# *A retrospective view on foreign language anxiety*

## Mariusz Kruk ✉

University of Zielona Góra, Poland
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5297-1966
*mkruk@uz.zgora.pl*

## Fatemeh Moafian

Kosar University of Bojnord, Iran
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3782-1561
*f.moafian@kub.ac.ir*

## Abstract

This paper explores the EFL students' experience of foreign language anxiety (FLA) as seen from a longer perspective including all stages of education up to the university level. It begins with a succinct description of the concept of FLA combined with an overview of related research. The theoretical considerations are followed by a study conducted on a group of 20 English Philology students who were asked to fill out a questionnaire and participate in semi-structured interviews aimed at examining the characteristics of their language anxiety as a process stretched over a long-term period of primary school, junior high school, senior high school and university education. The data were collected thorough a mixed methods approach as the goal was to numerically measure the respondents' levels of FLA at specific points in time as well as to investigate their personal judgments about the nature and quality of perceived language anxiety. Obtained findings led to the identification of a number of factors responsible for FLA in each of those four phases of L2 learning.

*Keywords:* FLA; FLA dynamics; retrospective variations in FLA

## 1. Introduction

Anxiety has been the object of empirical investigations among second language acquisition (SLA) researchers for years and it has been recognized as a gargantuan obstacle to language learners (Horwitz, 2001; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Although this negative feeling can be experienced by language learners with various levels of intensity and at various stages of the language learning process (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 1995a; Horwitz, 2000; Price, 1991), it is difficult to be removed from the language classroom as was suggested by the humanistic approaches of the 1970s because of its complex, dynamic and multifaceted nature (Kruk & Zawodniak, 2021; Pawlak, 2011). Various scholars perceive anxiety as interacting with different areas of SLA, such as individual difference variables and classroom-related factors (Aida, 1994; Horwitz, 2001; Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999). They also point to the fact that the impact of anxiety may alter due to individual students and learning situations (Gkonou, 2013). The current paper tries to shed further light by exploring fluctuations in the levels of foreign language anxiety through time and factors that affect them from a retrospective perspective, that is, from a long-term viewpoint encompassing all stages of education (i.e., primary school, junior high school, senior high school, and university).

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Issues in language anxiety

Anxiety has been considered by SLA researchers as getting in the way of second and foreign language (L2) learning and performance for many decades (Kleinmann, 1977). The phenomenon in question has been conceptualized as an amalgamation of three performance anxieties: communication apprehension (i.e., fear about communicating with others), test anxiety (i.e., a fear of failure) and negative evaluation (i.e., nervousness about others' evaluation) (Horwitz et al., 1986). It should be noted, however, that communication apprehension is considered to be the most ego-intimidating of the three encountered by language learners who feel a mental block against speaking in pairs/groups or in front of a large audience or against listening to spoken information (Horwitz et al., 1986). A number of definitions of foreign language anxiety has been offered in the SLA literature. The phenomenon has been understood as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 128) or "the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language" (MacIntyre, 1998, p. 27). More recently, the

construct in question has been regarded as a dynamic one "influenced by internal physiological processes, cognitive and emotional states along with the demands of the situation and the presence of other people, among other things, considered over different timescales" (MacIntyre, 2017, p. 28).

The context in which the learning a foreign language takes place seems to be particularly contributing to anxiety arousal (Price, 1991). This is because language learners find themselves in artificial settings created for them by language teachers in order to participate in activities, receive input and produce output in the language that they still have to master. These settings expose them to their teacher and class members' evaluation based on the linguistic and socio-cultural criteria. Such circumstances defy their self-concept as communicative language users and, consequently, give rise to shyness, forgetfulness, circumvention of complex language structures or unwillingness to volunteer answers and participate in communication activities. Such symptoms of anxiety, combined with physiological reactions such as, for example, sweating or palpitations (Crookall & Oxford, 1991; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994), may result in embarrassment and generate further feelings of fear and insecurity (Gkonou, 2013).

In the SLA literature a lot of space is devoted to sources of anxiety. According to Young (1991), the feeling of anxiety can be related to personal and interpersonal anxieties (i.e., they are triggered by low self-esteem, competitiveness, communication apprehension, social anxiety and anxiety specific to learning a language), learner beliefs about language learning (e.g., the belief that some learners are better suited to study an L2 than others, the beliefs in the importance of pronunciation, vocabulary or visits to the target language countries), teacher beliefs about L2 instruction (e.g., the belief that teachers ought to be in the center and do most of talking and teaching, constant correction of learners' errors, the inability to control students when they work in pairs/groups), teacher-learner interactions (e.g., a harsh manner of error correction, language learners' fears about how mistakes are seen by their teachers and/or peers), classroom procedures (e.g., speaking in the target language in front of the class) and language testing. When considering the cause-and-effect characteristics of anxiety, attention should be given to the linguistic coding differences hypothesis (Ganschow et al., 1994; Sparks & Ganschow, 1991). According to this hypothesis, anxiety results from rather than causes poor achievement stemming from subtle L1 learning deficits. It should be noted, however, that this view was resolutely questioned in defense of a position that language anxiety can occur independently of language difficulties (Horwitz, 2000; MacIntyre, 1995a, 1995b).

