom. Both participants and their teachers will remain totally anonymous.

The analysis of the questionnaire data will be written up for a final degree project. You will not be identifiable in the write up or any publication which might ensue, and any names of people will be deleted.

Many thanks for your participation!

Jone Iturricastillo Aizpuru (jiturricastill001@ikasle.ehu.eus)

I have been informed about the nature of this study and willingly consent to take part in it. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time. Tick the box _____

Background Information

1. Age:

2. Gender:

Female	Male	Other
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3. Nationality:

4. What is your attitude towards English?

1 Very unfavourable	2 Unfavourable	3 Neutral	4 Favourable	5 Very favourable
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5. What was the result on your last English language test from 1 to 10?

As you respond to the following items, think about your current English class

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Choose only ONE of the following options for each question: *Strongly disagree (SD)* / *Disagree (D)* / *Undecided (U)* / *Agree (A)* / *Strongly agree (SA)*

	<i>SD</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>SA</i>
1. Even if I am well prepared for the English class, I feel anxious about it.					
2. I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do.					
3. I can feel my heart pounding when I am going to be called on in the English class.					
4. I do not worry about making mistakes in the English class.					
5. I feel confident when I speak in the English class.					
6. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English class.					
7. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in the English class.					
8. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class.					

Thank you for your cooperation!

Jone Iturricastillo