

# The Impact of Language Anxiety on Foreign Language Acquisition

**Autor:** Moreno Cánovas, Isabel (Graduada en Estudios Ingleses).  
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## Abstract

The potential of anxiety to interfere with learning and performance is one of the most accepted phenomena in psychology and education. Furthermore, language anxiety has proved to be one of the strongest predictors of second language success. There is a large body of research that has investigated foreign language anxiety in instructional settings which contributes to help teachers mediate the effects of anxiety through particular instructional practices. The aim of the present article is to shed light on the role that language anxiety plays in instructional second language settings to improve the quality of the teaching-learning process.

**Keywords:** second language learning, foreign language anxiety, instructional settings, individual differences, empirical research

**Título:** El Impacto de la Ansiedad en la Adquisición de Lenguas Extranjeras.

## Resumen

El potencial de la ansiedad para interferir en el aprendizaje y actuación es uno de los fenómenos más aceptados en psicología y educación. Se ha demostrado que la ansiedad es un potente indicador del éxito en el aprendizaje de segundas lenguas. Hay un gran cuerpo de investigación sobre la ansiedad en contextos formales que contribuye a ayudar a los profesores a mediar sus efectos a través de prácticas concretas. El objetivo de este artículo es arrojar luz sobre el papel que juega la ansiedad en contextos formales de aprendizaje de segundas lenguas para mejorar la calidad del proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje.

**Palabras clave:** Aprendizaje de segundas lenguas, ansiedad por lenguas extrajeras, enseñanza formal, diferencias individuales, investigación empírica.

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## INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that the task of learning a new language is frequently a profoundly unsettling psychological proposition and, therefore, interferes with language learning. Indeed, the effects of foreign language anxiety can compromise the learning potential of the FL learner, wreck the best teaching techniques and render the most attractive material inadequate. Therefore, the study of this particular individual factor has meaningful instructional implications since, if we manage to understand the ways in which language anxiety develops, we should be in a better position to control its negative effects and to find methods to improve the quality of the teaching-learning process.

The review of the literature available indicates that foreign language anxiety has been investigated by different theoretical frameworks, which results in a variety of empirical approaches to conceptualise and approach this construct. The studies reviewed in the present article conceptualise the construct of foreign language anxiety as a situation-specific anxiety which is exclusive of foreign language learning and, therefore, independent of other general types of anxieties. What follows is a review of the theoretical and empirical literature available on the mediating role of language anxiety in second language acquisition.

## RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Early research on language anxiety used instruments from educational research to measure anxiety, resulting in inconsistent and mixed results. However, a fruitful line of inquiry on foreign language anxiety has been conducted since Scovel's (1978) literature review, who considered this construct distinguishable from other more general anxieties. After Scovel, the study conducted by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) was the first to propose anxiety as a phenomenon specific to the situation of language learning and their article gave rise to meaningful studies that have attempted to shed light on the role of language anxiety on the process of learning and instruction. In their article, they also made a significant

contribution to the study of language anxiety since they developed a scale to measure this particular construct, the FLCLAS. In fact, this scale has been the most widely used instrument in empirical research dealing with foreign language anxiety.

The question of how anxiety mediates the effects of instruction has been addressed in two ways in the body of research reviewed here. On the one hand, it is addressed as a social process, thereby examining whether or not anxiety influences the quantity and quality of the learner's participation and interaction in the classroom. Studies in this line of research have been carried out to investigate the relationship between anxiety and classroom participation. On the other hand, it is addressed as a cognitive process, in this case investigating the effects of language anxiety on the learner's ability to process input and output. Moreover, MacIntyre (2002) defended the idea that anxiety affects the different stages of the learning process and addressed anxiety as a cognitive process. According to this author, if learners experience anxiety, they would be less able to process input and to make connections between new and existing knowledge.

In general, studies dealing with the effects of anxiety on instruction have considered foreign language anxiety as a distinct construct specific to the process of language learning. Furthermore, the majority of the body of research available has focused on the negative impact of anxiety when it is conceptualised as a situation specific construct. Increasingly, there has been a significant body of research designed to investigate the effects as well as the correlates of foreign language anxiety in instructional settings. In addition, there is a large body of research that has investigated the relationship between language anxiety and performance in the foreign language. Furthermore, the majority of the literature on language anxiety has been focused on the relationship between this construct and the speaking skill. However, later research has also focused on the investigation of other skills in relation to language anxiety like writing and reading.

#### **EFFECTS OF ANXIETY ON ENJOYMENT AND MOTIVATION**

Regarding enjoyment, the study carried out by Dewaele & MacIntyre in 2014 revealed that there is a negative correlation between Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCAS). In other words, individuals who reported higher levels of FLE also reported lower levels of FLCAS. This suggests that enjoyment and anxiety are two related but different and independent dimensions or emotions.

In the case of motivation, data analysis revealed that different types of foreign language motivation were significantly associated to foreign language anxiety subscales (Khajavy & Khodadady, 2013). That is, students who have different reasons for studying and learning English have a different level and type of anxiety. Results showed that lack of motivation is significantly correlated to language anxiety. That is, students who were learning English to obtain some external benefits or to avoid reprimands reported communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and a negative attitude towards the English class. On the other hand, results indicated that intrinsic motivation was negatively correlated to language anxiety. In other words, students who were learning English for personal relevant purposes experienced less anxiety in comparison to those who learned English for some external pressure.