## 2.2. Empirical investigations into the dynamics of language anxiety

Over the past years, research into anxiety has taken a new path, shifting its focus towards changes in the levels of the phenomenon in question and thus emphasizing it as a complex and dynamic construct. Such studies have investigated changes in the construct in question in the longer and/or shorter term, sought to compare changes in anxiety and other variables and/or involved groups of learners as well as individual students. In their longitudinal study, Piniel and Csizér (2015), explored fluctuations in writing anxiety (together with motivation and self-efficacy) in a group of Hungarian English majors ($N = 21$) during a university academic writing course and showed that writing-related anxiety had a tendency fluctuate over the period of time in question. Liu and Xiangming (2019), in turn, investigated changes in the experience of language anxiety and their impact on students' performance in English over the period of ten weeks. The obtained results showed that at the end of that period of time the subjects (i.e., 324 first-year postgraduate students) turned out to be less anxious about communication and performance in English, respectively. They, however, started to be more apprehensive about tests. The results also revealed that anxiety was significantly related to the students' performance in speaking, listening, reading and writing tests, both at the start and the end of the study; however, the participants turned out to be less anxious toward its end. Another attempt to investigate changes, both long- and the short-term ones, in the phenomenon in question and their triggers was carried out by Kruk (2018). The study involved 52 Polish EFL high school learners who participated in 121 English lessons. The analysis of the data, gathered by means of a number of instruments (e.g., the *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale* [Horwitz et al., 1986], a foreign language anxiety grid, individual interviews) demonstrated that the students experienced the most anxiety at the beginning and the end of the semester. The obtained results also showed that, in general, the participants displayed the highest and the lowest levels of anxiety at the beginning and the end of lessons, respectively. The changes in anxiety levels were caused by a variety of factors, such as lack of self-confidence, being called to the board by the teacher, speaking in front of a class, language tests and grammar activities. A different approach to investigating changes in anxiety was adopted by Boudreau, MacIntyre and Dewaele (2018). The researchers used the idiodynamic method (i.e., a procedure for measuring moment-by-moment fluctuations in the experience of language anxiety during task performance) to uncover changes in language anxiety (as well as foreign language enjoyment) and its triggers among ten Canadian English-speaking students with French as an L2 during the performance of two types of communication tasks. The findings revealed that both variables underwent changes throughout the tasks which were influenced by the participants' interest/disinterest in the topic or linguistic problems.

Dewaele and Dewaele's (2017) pseudo-longitudinal study compared changes in foreign language classroom enjoyment and language anxiety. The participants were 189 secondary school language learners divided into three groups according to their age (i.e., 12-13, 14-15 and 16-18). Although the obtained results uncovered a moderate rise over time in foreign language enjoyment, they revealed little variation in classroom anxiety. Regression analyses showed that both constructs were predicted by fewer learner-internal and teacher-centered variables at the outset and the completion of the participants secondary education as compared to its middle phase. Dewaele and Dewaele concluded that the constellations of factors that triggered their participants' emotions experienced in the language classroom progressed at various rates over time. In another study whose aim was to investigate changes in foreign language enjoyment and anxiety, Elahi Shirvan and Taherian (2018) reported a decrease and then an increase in the participants' (i.e., 367 undergraduate students who attended a course of general English) level of foreign language enjoyment and anxiety over one semester. The qualitative analysis of the collected data also showed that some individuals concurrently experienced moments of low and high levels of the two constructs, respectively. In a recent questionnaire study carried out by Pan and Zhang (2021) the researchers explored the changes of foreign language enjoyment and anxiety over time, their relationship with motivation and personality traits among 55 college students. They reported that the negative emotion of anxiety, although subject to change, was more stable over time as compared to the feeling of enjoyment. Pan and Zhang found various motivational factors (e.g., ought-to L2 self, ideal L2 self) as well as some personality traits (e.g., extraversion) to be responsible for changes in the experience of enjoyment and anxiety by the participants.

It is also worth mentioning the application of ecological perspectives and the complex dynamic systems theory in the study of language anxiety. Results of such studies have shown that the dynamics of this phenomenon cannot be exclusively attributed to factors such as teachers and learners (e.g., Gkonou, 2017; Kasbi & Elahi Shirvan, 2017). For example, Kasbi and Elahi Shirvan (2017) explored speaking anxiety in four female EFL learners from an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) adopting the tenets of complex dynamic systems theory (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). The results showed that changes in the experience of language anxiety reported by the students were influenced by the following factors: linguistic (e.g., the lack of vocabulary), cognitive (e.g., the lack of knowledge related to conversational topics) and affective (e.g., teachers' judgment, pressure, significant others). Kasbi and Elahi Shirvan also showed that negative past experiences had an impact on the participants' changes in the intensity of this negative emotion.

