

Foreign Language Anxiety among EFL learners in Manabí

Luis Leandro Alcívar Cedeño.

E- mail: luisl.alcivar@pg.ulead.edu.ec

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6013-7686>

Universidad Laica Eloy Alfaro de Manabí, Ecuador

Lic. Cintya Maribel Zambrano Zambrano, Mgs.

E- mail: cintya.zambrano@uleam.edu.ec

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0129-9134>

Universidad Laica Eloy Alfaro de Manabí, Ecuador

Abstract

The present study examines the relationship between foreign language anxiety and academic achievement among university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. This context is particularly relevant given the increasing reliance on online education, which introduces new challenges and opportunities that may influence learners' emotional experiences. A mixed-methods design was employed in order to obtain both quantitative and qualitative insights into students' levels of anxiety and their perceptions of the learning environment. A mixed-methods design was employed in order to obtain both quantitative and qualitative insights into students' levels of anxiety and their perceptions of the learning environment. Quantitative data were collected using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), a widely validated instrument developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), while qualitative data were obtained through open-ended survey responses. A total of 168 undergraduate students participated in the study. The results revealed a moderate overall level of anxiety ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 0.91$), with the majority of students reporting moderate (58.9%) and high (33.3%) levels of anxiety. Item-level analysis indicated that communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation were the most significant sources of anxiety. The study highlights the importance of

implementing pedagogical strategies that address learners' emotional needs, foster supportive learning environments, and reduce anxiety-related barriers to participation and performance.

Introduction

Over the past several decades, the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has undergone a significant transformation, evolving from a predominantly structural and grammar-focused discipline into a multifaceted area of study that considers cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions of learning. Early approaches to language teaching emphasized the acquisition of grammatical rules and vocabulary, often neglecting the role of affective variables in shaping learners' experiences. However, contemporary research has demonstrated that emotional factors, such as motivation, attitudes, and anxiety, play a crucial role in determining the success of language learning (MacIntyre et al., 2020; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).

Among these affective variables, foreign language anxiety (FLA) has received considerable attention due to its pervasive impact on learners' performance and engagement. Foreign language anxiety is defined as a situation-specific form of anxiety that arises in contexts where individuals are required to use a language that is not their native language, particularly in situations involving communication, evaluation, and interaction with others (Horwitz et al., 1986). This type of anxiety is characterized by feelings of tension, nervousness, apprehension, and self-doubt, which can significantly interfere with the learning process.

One of the most important aspects of foreign language anxiety is its multidimensional nature. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), FLA consists of three primary components: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Communication

apprehension refers to the fear or discomfort associated with speaking in the target language, especially in front of others. Fear of negative evaluation involves concern about being judged, criticized, or evaluated unfavorably by peers or instructors. Test anxiety relates to the stress and nervousness experienced during examinations and assessments.

The impact of foreign language anxiety on cognitive processes has been extensively documented in the literature. Anxiety has been shown to interfere with attention, reduce working memory capacity, and hinder the retrieval of linguistic information (Li, 2022; Zhang, 2022). When learners experience anxiety, their cognitive resources are divided between managing their emotional state and performing the language task. As a result, they may struggle to concentrate, process information effectively, and produce accurate language output. This cognitive interference often leads to lower performance, even among learners who possess adequate linguistic competence.

In addition to its cognitive effects, foreign language anxiety also has important behavioral consequences. Students who experience high levels of anxiety often adopt avoidance strategies, such as refraining from participating in class discussions, avoiding eye contact, or choosing not to volunteer answers. These behaviors limit opportunities for practice and interaction, which are essential for language development. Over time, this lack of engagement can lead to slower progress, reduced confidence, and lower academic achievement (Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2021).

A substantial body of research has demonstrated a negative relationship between foreign language anxiety. Meta-analyses have consistently found that higher levels of anxiety are associated with lower performance in language tasks and assessments (Teimouri et al., 2019;

Botes et al., 2022; Saito et al., 2023). These findings highlight the importance of addressing emotional factors in language education, as they can significantly influence learning outcomes.

The social dimension of foreign language anxiety is another critical aspect that must be considered. Language learning is inherently a social process that involves interaction with others, including teachers and peers. In this context, learners are often concerned about how they are perceived by others, particularly when they are required to speak or perform in front of an audience. The fear of making mistakes, being corrected, or being judged negatively can lead to increased anxiety, especially in environments where evaluation is emphasized.

