

A descriptive study about language anxiety while learning English as a second language**Un estudio descriptivo sobre la ansiedad del lenguaje al estudiar inglés como segundo idioma**

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Abstract

Learning a second language has implications that go beyond cognitive processes. External factors such as the individual's economic situation, and other intrinsic factors such as motivation, can influence the second language acquisition. With this study we seek to analyze the role anxiety can have in order to learn English as a foreign language. This work is based on a descriptive analysis which was applied to 1773 undergraduate students from a University of Guadalajara campus, and with this study we look forward obtaining information about the role of anxiety in learning English; in addition to identifying whether there are any differences in anxiety levels according to the major students are going to graduate from. It is intended to contribute to the knowledge related to the study of a second language, to determine what factors influence the development of language anxiety, and how it could be possible to work aiming to reduce it while ensuring that the students can learn a second language in a more effective and meaningful way.

Learning process, Foreign language, University students**Resumen**

El aprendizaje de un segundo idioma tiene implicaciones que van más allá de los procesos cognitivos. Factores externos al individuo, como su capacidad económica y otros factores intrínsecos como la motivación, pueden influir en la adquisición de una segunda lengua. En este estudio se busca analizar el papel que la ansiedad puede tener para poder aprender inglés como lengua extranjera. Con este trabajo se parte de un análisis descriptivo aplicado a 1773 estudiantes de licenciatura de un campus de la Universidad de Guadalajara con el que se busca obtener información acerca del rol que tiene la ansiedad para el aprendizaje del inglés; además de identificar si existen diferencias en los niveles de ansiedad de acuerdo con el programa de estudios en el que se encuentra el alumno. Se pretende contribuir en el conocimiento relacionado al estudio de una segunda lengua, para determinar qué factores influyen en el desarrollo de la ansiedad del lenguaje, y cómo sería posible, en un futuro, trabajar para disminuirla y lograr que el estudiante pueda adquirir un segundo idioma de una manera más efectiva y significativa para él o ella.

Proceso de aprendizaje, Lengua extranjera, Estudiante universitario**Citation:** GONZÁLEZ-ANAYA, Ana Gabriela & LÓPEZ-RAMÍREZ, Enrique. A descriptive study about language anxiety while learning English as a second language. *Journal of Contemporary Sociology*. 2023. 10-28:19-25.

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Introduction

Research on second language learning tends to focus on cognitive development and skills. There are other factors that play a large role and one that has been analysed since the 1980s is anxiety. Without considering it as a disorder that has been recognised by different organisations and authorities in the field, language anxiety is analysed as a series of fears, worries and negative feelings that the learner develops with respect to the study of a second language, in this case, English.

Based on the need to carry out a diagnostic test of the English level of students at the Centro Universitario de los Altos (Cualtos), University of Guadalajara, it was decided to also analyse the characteristics of the students and determine factors that could influence a higher command of the language. For this study, only the results of the questions related to anxiety are included, as it is an element that should be analysed on its own.

Determining whether anxiety has an important influence on students' second language learning allows for new proposals focused on working with the subjects, leading to optimal performance in terms of English proficiency. It will also be possible to determine what resources the University of Guadalajara can offer that can meet the demands they have, based on their needs.

The research question that drives this work is what are the anxiety levels of the students and if there are differences with respect to the study programme to which they belong. As a hypothesis, we believe that anxiety levels are significant enough for students to be affected in their learning, and that there are careers in which these levels are more predominant than in others.

In this paper we first present an overview of the study of English as a second language specifically on the campus under analysis in this paper. This is followed by a review of the literature on anxiety and second language learning, a presentation of the methodology, a descriptive analysis of the results obtained, and conclusions.

The study of learning English as a second language

English is the main language of choice for global interactions, according to Calderón (2015), and Ruiz (2015) explains that more than 87% of publications in the social sciences, 79% in the health sciences and 96% in the natural sciences are published in English. The National Education Plan 2007-2012 (University of Guadalajara, 2016) established the teaching of a second language, mainly English in the curricula; in addition to professionalising foreign language teachers and establishing the parameters for considering that the levels indicated by the Common Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Instituto Cervantes, 2002) are reached.

Centro Universitario de los Altos has been offering English classes to students for more than a decade, with different programmes (called FILEX, JOBS and CLAP on campus). While these programmes have different offerings that can meet students' interests and adapt to their needs, they have not always been taken up, or in most cases, students drop out. In the case of the Bachelor's study programmes in Accounting, International Business and Management, students have four subjects focused on learning English as a second language. And in the case of the Law Degree, they have five semesters of foreign language teaching, in which English has been offered.

It became necessary to carry out a diagnostic assessment of students to find out their level of proficiency in English or another language. In addition, there is a need to find out more about the characteristics of the students that have allowed them to have an advanced level, i.e. those who already meet the level required for entry, regardless of the semester in which they are placed. In addition to this, to define whether there are characteristics that have a positive or negative impact on their learning of another language.