As the above review of the literature demonstrates, most of the empirical evidence on the dynamics of language anxiety has been obtained by focusing on its fluctuation from a real-time and/or an ongoing perspective. The study reported

below aimed to make a contribution to this contemporary line of inquiry by investigating changes in the levels of language anxiety over time and factors influencing them from a different angle, namely, from a retrospective perspective (i.e., from a longer viewpoint comprising all stages of education up to the university level).

## 3. The study

### 3.1. Research questions

The present study aimed to answer the following research questions:

> RQ1: Is there retrospective variation to be found in the participants' FLA over their prolonged period of language education (i.e., from elementary school to university)?
>
> RQ2: What are the main causes responsible for these fluctuations in the participants' FLA over this prolonged period of time?

### 3.2. Participants

The participants were a group of 20 Polish students (15 females and 5 males) majoring in English philology. This was a sample of convenience (Dörnyei, 2007) involving individuals to whom the present researcher had access. At the time the study was conducted, they were on average 22.05 years of age ($SD$ = 1.93). The proficiency level represented by the participants could be described as falling somewhere between B2 and C1, as specified in the levels laid out in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*. All the participants had started learning English at elementary school.

### 3.3. Data collection instruments

The data were collected by means of the *Foreign Language Anxiety in Retrospect* questionnaire (FLAR) and a semi-structured interview. The two data collection tools are described in more detail below.

*FLAR*

The participants were asked to think back on their experience of foreign language anxiety since they started learning English formally (i.e., from elementary school). They were requested to describe in what way and why they experienced

FLA at each educational level (i.e., elementary school, junior high school, senior high school and university) with their three different points in time in particular (i.e., beginning, middle and end). FLAR included some guiding questions the participants were encouraged to answer. Example items are as follows: *Who caused the feelings of foreign language anxiety (e.g., your language teachers, peers)?*, *What made you feel anxious (e.g., language activities, language materials, methods, techniques)?*, *In what situations did you experience most foreign language anxiety?* The participants were also requested to rate in a special grid the intensity of their FLA at each of these specific educational phases on a scale ranging from 1 (lowest) to 7 (highest). In addition, the questionnaire contained a short demographic section to gain information on the participants' sex, age and academic year. FLAR was completed by the students anonymously. To ward off potential misunderstandings or misinterpretations and ensure that the responses were indeed reflective of the participants' experience of FLA, the instructions in the questionnaire were given in Polish (i.e., the students' mother tongue) and the students were asked to respond in Polish. Finally, it should also be noted that the instrument was piloted prior to the study with a group of Polish students majoring in English. This resulted in some minor modifications related to the wording some of the questions posed in the questionnaire as well as its layout.

*Semi-structured interviews*

The interviews were conducted with ten individuals who voiced their willingness to further participate in the study. As Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014) observe, interviews, besides affording additional methodological rigor to the investigation, provide researchers with a richer understanding of the problem of interest. The interviews were conducted in Polish in order to facilitate comfort and ease of expression. Each interview lasted approximately 15 minutes.

## 3.4. Analysis

The collected data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The former was applied to the numerical self-evaluations performed and indicated by the students on an FLA grid in the FLAR questionnaire, whilst the latter concerned the participants' descriptions of their FLA experience in response to the questions raised in FLAR as well as the information collected by means of the semi-structured interviews. The numerical data were used to calculate means and standard deviation values for FLA levels at different stages of their education. Since some of the data obtained were not normally distributed, the levels of statistical significance were established by means of the nonparametric *Wilcoxon Signed-Rank*

*Test.* As far as qualitative enquiry analysis is concerned, it was performed by means of the *NVivo* software and adhered to Gao and Zhang's (2020) model of data analysis (see Figure 1). An external researcher was asked to audit the entire data together with the created codes and themes in order to enhance the study's confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nassaji, 2020). All areas of disagreement were solved through discussion and compromise.
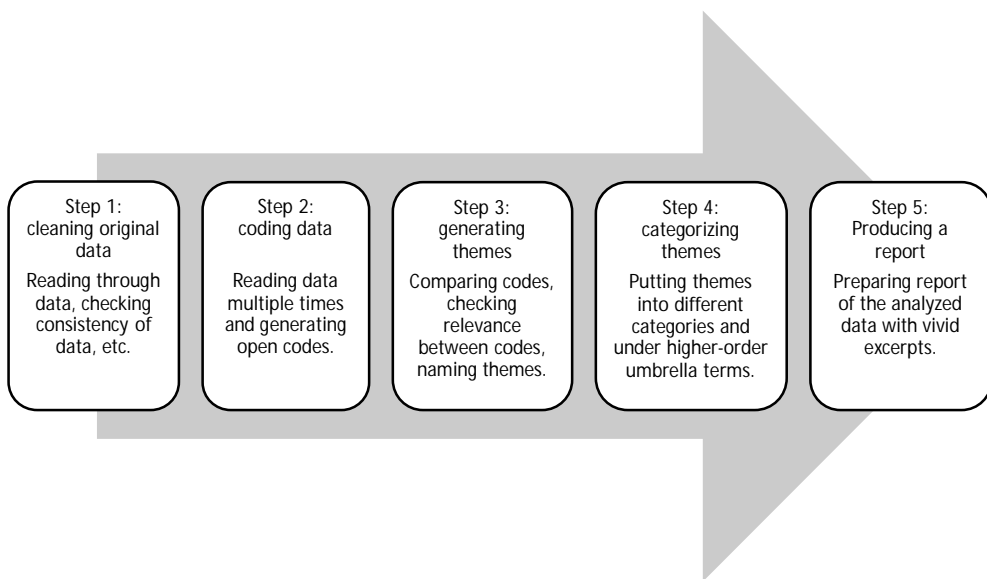
| Step 1:<br>cleaning original data<br><br>Reading through data, checking consistency of data, etc. | Step 2:<br>coding data<br><br>Reading data multiple times and generating open codes. | Step 3:<br>generating themes<br><br>Comparing codes, checking relevance between codes, naming themes. | Step 4:<br>categorizing themes<br><br>Putting themes into different categories and under higher-order umbrella terms. | Step 5:<br>Producing a report<br><br>Preparing report of the analyzed data with vivid excerpts. |

