

ANXIETY REACTIONS OF EFL STUDENTS TOWARD IN-CLASS ACTIVITIES AND INSTRUCTORS' PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND BEHAVIORS

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This study examined the anxiety reactions of EFL students toward in-class activities and instructors' personal characteristics and behaviors. No statistically significant difference between the groups of students was found regarding their perceptions of anxiety as generated by the activities. However, statistically significant differences in the amount of anxiety perceived by students were found between activities that demanded oral performance in front of the class and small group work activities or activities that did not demand high student self-exposure. Students reported that their English teachers lessened their language anxiety by preparing the classes well, and by establishing a warm social environment in the classroom. Finally, students commented that they felt that their language anxiety increased when their instructors created a threatening atmosphere in the classroom.

For many years second/foreign language teachers have been puzzled by the finding that some learners acquire a foreign language easily, while others struggle and learn it with great difficulty. Affective variables, including anxiety, attitudes, and motivation have been suggested as possible explanations of the difficulties learners experience with a foreign language. Among the affective variables, anxiety has received the greatest attention in the past few years. Language anxiety is defined as "the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning" (MacIntyre and Gardner 1994: 248).

The pervasive role that anxiety plays in learning another language has long been recognized by second language researchers and educators. Krashen (1982) and Krashen and Terrell (1983) claimed that anxiety is one of the main contributors to the affective filter, a kind of mental block which prevents learners from fully utilizing second language input for acquisition purposes. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) argued that anxiety negatively affects all stages

of language learning: the input stage, the processing stage, and the output stage. Teachers and students strongly believe that anxiety is a major obstacle in learning a foreign language and some fairly recent approaches to second language teaching, such as suggestopedia and the natural approach, explicitly aim at reducing learners' levels of anxiety.

Early research on the effect of language anxiety on foreign language learning produced mixed and conflicting results (e.g., Backman 1976, Chastain 1975, Gardner, Smythe, Clément and Gliksmann 1976, Kleinmann 1977, Tucker, Hamayan and Genese 1976, Swain and Burnaby 1976). In his review of anxiety research, Scovel (1978) attributed the discrepant findings at least in part to the inconsistency of anxiety measures used and concluded: "It is perhaps premature to relate it [anxiety] to the global and comprehensive task of language acquisition" (p. 132).

In the last few years, advances in theory and measurement have brought about more productive research into foreign language anxiety (see MacIntyre and Gardner 1991, Young 1991 for reviews of anxiety research). Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). Moreover, they proposed a model of foreign language anxiety wherein this construct is seen as a distinct phenomenon arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process. The model underlies three interrelated performance anxieties: 1) communication apprehension, 2) test anxiety, and 3) fear of negative evaluation.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) developed a model of foreign language anxiety similar to that of Horwitz et al. (1986). The model comprises two independent factors: general anxiety and communicative anxiety. Communicative anxiety is said to bear a relationship to two components of the Horwitz et al. model, namely communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation. However, test anxiety, the other component of this model, is said to be related to the general anxiety factor, but not to the communicative one. MacIntyre and Gardner claimed that test anxiety is a general problem and not one that is specific to the language classroom context. Within their model, foreign language anxiety is viewed as the cause of poor performance in the foreign language, which in turn increases state anxiety.

In the last two decades, research on language anxiety has broadened its scope to include learners' beliefs about language learning (Horwitz 1988), the relations among anxiety, L1, and L2 learning aptitude (Sparks and Ganschow 1991), the role of language anxiety on students' biases in their self-ratings of second language proficiency (MacIntyre, Noels and Clément 1997), the effect of instructional practice on student comfort (Koch and Terrell 1991, Price 1991, Young 1990), and teacher-student interactions (Young 1990).

Young (1990) explored the relationship of twenty in-class activities to foreign language anxiety from the students' perspective. She found that four of the five activities that generated the highest levels of anxiety were speaking-oriented activities that require high student exposure. These included: "Present a prepared dialog in front of the class," "Make an oral presentation or skit in front of the class," "Speak in front of the class," and "Role play a

situation in front of the class.” Speaking-oriented activities which do not demand a high degree of exposure were reported as making informants neither anxious nor relaxed. These included: “Repeat individually after the instructor,” “Interview each other in pairs,” and “Speak individually with the instructor in his/her office.” These results led Young to conclude that students experience the highest levels of anxiety when they have to speak or perform in front of others.