The study carried out by Khajavy and Khodadady (2013) revealed that motivation has an indirect influence on FL achievement through anxiety. In fact, amotivation and introjected regulation were found to be two major predictors of FL anxiety. This means that amotivated students experience more anxiety and therefore, are less proficient in English. In sum, amotivation and, consequently, anxiety have a negative effect on students learning languages.

#### **CORRELATION BETWEEN ANXIETY AND THE LANGUAGE SKILLS**

Regarding the relationship between anxiety and the reading skill, results reveal that the levels of reading anxiety depended on the specific target language due to the specific writing system. Results also indicated that foreign language reading anxiety increased with the perceived difficulty of reading in the foreign language (Cheng, 2002; Cheng, Horwitz & Schallert, 1999; Garza, Horwitz & Saito, 1999).

Regarding the writing skill, findings suggest that perceived FL writing competence predicts L2 writing anxiety better than L2 writing achievement does. It was also found that writing anxiety was significantly correlated with English class anxiety in general. Results also indicated that L1 writing anxiety is different from L2 writing anxiety. That is, as in the case of foreign language reading anxiety, the levels of writing anxiety also depend on the specific writing system of each target language (Cheng, 2002). The same conclusion was reached by Cheng, Horwitz & Schallert (1999); who found that foreign

language classroom anxiety was related to foreign language writing anxiety but they were independent constructs. In other words, foreign language anxiety was found to be a more general type of anxiety about learning a language with a strong speaking anxiety element while writing anxiety, as well as reading anxiety, is a language-skill-specific anxiety.

Woodrow (2006) found a considerable negative relationship between second language speaking anxiety and oral performance. These results suggest that anxiety has a negative effect on oral communication for English learners. These findings were also consistent with previous research in the area (Horwitz, 2001; Aida, 1994; Oxford, 2005; MacIntyre & Gardner, 2002).

## **FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY**

Several studies have also been conducted to shed light on the antecedents of anxiety like the number of languages acquired, foreign language mastery, education levels, age, learning styles, self-perception and perfectionism.

Regarding the number of languages acquired, the study carried out by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) indicated that the number of languages being studied has an effect on FLE and FLCA since participants who were studying more languages reported lower levels of FLCA and higher levels of FLE. Findings also showed that high intermediate and advanced participants reported higher levels of FLE than lower-intermediate and intermediate participants, demonstrating that foreign language mastery also has an effect on FLE.

In the case of age and academic achievement, these authors obtained results consistent with the study conducted by Bailey, Daley and Onwuegbuzie (1999a). Both studies demonstrated that FLE increases significantly across education levels and age. In fact, teenagers showed lower scores on FLE than participants in their twenties, thirties and forties. However, this was not the case with FLCA, since teenagers present the highest levels of anxiety followed by informants in their twenties. In sum, findings showed that individuals who know more languages, who have a higher proficiency in the foreign language, who feel more competent than their peers, who have a higher level of education and who are older reported higher scores on FLE and reported significantly lower scores on FLCA.

In relation to particular learning styles, Bailey, Daley and Onwuegbuzie (1999b) concluded that just two learning style variables contributed meaningfully to the prediction of foreign language anxiety: responsibility and peer-orientation. It was found that students who are not responsible in completing assignments and who prefer to learn by their own score higher levels of foreign language anxiety. This finding, thus, provided weak support to the hypothesis of an overall correlation between learning styles and foreign language anxiety.

Findings also indicated that self-perception was significantly correlated with foreign language anxiety (Bailey, Daley & Onwuegbuzie, 1999a; Clément, MacIntyre & Noels, 1997). These authors found that foreign language anxiety, perceived L2 competence and actual L2 competence were intercorrelated. Therefore, consistent results with previous studies were obtained in the sense that anxiety negatively correlated with both actual and perceived competence in the L2. That is, students who score high levels of anxiety tend to underestimate their ability while less anxious students tend to overestimate it.

In addition, Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) also found a strong correlation between foreign language anxiety and perfectionism. They found that anxious students had more perfectionist tendencies than non-anxious learners. In fact, anxious students reported higher standards for their English performance, a greater tendency toward procrastination, greater concern about others' opinion and a higher level of concern over their errors. In another study, Wörde (2003) found that students' major sources of anxiety were the following: speaking activities, inability to comprehend, negative classroom experiences, fear of negative evaluation, native speakers, methodology, pedagogical practices and the teachers themselves. Woodrow (2006) also found that giving oral presentations and performing in front of classmates and teachers were the most anxiety-producing factors while group discussions were rated the lowest.

## **CONCLUSION**

Anxiety is quite possible the affective factor that most pervasively obstructs the learning process. The literature available on foreign language anxiety has helped us to reach a better understanding of the role that anxiety has when learning a language in instructional settings. Although there are cases in which anxiety does not have a negative impact on learning, the majority of the body of research has shown anxiety to be debilitating. In this respect, findings indicate that there is a negative correlation between anxiety and enjoyment and motivation. It has also been demonstrated that anxiety

affects all the different stages of the learning process and other studies have demonstrated the existence of language-skill-specific anxieties. Furthermore, several studies have also been conducted to shed light on the antecedents of anxiety that demonstrate empirically that factors like the number of languages acquired, foreign language mastery, education levels, age, learning styles, self-perception or perfectionism have an influence on language anxiety.

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