Figure 1 Gao and Zhang's (2020) five-step data analysis model applied to this study

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Retrospective FLA fluctuations at different educational levels

In order to answer the first research question, the participants' reports of their self-perceived FLA at each of four phases of L2 learning were examined. As can be seen in Figure 2 and Table 1, the self-reported levels of FLA at different educational stages (i.e., from elementary school to university) between different points in time (i.e., beginning, middle and end) were subject to some changes. These fluctuations in the levels of FLA were the smallest at the elementary school level and the largest at university. In addition, with the exception of junior high school, the levels of FLA displayed a decreasing pattern, that is, they were the highest at the beginning of elementary school, senior high school and university and the lowest at the end of each educational stage. The *Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test* indicated some statistically significant differences between different

points in time at: senior high school: beginning → end ($Z$ = -2.558, $p$ = .011); and university: beginning → middle ($Z$ = -2.656, $p$ = .008), beginning → end ($Z$ = -2.728, $p$ = .006), middle → end ($Z$ = -2.032, $p$ = .042).

It should also be noted that, overall, the levels of FLA reported by the participants were moderate, since they oscillated between 3.02 (the lowest; elementary school stage) and 3.42 (the highest; university stage) and of a slightly increasing trend (see Table 1). However, the *Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test* did not show any statistically significant differences between these different stages of education ($p$ > .05).
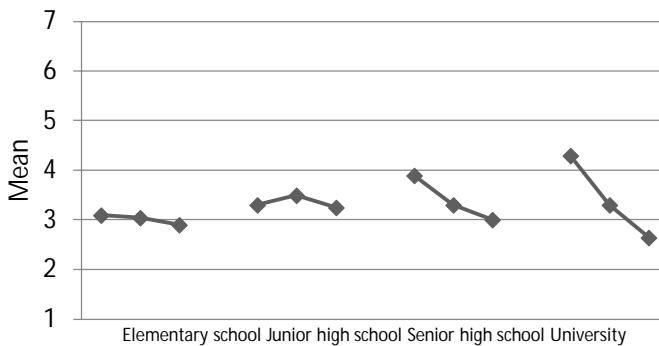


Figure 2 FLA fluctuations at different educational levels

Table 1 Means and standard deviations for FLA at different educational levels

| Level of education | Time frame | $M$ ($SD$) | Overall $M$ ($SD$) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Elementary school | Beginning | 3.10 (1.92) | |
| | Middle | 3.05 (1.61) | 3.02 (1.57) |
| | End | 2.90 (1.68) | |
| Junior high school | Beginning | 3.30 (1.66) | |
| | Middle | 3.50 (1.36) | 3.35 (1.37) |
| | End | 3.25 (1.62) | |
| Senior high school | Beginning | 3.90 (1.77) | |
| | Middle | 3.30 (1.57) | 3.40 (1.41) |
| | End | 3.00 (1.45) | |
| University | Beginning | 4.30 (2.00) | |
| | Middle | 3.30 (1.72) | 3.42 (1.56) |
| | End | 2.65 (1.73) | |

## 4.2. Main factors responsible for retrospective variations in FLA

In order to answer the second research question, the participants' reports of their FLA were further considered in order to find out causes responsible for their experience of