In recent years, the increasing use of virtual learning environments has introduced new challenges and complexities to the study of foreign language anxiety. Online education has become more prevalent due to technological advancements and global circumstances, offering flexibility and accessibility to learners. However, these environments also present unique challenges that may exacerbate anxiety. One of the most significant challenges associated with virtual learning is the increased sense of exposure that learners may experience. The use of cameras and microphones can make students feel more self-conscious, particularly when they are aware that they are being observed by others. This heightened self-awareness can intensify feelings of anxiety, especially for learners who lack confidence in their language abilities (Hampel & Stickler, 2021; Wang & Zhan, 2020).

Despite the growing body of research on foreign language anxiety, there is still limited evidence focusing specifically on virtual EFL contexts in Latin America, particularly in Ecuador. This gap in literature highlights the need for context-specific research that considers the unique characteristics and challenges of these environments. Specifically, the study aims to determine the levels of anxiety in foreign language learners in Manabi and it is guided by the following

research questions that are essential to the process of the study: what are the trends of foreign language anxiety in EFL learners?, what is the state of the dimensions of anxiety in the participants?, what are the trends of the dimensions of anxiety related to the factor age?, and what are the trends of the dimensions of anxiety related to the factor sex?

Literature Review

Second Language Acquisition

Learning a new language involves physical, cognitive, social and psychological changes throughout the process where those areas are interconnected and influenced during different stages of the learning process. In addition, acquiring a second language is a significant aspect of the mother tongue that can impact cognitive and social interactions obtaining meaningful and essential results. (Vigotsky, 1978). Second Language Acquisition known as “SLA” is a comprehensive and progressive process in which successful learners are required to balance their cognitive abilities with environmental demands aside from sociocultural factors operate through mechanisms such as mediation, cognitive restructuring, and identity negotiation, and they play an active role in shaping the linguistic development of learners and enhancing their intercultural communicative effectiveness. (Park, et al. 2025).

The long-standing debate in SLA concerning whether language development is primarily driven by innate linguistic mechanisms or by postnatal experience has gained renewed relevance in contemporary foreign language learning contexts. Different research show an analysis that demonstrates acquired environmental factors and exhibit clear explanatory advantages over innate factors under criteria of explanatory coverage, empirical consistency, and pedagogical

intervenability. (Kim, 2025). The findings suggest that while innate capacities delimit the boundaries of language learning, environmental input is acquired that plays the central and actionable role in shaping EFL development.

Furthermore, SLA is a multi-layered process encompassing linguistic, cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions. Axmedova & Abduraxmanova (2025) in their paper concludes that no single theory fully explains SLA; instead, an integrative, interdisciplinary understanding is necessary to account for the diverse pathways through which learners develop second language competence. Simultaneously, the differences between acquisition that can be defined as an unconscious, natural process driven by meaningful communication, and learning that is composed by a conscious process involving explicit rule knowledge. In this aspect many authors has developed different theories and methodologies to study those characteristics, such as Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis that further contends emotions such as anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence can facilitate or impede the intake of comprehensible input, which is why he advocates low-stress, engaging, and meaning-focused classrooms. (Krashen, 1988).

The application of the SLA has become a pivotal area of research within applied linguistics, focusing on how structured pedagogical methods impact the ability of pupils to acquire a second language known as L2. Many Theories like Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis where learners acquire language in only one way, by understanding messages that are slightly beyond their current level of competence emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input and language slightly beyond the learner's current proficiency, while Swain's Output Hypothesis stresses that producing language compels learners to process it at a deeper level and notice gaps in their knowledge. The opportunities for learners to negotiate

meaning, ask questions, and receive feedback led to more vigorous acquisition, supporting task-based and focus-on-form approaches within communicative classrooms (Quin, 2026).

Characteristics of SLA

It is evidenced that two main theories has been making an enormous impact on the educational area where the input and output of a second language has been the foremost subject to study in order to obtain better strategies and methods to incorporate a foreign language into different classes or institutions which wants to improve their natural curriculum. The first one is the Input hypothesis that outlines five distinct characteristics, asserting that the unconscious mind, located in our memory, plays a crucial role in the formation and evolution of our native language as well as the learning of additional languages over our lifetime, on condition that we receive appropriate stimuli. It is declared “The Input Hypothesis is the central part of an overall theory of second language acquisition that consists of five hypotheses” (Krashen, 1985:1). At the same time, the output is not just the result of learning; it is a necessary condition for developing accuracy, consistency, and fluency, especially at the beginning of the learning process. This hypothesis contains three main functions that are explained as the recognition of linguistic problems related to the constant exposure of the target language, the construction of a well-formed ability in students, and the control and internalization of the new language (Swain, 1995).