A questionnaire was then given to the students before they took their diagnostic test. The aim of the questionnaire was to obtain information both on the characteristics of the students that influence their second language level (age, teaching resources, other courses), and on personal and motivational characteristics that could provide an overview of the factors that influence their decision whether or not to continue with their English studies. Factors may also be external or institutional such as the range of courses available, the prestige of the courses, among others. For this paper the focus is on what students responded about anxiety and their performance in English classes or another language they are acquiring in addition to their native language.

Anxiety and its role in second language learning

Learning a second language has positive implications for both the personal and professional life of any individual. However, language teachers have found that it is not a pleasant experience for many, and that learners' performance is often unrelated to their knowledge of the new language. Anxiety is an important factor to consider for learners, especially in relation to certain areas of knowledge that have more important implications for them.

Learners' emotions shape foreign language learning. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the psychological factors of second language learning (Li and Wei, 2022).

In order to prevent classroom work from becoming a traumatic experience for learners, it is necessary to determine what it is that creates these adverse situations in learners and to lead them to develop a better and broader understanding of what the learner is expected to master.

Authors such as von Worde (1998) analysed the anxiety levels of second language learners and found that at least a third of learners, and in some cases half, had debilitating levels of what many authors have termed "language anxiety". In some cases this is due to the speed at which topics are reviewed, to having to use it in class and at other times to sitting exams which will assess their language proficiency.

Anxiety has been shown to impede learners' cognitive processing and has been recognised as a predictor variable of second language learning outcomes (Fathi and Mohammaddokht, 2021).

Anxiety can be defined as feelings of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry that are associated with changes in the nervous system (Spielberger, 1983). Anxiety is an excessive worry about certain events or activities, a worry that is disproportionate to the actual impact of the event. These worries can interfere with the individual's development in a significant way. In the case we are analysing, it has been determined as situational anxiety (which would have to be evaluated as a phobia, according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association, 2014).

It is a widely studied disorder and different forms of anxiety, as well as its triggers, have been identified. The anxiety that we propose to analyse, in this case, is not classified as a disorder but as a set of emotions that the student presents and perceives at the time of developing different activities as part of their learning of a second language. Those negative emotions of nervousness that lead the learner to refuse to participate in different activities, as well as to refuse to continue with his or her studies of a new language, despite knowing about the benefits it can have for him or her.

MacIntyre (1998) explains it as language anxiety, being "the worry and negative emotional reaction that arises when learning or using a second language" (p. 27).

Scovel, in 1978, was the first to analyse that there was a relationship between anxiety and learning another language. He found that levels of difficulty in learning activities could trigger anxiety reactions. Interestingly, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) found that language anxiety is unrelated to other types of anxiety, so that we could determine that studying a new language is causal for these emotions in itself.

Authors such as Bensalem (2017) take up what these authors have said about second language learning anxiety. He found that high levels of anxiety appear in class performance, confidence in English (the language he used as a foreign language for his study), negative feelings towards English and fear. Without finding any gender differences, the author explains that the belief that women are more prone to anxiety cannot be demonstrated with regard to language learning.

The main reasons that Bensalem (2017) found to cause anxiety were: worry about failing English class, speaking in class using the second language, a finding that is consistent with other studies (e.g. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986).

Zheng, 2008, reviewed what aspects might influence the development of language anxiety. Whether it has to do with the learner, the teacher, the classroom or the interaction of all three was reviewed. Similarly, if there are affective variables that could be impacting, or if they were cognitive skills. Among the findings, it was determined that a language deficiency leads to anxiety, and that affective skills and cognitive abilities do not have a significant impact.

Other authors, such as MacIntyre (1995) found that anxiety impacts on all stages of language acquisition: input, process and output. The input is understood as all those resources that a person can make use of to improve or increase their knowledge of another language, while the output will be those sentences or speech productions that the learner can make.

It is necessary to recover the work of MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) as they established five aspects where anxiety influences second language learning and performance. Firstly, anxiety is a strong predictor of learning competence (the higher the anxiety, the poorer the performance); socially, learners with higher anxiety will avoid communicating with others; cognitively, anxiety occurs at any stage of learning; anxiety can influence the speed and effectiveness of learning another language; and finally, studying another language can even become a traumatic experience.

It is worth noting that there is agreement between the various studies reviewed that explain classroom or performance-related anxiety, whether it is about speaking in front of the group, fear of the instructor or about the learners' own aspirations for their learning. Other factors, reported by Williams and Andrade (2008), include fear of negative evaluation or of making a bad impression on peers, as well as feeling less capable than others, in Japanese students, although their results were similar to those of American students. In all cases the anxiety presented did not have an external emotional, cognitive or environmental cause, so we could understand that these are emotions produced and strictly related to the study of a second language.

Methodology

A questionnaire was administered to the student population of the Centro Universitario de los Altos of the University of Guadalajara, Mexico. The questionnaire included questions that focused on determining the personal characteristics of the students: degree course, semester, municipality of origin, whether they had previously studied English or another language in addition to Spanish, what level they consider themselves to have in English and, finally, questions focused on language anxiety.

These questions come from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) instrument that was validated by García Ramos, Ochoa García and Hernández Cueto (2016) in the Mexican student population. The version that was validated in Spanish retained the structure of the original 33-item questionnaire.