FLA. A thorough examination of the students' FLA descriptions of each educational stage (i.e., from elementary school to university) with their three different points in time (i.e., beginning, middle and end) yielded six thematic categories: *classroom members*, *speaking in the target language*, *formal forms of assessment*, *demanding language materials*, *uncertainty* and *the specter of being worse*.
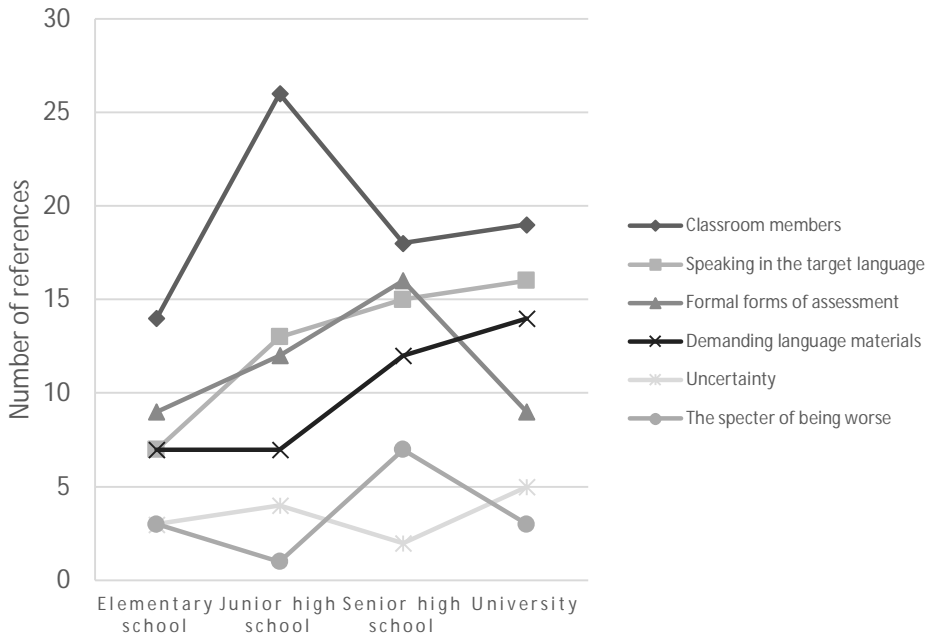


Figure 3 Factors responsible for variations in FLA in retrospect at various educational levels

As far as the category of classroom members is concerned, it comprised the largest source of FLA (77 references in total) and included two subcategories: *teachers* (43) and *peers* (34). As illustrated in Figure 3, generally, this category was subject to some change since it was the most significant source of FLA during the period of junior high school (26 references in total) but it was the least important at elementary school level (14 references). In addition, the subcategory of teachers was the largest source of FLA at junior high school (14 references) and the smallest at university (seven). As for the subcategory of peers, it was the factor evoking the most stress at junior high school and university levels (each 12 references) and the least stressful factor at elementary level (only 2 references). For example, the participants felt anxious when they perceived their teachers as "strict" and "unpleasant," when their teachers commented on their language performance in an

unfriendly manner and when their peers laughed at them when speaking in the target language. Some of these findings are illustrated in the following excerpts:[1]

> *Stress was evoked by my teacher who openly commented on our English skills and said: "you can't do anything," "you will be nobody."*

> *The beginning of junior high school was connected with new colleagues in my class what, again, was a cause of stress for me.*

When it comes to the second major category, that is, speaking in the target language, it encompassed 51 references. As can be seen in Figure 3, this source of FLA displayed an increasing pattern. More specifically, it was the least influential source of FLA at elementary school level (seven references) and the most significant one at the final phase of the participants' education (university: 16 references). Generally, the students were afraid of speaking in English in new situations and in the classroom in front of their colleagues. They did not want to make a fool of themselves and they suffer from the lack of frequent speaking practice at school. This is evident in the following excerpts:

> *New school did not have a positive impact on the level my language anxiety. The teacher and new classmates made me feel stressed during speaking in English.*

> *At the end of junior high school I experienced a lot of stress. I was afraid of speaking in English in the classroom. All my utterances in English were a huge source of stress for me.*

> *My situation changed because I started to understand a lot more. Unfortunately, my speaking skills worsened a lot because I rarely spoke in English. This is because there were a lot of better students than me and I didn't want to make a fool of myself.*

> *At the end of senior high school I was afraid of speaking in English because we practiced this skill very rarely.*

Other important sources of FLA were related to formal forms of assessment and demanding language materials or lessons (46 and 40 references, respectively). As for the former, it included two subcategories: tests/exams (35 references) and grades (11 references). Overall, this source of FLA was on the increase from the start of language education (i.e., from elementary school) until senior high school but it was the lowest at the university level. As to the latter, this source of FLA tended to rise with time, that is, it was the lowest at the first two educational stages (i.e., elementary and junior high school – both seven references) and the highest at university (14 references) (see Figure 3). Examples of relevant comments follow:

---

[1] Both here and throughout the remainder of the paper, the excerpts are translations of the students' responses.