Second language acquisition is characteristically multidimensional, shaped by interacting linguistic, cognitive, psychological, socio-cultural, and technological factors rather than by any single mechanism. Different research have consistently treated learner languages as an interlanguage consisting of a systematic, dynamic, and variable system that develops over time and differs from both the first and target languages. Besides, SLA is empirically organized

around multiple linguistic levels, such as morphosyntax, semantics, phonetics or phonology, and the four skills defined as speaking, listening, writing, reading, often using psycholinguistic or neurophysiological methods such as eye-tracking and self-paced reading to trace processing in real time. Across studies, a recurrent finding is that comprehensive input, meaningful interaction, learner output, motivation, corrective feedback, cognition, and learning context jointly contribute to successful L2 development, while individual differences for instance, aptitude, working memory are instinctively helping explain why learners progress at different rates and to different endpoints (Kholoud, 2026). Over the past decades, research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has shifted from a purely cognitive perspective to a more comprehensive approach that integrates emotional and psychological variables as central components of the learning process. Within this framework, foreign language anxiety has emerged as a key factor that can either hinder or facilitate language learning depending on how it is managed in the classroom.

Foreign Language Anxiety

Foreign language anxiety, known as FLA, is widely recognized as a substantial affective factor involved in the acquisition of a foreign language, being a factor undermines cognitive performance, motivation and retention in pupils of a second language. Scovel (1978) stated that anxiety is a cornerstone of individual differences research in applied linguistics, being the first research to accomplish the term “anxiety” inside the world of the education and the different strategies that were applied during that time. Then, many studies were conducted in order to specify the FLA until the definition and concept it is recognized nowadays. It is characterized as a contextually grounded and dynamic construct, with distinct research moving toward person-centered methodology, cross-cultural and task-specific examinations that combine constructs that highlights the feeling of shame, guilt and imposter phenomenon. (Huang and Liu, 2025). In the

article it is highlighted that FLA arises from the interaction of the student, the classroom and several task factors in the same perspective.

Foreign language speaking anxiety enhanced apparent through dynamic connections between internal weaknesses and external contextual situations, rather than from any single cause. In his research, Khoirunnisa, et al. (2025), referred to the social-affective factors were the most frequently reported triggers, that underscoring the centrality of interpersonal evaluation, peer dynamics, and identity-related concerns in speaking situations. These anxiety triggers are linked to observable behavioral manifestations as the main features involved in this aspect, which includes speech disruption, avoidance, affective and physiological responses, technology-mediated adaptations, and cognitive interference, and it is suggested that speaking anxiety not only reflects emotional states but also constrains real-time communicative performance.

Characteristics of FLA

Inside the conceptualization of how FLA is compelled, it is described that it involves several characteristics that creates the main scenarios where students can be identified to be struggling with this phenomenon. Features such as apprehension feeling, self-doubt and tension during the L2 performance in the different skills are visible in students who are going through this issue. In the study conducted by Yang and Li is explained how the lack of a strong emotional state not only impede a correct performance but also it is associated with broader physiological distress that includes a low self-esteem and disruptive behaviors. (Yang & Li, 2025). A great variety of research have been developed to be able to identify different characteristics of FLA, “dynamic methods offer valuable insight into language anxiety, as they capture individualized patterns that are invisible in cross-sectional or group-level research. By showing how anxiety

evolves across days within a single learner, the study highlights the fundamentally person-specific and temporally structured nature of language anxiety” (Botes. et al, 2025).

Effects on the acquisition of a foreign language

Many authors has described the immediate effects on FLA in learners, as Luo (2026) determined in his study, FLA can be divided into four major categories described as emotion regulation, cognitive restructuring, skill building and classroom environment, used to build up many strategies and activities to reduce interventions and get better-quality results in students from different educational backgrounds. Simultaneously, many studies has indicated that the common causes of speaking anxiety on students include the fear of making mistakes, as well as shyness and fear of teacher’s negative techniques of error correction, in addition, the fear of the reaction of their classmates to their participation, and remarks on the lack of good preparation, aside from the lack of speaking practice in the target language. (Alamri & Qasem, 2024).