Additionally, Young looked at the instructors’ personal characteristics and behaviors that students felt reduced their anxiety levels. She found that the majority of students reported that instructors who were friendly, patient, relaxed, and had a good sense of humor lessened their anxiety. Students also felt that instructors reduced foreign language anxiety by not overreacting to mistakes, by helping them realize that everybody makes mistakes, by promoting group work, and by letting them volunteer answers instead of calling on them to provide responses.

Koch and Terrell (1991) examined which activities and techniques of the natural approach Spanish classes were rated by students as enjoyable, and which ones were perceived as anxiety-producing. They discovered that the anxiety-provoking activities in the natural approach classes were: “Oral presentations in front of the class,” “Oral skits and role playing,” “Defining words in Spanish,” “Oral quizzes,” “Being called on to speak,” and “Working in large groups” (seven to ten students). In contrast, activities rated as enjoyable by large numbers of students were: “Preference ranking,” “Interviews,” “Figuring out what does not belong on a list of items,” “Working with maps and other realia,” and “Creating charts and schedules.”

Price (1991) found that speaking in front of their peers was the greatest source of anxiety of all her ten anxious subjects: “They all spoke of their fears of being laughed at by the others, of making a fool of themselves in public” (p. 105). Other sources of anxiety reported by the students were their concern about making pronunciation errors when using the target language, the frustration of not being able to communicate effectively, and the perceived difficulty of their language classes. She also found that subjects’ beliefs may be a major cause of anxiety. Most of the subjects believed that others were better than them at learning languages. They held the view that learning a foreign language requires a special aptitude, an aptitude they believed they did not possess. In addition, subjects felt that instructors would reduce their levels of anxiety by behaving more like friends and less like authoritarian figures, by encouraging them to make mistakes, and by helping them develop more realistic expectations.

The present study extended the investigation of the anxiety reactions of EFL students toward a set of in-class activities and instructors’ personal characteristics and behaviors. It addressed four research questions:

1. To what extent do basic students, EFL preservice teachers, and adult-night school students differ in their perceptions of anxiety as generated by a set of thirty-two EFL in-class activities?

2. To what extent do the anxiety levels generated by the activities differ from each other?
3. Which instructors' personal characteristics and behaviors are perceived by students as anxiety-reducing?
4. Which instructors' personal characteristics and behaviors are perceived by students as anxiety-increasing?

METHOD

Participants

157 EFL students of three different educational levels in the state of Trujillo, Venezuela, participated in this study. 111 of the students were from different basic schools (37 seventh graders, 46 eighth graders, and 28 ninth graders); 21 of the students were from an adult-night school; and 25 of the students were preservice EFL teachers at the Universidad de los Andes (Trujillo) with widely varied proficiency levels.

Materials

A questionnaire, written in the Spanish language to avoid potential problems with students not comprehending the propositions and questions, was used to collect the data. The questionnaire was a modified version of Young's (1990) and consisted of two sections. The first section consisted of thirty-two EFL in-class activities (see Appendix), each with a blank space before it for students to rate the anxiety level the activity generated in them. The set of activities was by no means either exhaustive or reflective of any particular foreign language teaching approach. A five-point Likert-like scale ranging from "ninguna" (none), "muy poca" (very little), "poca" (little), "considerable" (considerable), to "mucha" (very much) was used to rate perceived anxiety. Thus, possible scores for each activity ranged from 1 ("ninguna") to 5 ("mucha"). Subjects were instructed to omit their rating if a particular activity had not been presented in their classroom in the semester or school year in which the study was conducted to minimize potential carryovers from previous experiences.

The second section of the questionnaire consisted of four open-ended questions. The first question asked students to specify instructors' personal characteristics that tended to reduce their levels of anxiety. The second asked students to indicate those characteristics that were felt to produce the opposite effect. The third question dealt with the things English teachers did to reduce students' anxiety, while the fourth asked students to describe what instructors did that increased their anxiety levels. For each question, sufficient blank space for students to write their responses was provided. Students were advised to respond in Spanish to allow for as much elaboration as possible.

Students were allowed to complete the questionnaire at home, and were urged to do it honestly for their responses would be anonymous. To ensure full comprehension by the subjects, the researcher used very common words

throughout the questionnaire, particularly in those cases where confusion or ambiguity were likely to occur. For example, the words “ansiedad” (anxiety) and “nerviosismo” (nervousness) were used as synonymous.