*I felt more language anxiety at the end of senior high school and it was connected with my Matura exam.*

*I was afraid of not being awarded a good grade for which I worked very hard.*

*I started to experience more language anxiety in junior high school when more diffi-cult things were practiced in English lessons. It was more difficult for me to learn Eng-lish than in elementary school.*

Uncertainty and the specter of being worse (14 references each) com-prised the last two sources of FLA. As can be seen in Figure 3, these sources underwent some changes throughout the period of L2 education in question. For example, the feelings related to the fact of being in new school and in new situations were the most visible at the beginning of junior high school and uni-versity (four and five references, respectively). The fear of being the worst lan-guage learner was the most pronounced at senior high school (seven refer-ences) and almost non-existent at junior high school (one reference). The fol-lowing extracts provide examples of these types of issues:

*Studying English at university was connected with new challenges which made me experience more foreign language anxiety.*

*Like at the end of junior high school I wasn't feeling good at English and, because of this, I couldn't be the best in my class.*

5. Discussion

In this study, FLA was investigated as a long-term process for EFL students throughout all stages of their education up to university. To achieve the study's objectives, two research questions were formulated. In the first research ques-tion, the researchers attempted to determine retrospectively how the FLAs of the participants had changed over the duration of their language education. The results revealed that the fluctuation in FLA levels was the greatest at the univer-sity level and the smallest at the elementary school level. This finding is con-sistent with previous research (e.g., Dewaele, 2002, Dutra & Finger, 2019; Mac-Intyre & Gardner, 1994; Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999), which indicated higher levels of anxiety among more mature learners. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) claimed that adult learners process information at a slower rate and are more critical of their outcomes in terms of accuracy. In effect, they are more likely to experience anxiety when learning a foreign language. Furthermore, Lopez and Aguilar (2013) argued that previous negative experiences can impede learning a foreign language. It is likely that older learners have been exposed to a greater number of negative learning environments or frustrating attempts to learn. This may

have prevented them from developing psychological resources to cope with the learning process, leading to a higher level of anxiety.

With respect to the levels of FLA at different points in time (i.e., at the beginning, middle, and end), apart from junior high school, these levels displayed a declining pattern. This means that they were highest at the start of elementary school, senior high school, and university, and lowest at the end of each educational level. One might argue that entering a new level of study confronts students with a situation that is unfamiliar to them and that they lack sufficient control over it. As a result, they may experience anxiety as a result of this lack of control. According to Chorpita and Barlow (1998), individuals who experience uncertainty about their ability to control outcomes tend to experience an elevated affective state, referred to as "aroused anxiety." The students, however, gradually gain mastery and control of the content and learning environment, including peers, instructors, and teaching modes (Liu & Xiangming, 2019), and their anxiety decreases as a result. With respect to junior high school, it appears that puberty may be responsible for the increase in anxiety during the middle of junior high school. Hormonal changes, adolescent concerns, and identity debates during this time might make students distant from learning and more vulnerable. These features interfere with the usual anxiety associated with this level of education, causing students to feel more anxious.

In the second research question, the present researchers attempted to identify the main factors responsible for the participants' FLA experience. Based on the findings, six different thematic categories emerged: classroom members, speaking in the target language, formal forms of assessment, demanding language materials, uncertainty, and the specter of being worse. FLA was primarily attributed to classroom members. As a general rule, interpersonal relationships are highly associated with anxiety (Zheng et al., 2023). When students are intimately linked to their class members in the learning environment, they will experience a relaxed psychological atmosphere, resulting in a reduction in anxiety and worry, especially at the beginning of each level when students have less control over the content and environmental factors. In such an intimate environment, students are more likely to seek advice and assistance from teachers and peers when they encounter difficulties in their studies (cf. Li, 2022). The opposite condition, however, carries the risk of increasing anxiety. Among the different levels of education, junior high school students receive the greatest influence from teachers and peers. This finding is in line with those of the study carried out by Yang (2001) which indicated that teacher-student relationships and peer relationships greatly contributed to middle school students' anxiety levels. The most significant adolescent relationships are those with peers, teachers, and parents (Wentzel, 1998). Junior high school students' anxiety symptoms are

significantly affected by teacher-student relationships in learning environments. Students who have a poor relationship with their teachers are more likely to experience anxiety. In a similar vein, peer relationships are associated with anxiety symptoms based on the degree of intimacy with the class, the number of friends, and the relationship between classmates since peers can provide a great deal of emotional support, assistance, and encouragement (Zheng et al., 2023). At the university level, however, teachers were the least anxiety-producing factor, while peers were the most. An explanation for such a result can be found in the way instruction is delivered in the classroom. If, for example, the class is highly student-centered, the teacher does not play an active role and a competitive atmosphere is created, the presence and performance of classmates may cause anxiety to a significant extent. Finally, among the different levels of education, elementary school students received the least amount of influence regarding anxiety from classroom members. It can be explained by the way learners interact in the learning environment. In elementary schools, instruction is largely based on play and teamwork. This atmosphere seems to provide a basis for the development of a safe and friendly relationship, which, in turn, reduces anxiety levels.

The second source of anxiety for the participants was speaking in the target language, which showed an increasing tendency as the participants progressed from elementary school to university. It is possible to argue that as time goes by, learners' expectations of themselves and others' expectations of them regarding their speaking competence increase. Because of this issue, as well as the fear of not meeting these expectations, the fear of making mistakes, not being understood, being negatively or poorly evaluated, and appearing less competent than other students (Suleimenova, 2013), speaking the target language can be extremely anxiety-provoking for L2 learners.