Online Education and FLA

Furthermore, the lack of non-verbal communication clues in online environments can make interactions more difficult and less natural. In face-to-face settings, learners can rely on gestures, facial expressions, and body language to support communication and interpret meaning. However, in online contexts, these cues are often limited or absent, which can increase uncertainty and anxiety. cognitive overload and speaking anxiety are major barriers in EFL, and that multimedia-assisted and AI-enhanced environments can increase speaking anxiety when designed with cognitive-affective principles. (Qi, 2026).

Technological issues also contribute to anxiety in virtual learning environments. Problems such as unstable internet connections, audio or video malfunctions, and unfamiliarity

with digital platforms can create additional stress and frustration. These challenges can disrupt communication, hinder participation, and negatively affect learners' confidence. While not exclusively about online education, it synthesizes evidence that FLA is linked to working memory, attention, and processing efficiency, which are especially relevant in multimedia and online learning environments where cognitive load is high (Gullan. et al, 2025).

Methodology

This study adopts the naturalistic paradigm and the quantitative approach that incorporates a descriptive component. On one hand, it seeks to determine the trends of foreign language anxiety among EFL learners in Manabi. On the other hand, it explores the state of anxiety in four dimensions. This methodological framework is particularly suitable for the objectives of the study, as it allows for both breadth and depth analysis. It acknowledges the complexity of foreign language anxiety as an affective variable and provides a comprehensive lens through which it can be examined.

The hermeneutic dimension of this study allows for a deeper exploration of learners lived experiences, particularly in relation to how they perceive and interpret anxiety in virtual learning environments. Rather than reducing anxiety to numerical scores alone, this approach recognizes that learners' emotions are influenced by their beliefs, prior experiences, self-perceptions, and interactions with others. Therefore, understanding anxiety requires not only measuring its intensity but also interpreting its meaning within specific educational contexts.

In addition to the interpretive framework, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach. This methodological choice is based on the recognition that complex educational phenomena such as foreign language anxiety cannot be fully understood through a single type of data.

Quantitative methods provide measurable and generalizable insights into the levels and distribution of anxiety, while qualitative methods offer depth and context, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of learners' experiences through the data obtained during the process of the study.

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 168 English Foreign Language (EFL) learners in diverse modalities. The participants were selected using a convenience sampling method, as they were readily accessible to the research team. The participants range in age range from 18 to 25 years old and represented a variety of academic disciplines, including business administration, engineering, education, social sciences and others. Participation in the study was voluntary, and they were informed about the aim of the research before providing their consent. No incentives were offered, and participants were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential during seven years following the APA ethics norms.

Instruments

The instrument used to collect data is:

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). – The instrument developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). The 33 items are designed to assess three main dimensions of foreign language anxiety: (1) Communication apprehension, (2) Fear of negative evaluation, and (3) Test anxiety. Each item is rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate higher levels of anxiety. The FLCAS is one of the most widely used instruments in SLA research and has been validated across different contexts and

populations. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.89 indicates a high level of internal consistency, confirming that the instrument is reliable for measuring foreign language anxiety in this context. The administration of the instrument used a Google Form. Researcher team used a questionnaire in both English and Spanish to ensure participants comprehension and accuracy. Data was collected through Google format online, which was distributed to participants via institutional communication channels. Students were given a period of two weeks to complete the instrument.

Procedure

The research began in September of last year. During the research module, the main idea was developed due to the lack of research of this type in Ecuador and in response to the issues raised during class. The first draft was based on in-person classes and endorsed by several faculty members and support staff throughout this process; however, there was a very important issue to address online classes and after several discussions with various people, the current focus of this study was established, centered on FLA and its impact on EFL learners.

Subsequent to selecting the topic, students from ULEAM University, ESPAM University, and EF Education First were chosen to serve as the study sample. The sample was selected based on the type of qualitative and quantitative research required, as well as the feasibility of conducting the surveys and the information that could be obtained during the analysis of that data. In addition, various tools were used to obtain essential information previously agreed upon for the study. It was also decided to use FLCAS with the various individuals selected from the different institutions chosen for this process; therefore, these tools were integrated structurally into the methodologies applied throughout the research.

Ultimately, the information obtained through the FLCAS is a platform for collecting statistical and specific data based on the various dimensions of anxiety and how these characteristics affect the results that are used to arrive at a general representation of the sample and to analyze the various findings in this study.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data was conducted in two main phases: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative data is a descriptive statistics were calculated, including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions. These measures provided an overview of the levels of foreign language anxiety among participants. The analysis also included the examination of the three dimensions of anxiety separately, allowing for a more detailed understanding of the specific sources of anxiety. In addition, researchers obtained the Chi square of Pearson using SPSS version 26.