RESULTS

Anxiety ratings of EFL in-class activities

To address the first research question, a 95% confidence interval for the group mean on each activity was computed. These confidence intervals were then plotted and analyzed. They showed that there was not a statistically significant difference between the groups of basic school students, EFL preservice teachers, and adult-night school students regarding their perception of the anxiety level generated by the set of thirty-two EFL in-class activities.

A 95 % confidence interval was also used to address the second research question. This time, however, the confidence interval for the mean of all students combined on each activity was considered in the analysis. The confidence intervals were plotted in Figure 1.

Figure 1 below reveals that the eight activities that generated the highest levels of language anxiety were speaking-oriented activities that demand high student exposure. These activities were: Activity 17 “Interview a classmate or another person and report on the interview orally,” activity 7 “Role play a situation or a dialog voluntarily in front of the class,” activity 3 “Answer oral questions out of a dialog or another text,” activity 32 “Make an oral presentation or skit in front of the class,” activity 12 “Create a dialog working in pairs and act it out in front of the class,” activity 14 “Describe a picture orally in English,” activity 11 “Participate voluntarily in debates in English,” and activity 31 “Read individually after the teacher.” The confidence intervals for these activities overlapped, which means that they did not statistically significantly differ from each other.

Additionally, Figure 1 reveals that the six activities that generated the least amount of language anxiety involve little or no risk of exposure by students. These activities were: Activity 15 “Listen to an English song having the words to it,” activity 9 “Sing as a class an English song,” activity 13 “Work in groups of three or four,” activity 23 “Repeat in chorus after the instructor,” activity 30 “Compete by teams in games developed by the instructor,” and activity 8 “Work in pairs to create a short story in English.” These activities did not statistically significantly differ from each other either. However, as can be seen in Figure 1, the confidence intervals for these two clusters of activities did not overlap, which indicates that students perceived the former cluster of activities as statistically significantly more anxiety-provoking than the latter cluster. We computed effect sizes for the differences between the amount of anxiety generated by these activities. The obtained effect sizes ranged from as low as .42 standard deviation units between activities 11 and 8 to as high as 2.11 standard deviation units between activities 17 and 15. These effect sizes are, respectively, moderate and very large (Cohen 1988).

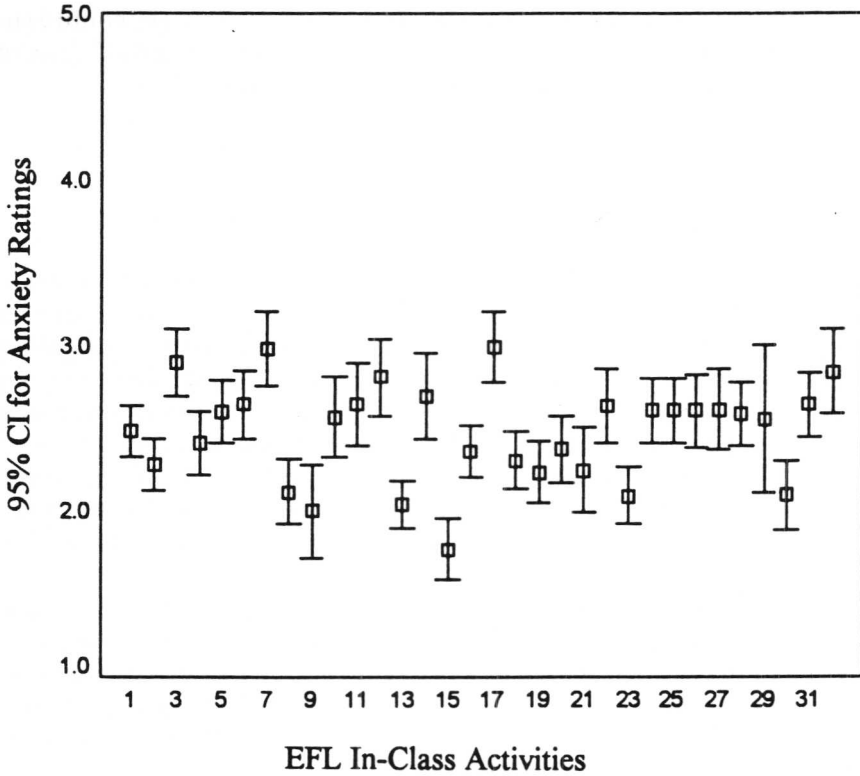


Figure 1
95% CONFIDENCE INTERVALS FOR ANXIETY RATINGS
BY ACTIVITY

Another interesting finding was the low mean ratings for all in-class activities. Overall mean ratings ranged from 1.77 for activity 15 to 3.00 for activity 17. This result suggests that the students did not seem to experience high levels of anxiety when engaged in any of the activities surveyed in this study. This finding is particularly encouraging given the deleterious effect that anxiety plays in the acquisition of foreign languages.