FLA was also brought about by formal types of assessment. The FLA rate due to this source increased from the start of language education (i.e., early elementary through senior high school), but it was the lowest at the university level. Prior to entering university, students are rarely exposed to the world of work, and their major at university largely determines their employment prospects. Accordingly, it is critical for them to obtain high grades in their courses, including foreign language courses, in order to gain admission to universities, and, in turn, to succeed in their future careers. In this sense, students attach a great deal of importance to their exams and grades. This leads to anxiety as a result of worrying about their performance. Nevertheless, once they have been admitted to the university, they find more peace of mind and their formal assessment anxiety decreases since their future career status is determined to some degree, and there is no longer a great deal of concern about how they perform in their formal examinations.

The fourth source of anxiety was found to be demanding language materials. There was a tendency for this source of FLA to rise with time, that is, it was the lowest at the first two educational stages and the highest at the university level. It may be argued that with the passage of time and the entry of learners into higher educational levels, learning materials become more complex and difficult, and thus the act of controlling and mastering the learning content gets more and more challenging and requires more effort. On the other hand, as learners grow older, they require a greater degree of autonomy and control over matters associated with their lives, including educational issues (see Sheldon et al., 2006). However, demanding language materials threaten learners' control over the content, and the loss of control increases their anxiety, as reported earlier (Chorpita & Barlow, 1998).

The last two sources of FLA were uncertainty and the possibility of being worse. The most noticeable level of uncertainty was at the beginning of junior high school and university. From a general perspective, uncertainty is one of the major concerns in academic life, which results from a lack of knowledge regarding the outcome of actions (Nästesjö, 2021). With respect to the present study, completing elementary school and beginning junior high school, as well as finishing high school and entering university represent two stages during a student's educational journey where a relatively new and more serious educational process is encountered, accompanied by new and sometimes unforeseeable challenges, compared to the earlier level. In general, individuals seem to be uncertain about the outcome of their actions when they face new conditions, and they are not certain whether the actions they take will allow them to achieve their objectives. There is a greater probability of this uncertainty occurring during transitional periods, such as when a student is transitioning from elementary school to high school or from high school to university, which results in increased anxiety.

Lastly, the fear of being the worst language learner was most evident in senior high school. This can be explained by the fact that, during high school, students tend to form groups of peers since they feel that the group of friends is closer to them intellectually than their families. During this time, parental authority is also being challenged by peer pressure (Chen, 1997). Thus, it is particularly important for them to be accepted by their peers. Poor learners have a lower probability of being accepted by their peers. As a result, they develop a fear of being the worst language learners, leading to anxiety.

## 6. Conclusions, implications, weaknesses, and directions for future research

In the current study, FLA was examined as a long-term process for EFL students ranging from elementary school to university. Based on the results, it was determined that the greatest fluctuation in FLA levels was observed at the university

level and the smallest at the elementary school level. At different points in time, the intensity of FLA was highest at the beginning of the levels, and lowest at the end of them, with the exception of junior high school. The participants' FLA experience was also attributed to six factors, including classroom members, speaking in the target language, formal types of assessment, demanding language materials, uncertainty, and the prospect of being worse. In the thematic categories of speaking in the target language, demanding language materials, and formal forms of assessment, FLA demonstrated an increasing tendency as participants progressed from elementary school to university, with the exception of formal assessments at university. As for other categories, there were some fluctuations depending on the level of education. Students in junior high school received the most influence from both teachers and peers, and they experienced the greatest amount of uncertainty at the beginning of their level. Senior high school students were most likely to fear being the worst language learners. At the university level, peers were the most anxiety-provoking factor and there was the greatest level of uncertainty at the start of this level.

A number of implications can be drawn from the obtained findings for those involved in educational settings. First, establishing a friendly and relaxed atmosphere that is free from debilitating anxiety is beneficial to all levels of education, especially at the beginning of each level. It is recommended that teachers frequently use teamwork in their classrooms to facilitate speaking in the target language, as students seem more comfortable speaking in the target language in small groups than in front of the entire class. In order to reduce the anxiety associated with formal assessments, evaluation should be conducted more dynamically and part of it should be project-based. In the case of demanding language materials, one of the solutions involves inviting students to use the materials cooperatively so that they are able to handle them more effectively. In junior high school, students begin to experience the phenomenon of puberty, which is a very distinct phase of their academic career. Educators are encouraged to study the needs and features of this era of life and improve their ability to cope with the learners' needs and problems. It is therefore recommended that teachers create cooperative rather than competitive environments in class in junior and senior high schools as well as universities so that learners become one another's helpers rather than competitors, thus reducing peer influence, fear of being worse, as well as uncertainty.

The study has several limitations, the first of which is the small number of participants. It is suggested that other researchers replicate the study using a larger sample size. In addition, gender was not taken into account in the current study. In future research, it is recommended that gender be considered as well.

References

Aida, Y. (1994). Examination of Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's construct of foreign language anxiety: The case of students of the Japanese. *Modern Language Journal*, *78*, 155-168.

Boudreau, C., MacIntyre, P. D., & Dewaele, J.-M. (2018). Enjoyment and anxiety in second language communication: An idiodynamic approach. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching, 8*(1), 149-170.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development.* Harvard University Press.