Results

The quantitative analysis of the data collected through the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) revealed that foreign language anxiety is a significant and widespread phenomenon among the participants. The overall mean anxiety score was $M = 3.27$ ($SD = 0.91$), indicating a moderate level of anxiety across the sample.

In terms of distribution, most participants reported moderate to high levels of anxiety. Specifically, 58.9% of students fell within the moderate anxiety range, while 33.3% reported high levels of anxiety. Only 7.7% of participants were classified as experiencing low anxiety.

These results suggest that foreign language anxiety is not limited to a small group of learners but rather affects the majority of students in the virtual learning environment.

Descriptive Statistics of FLCAS Items

A detailed analysis of the 33 items of the FLCAS was conducted to identify specific sources of anxiety. Table 1 presents the mean scores, standard deviations, and interpretation for each item.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of FLCAS Items (n = 168)

Item	Mean	SD	Interpretation
1	3.82	0.91	High
2	4.01	0.88	High
3	2.63	0.95	Moderate
4	3.47	0.92	Moderate
5	3.91	0.87	High
6	2.71	0.90	Moderate
7	3.58	0.93	High
8	2.54	0.89	Moderate
9	3.76	0.94	High
10	3.80	0.90	High
11	3.65	0.91	High

Item	Mean	SD	Interpretation
12	3.72	0.95	High
13	3.68	0.92	High
14	3.83	0.88	High
15	3.79	0.91	High
16	2.69	0.93	Moderate
17	3.88	0.89	High
18	3.52	0.94	High
19	3.61	0.92	High
20	3.86	0.90	High
21	3.55	0.96	High
22	3.70	0.91	High
23	3.84	0.88	High
24	3.92	0.87	High
25	3.95	0.86	High
26	3.89	0.89	High
27	3.77	0.92	High
28	3.81	0.90	High
29	3.60	0.93	High
30	3.73	0.91	High

Item	Mean	SD	Interpretation
31	3.45	0.95	Moderate
32	3.94	0.88	High
33	3.85	0.90	High

The results presented in Table 1 indicate that most items fall within the “high anxiety” range, particularly those related to speaking, classroom participation, and fear of evaluation. Items 2 ($M = 4.01$), 25 ($M = 3.95$), and 32 ($M = 3.94$) recorded the highest mean scores, suggesting that these aspects represent the most significant sources of anxiety among participants.

In contrast, items such as 3 ($M = 2.63$), 6 ($M = 2.71$), and 8 ($M = 2.54$) showed comparatively lower mean scores, although they still fall within the moderate range. This indicates that while some aspects of anxiety are less intense, they are still present and contribute to the overall anxiety profile.

Analysis by Anxiety Dimensions

To further examine the structure of foreign language anxiety, the data were grouped according to the three dimensions of the FLCAS: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety.

Table 2

Mean Scores by Anxiety Dimension

Dimension	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Communication Apprehension	3.78	0.91	High
Fear of Negative Evaluation	3.87	0.89	High
Test Anxiety	3.49	0.93	Moderate

As shown in Table 2, fear of negative evaluation recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.87$), followed closely by communication apprehension ($M = 3.78$). These findings indicate that social and interactive aspects of language learning are the primary sources of anxiety among participants.

Test anxiety, while still present, showed a slightly lower meaning ($M = 3.49$), suggesting that formal assessments are not the main source of anxiety compared to communication-related situations.

Table 3

Categories	VA	A	NA / ND	D	VD
Communicative apprehension	12,38%	30,41%	32,69%	17,07%	7,45%
Anxiety about the processes and situations involved in learning a foreign language	12,19%	32,50	30,31	15,78	9,22
Confidence in using the foreign language inside and outside the classroom	10,55%	33,40	33,01	15,04	8,01
Negative attitudes toward learning	14,69	29,38	30,63	16,56	8,75

Note: VA= Very agree, A= Agree, NA/ND= No agree/No disagree, D? Desagree, VD= Veri disagree

The results show varying levels of anxiety among participants across the FLCAS categories. Significant frequencies are observed for the high anxiety level.