Instructors' personal characteristics and behaviors

To consider the last two research questions, a procedure similar to that of Young (1990) was used. If a comment appeared more than twice, it was considered for tabulation, and formed a comment item. Conversely, if a comment appeared only once or twice, it was discarded for it might have simply represented an individual student idiosyncrasy. To further simplify the analysis, roughly similar comments were embraced under a broad category; for example, comments such as "speak in front of the class," "write answers on the

blackboard,” “present a dialog in front of the class,” and “take an oral exam” were placed under the category “students were put on the spot.” Due to the nature of the analysis of this section, only overall students’ comments were reported and discussed.

The number of responses to the questions varied considerably. There were 120 responses to the first question, 99 to the second, 144 to the third, and 141 to the fourth. Interestingly, comments such as “ninguna” (none) or “nada” (nothing) were common responses across groups. Again, the number of such comments varied from question to question: 8 for the first question, 29 for the second, 10 for the third, and 22 for the fourth.

Student responses to the first question, displayed in Table 1, revealed that the instructors’ personal characteristics reported as anxiety-reducing by the greatest number of the students were the following: friendly (44.17% of the students); good sense of humor (20.00%); and make students feel comfortable (15.83%).

Table 1
STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION
ON INSTRUCTORS’ PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS THAT
REDUCE STUDENTS’ ANXIETY

<i>Personal Characteristics</i>	<i># of Comments</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Friendly	53	44.17
Good sense of humor	24	20.00
Makes students feel comfortable	19	15.83
Understanding	6	5.00
Explains subject matter well	6	5.00
Patient	4	3.33
Smiles	4	3.33

Student responses to the second question, summarized in Table 2, indicated that 32.32% of the students felt that EFL instructors increased foreign language anxiety by being bad-tempered. 11.11% of the students reported that instructors raised language anxiety by being sarcastic. Other instructors’ personal characteristics cited by students as anxiety-provoking were authoritarian (8.08% of the students); serious (7.07%); demanding (4.04%); and insecure (4.04%).

Responses to the third question revealed that 16.54% of the students felt that instructors helped reduce language anxiety by preparing the class well. 9.77% felt that encouraging them to participate in class was anxiety-decreasing. A similar number of students believed that instructors alleviated their foreign language anxiety by telling jokes in class. 9.02% of the students felt that instructors helped lower language anxiety by not putting them on the spot (see Table 3).

Table 2
STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION
ON INSTRUCTORS' PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS THAT
INCREASE STUDENTS' ANXIETY

<i>Personal Characteristics</i>	<i># of Comments</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Bad-tempered	32	32.32
Sarcastic	11	11.11
Authoritarian	8	8.08
Serious	7	7.07
Demanding	4	4.04
Insecure	4	4.04

Table 3
STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION
ON INSTRUCTORS' ACTIVITIES THAT REDUCE
STUDENTS' ANXIETY

<i>Activities</i>	<i># of Comments</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Prepare the subject matter well	22	16.54
Encourage students to participate in class	13	9.77
Tell jokes in class	13	9.77
Speak to students friendly	12	9.02
Do not put students on the spot	12	9.02
Smile	10	7.52
Promote group work	7	5.26
Do not overreact to students' mistakes	4	3.01
Promote in-class games	3	2.26

Finally, almost half of the students (47.51%) reported that instructors increased their anxiety levels by putting them on the spot. 14.18% of the students felt that exams were anxiety-provoking, while 11.35% of the students felt that instructors raised their language anxiety by making them feel stupid when they made a mistake (see Table 4).

DISCUSSION

Previous research on language anxiety has suggested that students with markedly different proficiency levels tend to rate their language anxiety differently (e.g., Gardner, Smythe and Brunet 1977, Saito and Samimy 1996, Young 1990). However, the results of this study indicated that students, regardless of their proficiency in English, shared similar perceptions regarding the anxiety level generated by the in-class activities surveyed in this study.