It is measured on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The original questionnaire focused on measuring levels of anxiety in foreign language learning, so the authors adapted the language to English. For the purpose of this study, we will only focus on the answers students gave to the anxiety questions.

It should also be noted that 2885 students from Centro Universitario de los Altos participated, but for this study only the results of 1773 students from cycle 2022 B (second semester of the year) are taken into account. For the analysis only students from Law, Administration, Medical Surgeon, Midwife, Public Accounting, Nursing, Computer Engineering and Psychology are taken into account. The rest of the study programmes were not considered for this study as there were not enough students to be able to make a comparison between degree programmes.

Of the students who participated, 34.9% were male and 65.1% were female.

Career	Number of participants
Lawyer	319 (18.4%)
Administration	204 (11.8%)
Midwife Surgeon Career	244 (14.1%)
Public Accounting	303 (17.5%)
Nursing	193 (11.1%)
Computer Engineering	149 (8.6%)
Psychology	321 (18.5%)

Table 1 Distribution of students by degree
Source: Own elaboration

Considering the present study as descriptive, we considered it necessary to establish a scale to classify the students according to an appropriate risk level based on their normative group, so that with these items, a brief application could be made and the risk level could be determined according to the total scores. First, the total scores of each participant were calculated, the mean and the standard deviation were determined for the calculation of the z-scores.

Results

The Cronbach's alpha internal consistency index obtained from the full questionnaire was .91. To analyse whether the selected items belonged to a single dimension, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis, which allowed us to determine that the items were grouped into a single factor explained by 70.71% of the variance. Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant, $X^2= 8051.325283$, $p \leq 0.001$, $KMO=.805$.

N	Statistical minimum	Statistical maximum	Asymmetry
Puntuation z	1733	-2.46	1.60

Table 2 Descriptive data by z-score
Source: Own elaboration

The calculation of z-scores was carried out in order to find out what level of anxiety each student is at in accordance with the scores of their normative group. This also allowed us to establish a scale to determine the levels of anxiety and compare which careers, according to the standard deviation of 1.50, we consider to be high average anxiety.

It is important to note that the highest score according to their standard deviation position is 1.60.

Career	Sample	Students	Percentage
Lawyer	319	19	5.95%
Administration	204	14	6.86%
Medical Surgeon Midwife	193	14	2.59%
Public Accountant	303	8	2.64%

Table 3 Students with z-score between the first standard deviation and the second
Source: Own elaboration

A total score on the questionnaire is 30 points. According to the scale established for this population of students, it is considered that scores of 27 to 30 points would indicate a high level of anxiety in the students. A lower score would not be considered as a level of anxiety that could represent complications in learning, at least for this variable.

Career	Sample	Students	Percentage
Lawyer	319	32	10.03%
Administration	204	21	10.29%
Midwife Surgeon	193	52	21.31%
Public Accountant	303	37	12.21%
Nursing	193	11	5.69%
Computer Engineering	149	31	20.80%
Psychology	321	53	16.51%

Table 4 Students with negative z-scores between the first and the second standard deviation

Source: Own elaboration

Total scores of 14 and above can be considered as a near zero level of anxiety.

Career	N	Minimum	Maximum	Media	Standard deviation
Lawyer	319	6	30	20.61	5.38
Administration	204	7	30	20.49	5.24
Medical Surgeon Midwife	244	7	30	18.52	5.78
Public Accounting	303	7	30	21.17	5.46
Nursing	193	11	30	22.92	5.15
Computer Engineering	149	6	28	17.69	5.78
Psychology	321	6	30	21.35	6.47

Table 5. Total anxiety scores

Source: Own elaboration

The tests of differences between the groups were not statistically significant. Through the means it can be shown that the nursing group had higher scores, followed by the group of Public Accounting, Psychology, Administration, Lawyer, Surgeon Midwife and finally Computer Engineering.

The groups analysed were classified into seven careers. Since the assumption of normality for applying a parametric test was not met, we opted to apply the Kruskal-Wallis test to analyse whether there are significant differences between the groups in terms of the level of anxiety in English. The hypothesis test for group differences did not reflect significant differences between any group, so we found no evidence to determine that the groups are different in terms of their raw total scores on anxiety level $p > .05$.

Conclusions

The main aim of the study was to perform a descriptive analysis of the anxiety level of students who can be considered to be entering higher education. Although no significant differences were reflected in any group, the averages allowed us to understand the general anxiety level of this population.

Taking into account that, according to the normative scores, the score that can be considered as a high level of anxiety was 27, the mean scores of the students ranged between 17 and 20. However, the nursing and public accounting students had the highest scores compared to the students of the other degree programmes. In contrast, computer engineering and midwifery students had the lowest scores. The latter two courses are of particular relevance since the updated literature is mainly in English, and can be considered not to represent, for this population, a level of anxiety towards English language learning that could be considered alarming.

Finally, we can conclude that this study has allowed us to have a closer look at the levels of anxiety in learning English as a second language, which has been considered an important emotional component in education and which could hinder performance during the courses offered by universities.

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