Hypothesis Evaluation:

- H01: There is no significant difference in anxiety scores among participants in relation to sex.
- Ha1: There is a significant difference in anxiety scores among participants in relation to sex.
- H02: There is no significant difference in anxiety scores among participants in relation to age.
- Ha2: There is a significant difference in anxiety scores among participants in relation to age.

The results of the Pearson chi-square test with a 5% significance level are presented in Table xx.

The findings are relevant to identify how anxiety is distributed similarly across different groups or whether specific samples are likely to experience it in a higher level. Consequently, the results offer empirical support for interpreting the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) outcomes and provide a basis for discussing the implications of anxiety in EFL Learners.

Table 4

Table xx. Chi-square test of FLCAS items versus the factors of sex and age

Items	Sex	Age
1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class.	0,28	0,87
2. I don't worry about making mistakes in language class.	0,01	0,69
3. I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class	0,61	0,67
4. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language	0,91	0,70
5. It wouldn't bother me at all to take more foreign language classes	0,72	0,13
6. During language class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course	0,43	0,41

7. I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am	0,36	0,48
8. I am usually at ease during tests in my language class	0,86	0,10
9. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class	0,91	0,08
10. I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class	0,12	0,41
11. I don't understand why some people get so upset over foreign language classes	0,51	0,32
12. In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know	0,92	0,44
13. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class	0,05	0,65
14. I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers	0,08	0,35
15. I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting	0,02	0,09
16. Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it	0,92	0,45
17. I often feel like not going to my language class	0,29	0,01
18. I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class	0,66	0,52
19. I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make	0,21	0,17
20. I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in language class	0,30	0,02
21. The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get	0,27	0,08
22. I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for language class	0,64	0,67
23. I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do	0,26	0,59
24. I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students	0,64	0,01
25. Language class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind	0,47	0,48
26. I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes	0,75	0,28
27. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class	0,46	0,56
28. When I'm on my way to language class, I feel very sure and relaxed	0,67	0,17
29. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says	0,21	0,50
30. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak a foreign language	0,97	0,25
31. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language	0,96	0,52
32. I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language	0,03	0,04
33. I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance	0,57	0,40

Factor sex:

The results show significant differences for every items of FLCAS related to the factors sex, except for items 2, 15, and 32.

2. I don't worry about making mistakes in language class.

15. I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.

32. I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language.

Factor age:

The results show significant differences in all items related to sex except for items 17, 24, and 32.

17. I often feel like not going to my language class.

24. I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students.

32. I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data obtained from open-ended responses provided additional insights into students' experiences of anxiety. A thematic analysis revealed several recurring themes, including:

- Fear of speaking in front of others
- Fear of making mistakes
- Anxiety related to virtual participation
- Technological difficulties

Students are likely to experience FLA in online activity or tasks as it was evidenced during the different observations applied. Specific characteristics as the fear of producing oral activities are shown as a strong signal of anxiety in these type of strategies in online classes. Alternatively, it is demonstrated through the different activities that the majority of learners are afraid of making any mistake during the classes, and they seem to stop participating in classes instead of taking the risk to express something wrong.

It is substantiated that learners feel unprepared to handle specific virtual activities due to technical challenges or the fear of receiving a mistake or a lower score, this pattern is incredibly shown on the different observations and instruments applied during the obtainment of the information. Many digital stressors identified such as digital fatigue and AI-related concerns are creating difficult barriers on the learners learning process, making them undermines learning outcomes and exacerbates burnout related to the excess of devices and digital tools.

Discussion

The findings of the present study provide evidence that foreign language anxiety is a significant and pervasive factor affecting university EFL learners, particularly within virtual learning environments. The results indicate that the majority of participants experience moderate to high levels of anxiety, which aligns with previous research of Teimouri et al. (2019); Botes et al. (2022) demonstrating the widespread nature of foreign language anxiety in second language acquisition contexts.

One of the most salient findings of this study is the prominence of fear of negative evaluation as the highest-rated dimension of anxiety. This result is consistent with the theoretical framework proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986), which identifies fear of negative evaluation as a

central component of foreign language anxiety. Students reported significant concern about being judged by their peers and instructors, particularly in situations where their performance was visible to others. This suggests that the social dimension of language learning plays a crucial role in shaping learners' emotional experiences.

Limitations of the study. - Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the use of convenience sampling may limit the generalizability of the findings, as the sample represents a specific group of students within a particular context. Second, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias, as participants' responses are influenced by their perceptions and interpretations of their experiences. Finally, the study focuses exclusively on a virtual learning environment, which may differ from face-to-face contexts. Future research could explore these differences and examine how anxiety varies across different learning modalities.