Table 4
STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION
ON INSTRUCTORS' PERSONAL ACTIVITIES THAT
INCREASE STUDENTS' ANXIETY

<i>Activities</i>	<i># of Comments</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Put students on the spot	67	47.51
Exams	20	14.18
Make students feel stupid when they make a mistake	16	11.35
Pop quizzes	5	3.55
Speak so fast that students cannot understand them	4	2.84
Speak English all the time	4	2.84

The results of this study support those of Koch and Terrell (1991), Young (1990), and Price (1991). They showed that students across groups became more anxious when they had to speak English in front of their peers. However, their language anxiety significantly decreased when they engaged in small group work or in activities that did not demand high student self-exposure. Interestingly, however, the low overall mean anxiety ratings across groups suggest that the students in this study felt relatively relaxed and comfortable in their English classes even when they had to perform in front of their peers.

Student responses to instructors' personal characteristics and behaviors provide valuable insight into what can be done to help reduce foreign language anxiety in class. Consistent with the results of Price (1991) and Young (1990), students commented that their English instructors helped them reduce their language anxiety by preparing the classes well, by encouraging students to participate in class, by being friendly, and by having a good sense of humor. Thus, foreign language instructors need not avoid asking students to perform in front of the class as long as they promote a warm social environment in the classroom.

Further, student responses to instructor personal characteristics and behavior shed light on the potential sources of language anxiety in class. Students reported that they felt their language anxiety increased when their English teachers created a threatening atmosphere in the classroom by asking them to perform in front of the class; by making them feel stupid when they made an error; and by being bad-tempered, sarcastic, and authoritarian.

Foreign language teachers must be sensitive to the negative effects of anxiety on the language learning process. They need to be informed on how students react to different EFL classroom activities and to their personal characteristics and behaviors. A comprehensive knowledge in these areas will probably make them more effective teachers. This study was an attempt to contribute to the building of such knowledge.

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APPENDIX

CUESTIONARIO

Sección I

ACTIVIDADES EN LAS CLASES DE INGLÉS

1. Responder en forma escrita preguntas escritas extraídas de los textos.
2. Recibir explicaciones gramaticales en inglés.
3. Responder en inglés preguntas orales de un diálogo u otro texto.
4. Leer silenciosamente en clase algún material en inglés.
5. Escribir un párrafo en inglés a partir de preguntas orales o escritas.
6. Responder en forma escrita preguntas orales en inglés.
7. Dramatizar voluntariamente en inglés una situación o diálogo frente a tus compañeros.
8. Elaborar en pareja una pequeña historia en inglés.
9. Cantar en grupo una canción en inglés.
10. Entrevistar en inglés a un compañero de estudio y ser entrevistado por éste.
11. Participar voluntariamente en debates en inglés.
12. Elaborar un diálogo en pareja y representarlo frente a tus compañeros.
13. Trabajar en grupos de tres (3) o cuatro (4).
14. Describir una lámina oralmente en inglés.
15. Escuchar una canción en inglés en el aula teniendo la letra de la canción.
16. Buscar en un diccionario el significado en castellano de algunas palabras en inglés.
17. Reportar oralmente en inglés los resultados de una entrevista a un compañero de clase o a otra persona.
18. Realizar los ejercicios en tu libro de inglés en el aula de clases.
19. Escribir una composición en inglés en casa.
20. Realizar en grupo un resumen oral en inglés del material leído.
21. Resolver crucigramas en inglés preparados por el profesor.
22. Formular preguntas orales en inglés a un compañero de clases.
23. Repetir en coro después del profesor.
24. Escribir tus respuestas en la pizarra.
25. Cambiar vocablos y estructuras de un diálogo por otros que expresen la misma función comunicativa.
26. Memorizar una oración asignada del texto presentado.
27. Tomar dictados en inglés.
28. Repetir individualmente después del profesor.
29. Recibir explicaciones en castellano de aspectos gramaticales del inglés.
30. Competir por equipos en juegos diseñados por el profesor.
31. Leer individualmente después del profesor.
32. Presentar un relato corto en inglés frente a tus compañeros.

Sección II
CARACTERÍSTICAS PERSONALES Y CONDUCTAS DE TU(S)
PROFESOR(ES) DE INGLÉS

1. ¿Cuáles características personales de tu(s) profesor(es) de inglés reducen tu nerviosismo en sus clases?
2. ¿Cuáles características personales de tu(s) profesor(es) de inglés aumentan tu nerviosismo en sus clases?
3. ¿Cuáles de las cosas que hace(n) tu(s) profesor(es) de inglés reducen tu nerviosismo en sus clases?
4. ¿Cuáles de las cosas que hacen tu(s) profesor(es) de inglés aumentan tu nerviosismo en sus clases?