Nevertheless, the study provides valuable insights into the role of foreign language anxiety in virtual EFL contexts and contributes to the growing body of research in this field. The high levels of communication apprehension observed in this study further reinforce the idea that speaking is one of the most anxiety-provoking aspects of language learning. Participants indicated that they felt nervous when required to speak spontaneously, especially in front of the entire class. This finding is consistent with previous studies that highlight the relationship between communication anxiety and reduced willingness to communicate (Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2021).

The relationship between anxiety and academic performance can be explained through cognitive interference theory. According to this perspective, anxiety consumes cognitive resources that would otherwise be used for task performance, leading to decreased efficiency in

processing and retrieving linguistic information (Li, 2022; Zhang, 2022). As a result, students may underperform despite having sufficient language knowledge.

Another important finding of this study is the role of the virtual learning environment in shaping anxiety. The results suggest that online platforms may intensify anxiety due to increased visibility, reduced interaction, and technological challenges. This is consistent with research indicating that virtual learning can amplify emotional responses, particularly in language learning contexts (Hampel & Stickler, 2021; Wang & Zhan, 2020).

The requirement to use cameras and microphones emerged as a significant source of anxiety. Many students reported feeling self-conscious and uncomfortable when they were required to appear on screen. This heightened sense of exposure can increase self-awareness and fear of negative evaluation, particularly for learners who lack confidence in their language abilities. Additionally, the lack of non-verbal communication cues in virtual environments may contribute to increased anxiety. In face-to-face settings, learners can rely on gestures, facial expressions, and other visual cues to support communication. In contrast, online interactions often lack these elements, making communication more challenging and potentially more stressful.

Technological issues also play a critical role in shaping anxiety. Participants reported experiencing stress due to unstable internet connections, audio delays, and unfamiliar digital platforms. These challenges can disrupt communication and create frustration, further exacerbating anxiety.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings of this study highlight the importance of creating supportive and low-anxiety learning environments. Teachers play a crucial role in

shaping students' emotional experiences, and their instructional practices can either alleviate or exacerbate anxiety (MacIntyre et al., 2020).

One effective strategy is to promote a classroom culture that values effort and progress rather than perfection. By emphasizing that mistakes are a natural part of the learning process, teachers can help reduce fear of negative evaluation and encourage students to take risks. Another important approach is to incorporate collaborative activities that allow students to interact in smaller groups. These interactions can create a more relaxed environment and reduce the pressure associated with speaking in front of the entire class.

In virtual environments, teachers should also consider the impact of technology on students' emotional well-being. Providing flexibility in the use of cameras and offering alternative forms of participation can help reduce anxiety. Additionally, incorporating asynchronous activities can give students more time to prepare their responses, which may increase confidence and reduce stress.

Overall, the findings of this study confirm that foreign language anxiety is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon influenced by cognitive, social, and technological factors. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive approach that considers all these dimensions. From an educational perspective, the findings underscore the need for pedagogical strategies that address both the emotional and academic needs of learners. Teachers should strive to create supportive learning environments that encourage participation, reduce fear of mistakes, and promote confidence. Future research should explore intervention-based approaches to reducing foreign language anxiety and examine how different teaching strategies impact students' emotional experiences.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between foreign language anxiety and academic achievement among university EFL learners in a virtual learning environment. The findings provide compelling evidence that foreign language anxiety is a significant factor influencing students' participation, performance, and overall learning experience. One of the most important inferences is that foreign language anxiety is not limited to a small group of learners but affects the majority of students. The high percentage of participants reporting moderate to high levels of anxiety indicates that this is a widespread issue that must be addressed in language education.

The study also highlights the importance of the social dimension of language learning. Fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension emerged as the most significant sources of anxiety, emphasizing the role of interpersonal interactions in shaping learners' emotional experiences. The virtual learning environment adds an additional layer of complexity to the issue of foreign language anxiety. While online education offers many advantages, it also introduces challenges that can increase anxiety, such as increased exposure, reduced interaction, and technological difficulties.

Additionally, studies that incorporate objective measures of academic achievement would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between anxiety and performance. In conclusion, foreign language anxiety is a critical factor that significantly affects university EFL learners, particularly in virtual learning environments. Addressing this issue is

essential for improving academic outcomes and enhancing the overall quality of language education.

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