Chen, X. (1997). Students' peer groups in high school: The pattern and relationship to educational outcomes (NCES 97-055). Department of Education.

Chorpita, B. F., & Barlow, D. H. (1998). The development of anxiety: The role of control in the early environment. *Psychological Bulletin, 124*(1), 3-21.

Crookall, D., & Oxford, R. (1991). Dealing with anxiety: Some practical activities for language learners and teacher trainees. In E. K. Horwitz, & D. J. Young (Eds.), Language anxiety: From theory and research to classroom implications (pp. 141-148). Prentice Hall.

Dewaele, J.-M. (2002). Psychological and sociodemographic correlates of communicative anxiety in L2 and L3 production*. International Journal of Bilingualism, 6*(1), 23-38.

Dewaele, J.-M., & Dewaele, L. (2017). The dynamic interactions in foreign language classroom anxiety and foreign language enjoyment of pupils aged 12 to 18: A pseudo-longitudinal investigation. *Journal of the European Second Language Association, 1*, 11-22.

Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics.* Oxford University Press.

Elahi Shirvan, M., & Taherian, T. (2018). Longitudinal examination of university students' foreign language enjoyment and foreign language classroom anxiety in the course of general English: Latent growth curve modeling. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism.* https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2018.1441804

Dutra, R., & Finger, I. (2019). Age and proficiency in foreign language anxiety. *Caderno de Letras*, *35*, 209-220.

Ganschow, L., Sparks, R. L., Anderson, R., Javorsky, J., Skinner, S., & Patton, J. (1994). Differences in language performance among high-, average-, and low-anxious college foreign language learners. *Modern Language Journal, 78*, 41-55.

Gao, L. X., & Zhang, L. J. (2020). Teacher learning in difficult times: Examining foreign language teachers' cognitions about online teaching to tide over COVID-19. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *11*, 1-14. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.549653

Gkonou, C. (2013). A diary study on the causes of English language classroom anxiety. *International Journal of English Studies, 13*(1), 51-68.

Gkonou, C. (2017). Towards an ecological understanding of language anxiety. In C. Gkonou, M. Daubney, & J. M. Dewaele (Eds.), *New insights into language anxiety: Theory, research and educational implications* (pp. 136-156). Multilingual Matters.

Horwitz, E. K. (2000). It ain't over till it's over: On foreign language anxiety, first language deficits, and the confounding variables. *Modern Language Journal, 84*, 256-259.

Horwitz, E. K. (2001). Language anxiety and achievement. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 21*, 112-126.

Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M., & Cope. J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *Modern Language Journal, 70*(1), 125-132.

Kasbi, S., & Elahi Shirvan, M. (2017). Ecological understanding of foreign language speaking anxiety: Emerging patterns and dynamic systems. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education, 2*(1), 2-20.

Kleinmann, H. H. (1977). Avoidance behavior in adult second language acquisition. *Language Learning, 27*, 93-117.

Kruk, M. (2018). Changes in foreign language anxiety: A classroom perspective. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics, 28*(1), 31-57.

Kruk M., Zawodniak J. (2021). The changing nature of foreign language anxiety: The case of individual learners. In Pawlak M. (Ed.), *Investigating individual learner differences in second language learning: Second language learning and teaching* (pp. 49-72). Springer.

Larsen-Freeman, D., & Cameron, L. (2008). *Complex systems and applied linguistics*. Oxford University Press.

Li, B. (2022). The influence of teacher-student relationship on anxiety and depression in children. *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, 3*, 232-238.

Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.

Liu, M., & Xiangming, L. (2019). Changes in and effects of anxiety on English test performance in Chinese postgraduate EFL classrooms. *Education Research International*, 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1155/2019/7213925

López, M. G. M., & Aguilar, A. P. (2013). Emotions as learning enhancers of foreign language learning motivation. *Profile Issues in Teachers' Professional Development, 15*(1), 109-124.

MacIntyre, P. D. (1995a). How does anxiety affect second language learning? A reply to Sparks and Ganschow. *Modern Language Journal, 79*, 90-99.

MacIntyre, P. D. (1995b). On seeing the forest and the trees: A rejoinder to Sparks and Ganschow. *Modern Language Journal, 79*, 245-248.

MacIntyre, P. D. (1998). Language anxiety: A review of the research for language teachers. In D. J. Young (Ed.), *Affect in foreign language and second language learning* (pp. 24-45). McGraw-Hill.

MacIntyre, P. D. (2017). An overview of language anxiety research and trends in its development. In C. Gkonou, M. Daubney, & J.-M. Dewaele (Eds.), *New insights into language anxiety: Theory, research and educational implications* (pp.11-30). Multilingual Matters.

MacIntyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1994). The subtle effects of language anxiety on cognitive processing in the second language. *Language Learning, 44*, 283-305.

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldana, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Nassaji, H. (2020). Good qualitative research. *Language Teaching Research, 24*(4), 427-431. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168820941288

Nästesjö, J. (2021). Navigating uncertainty: Early career academics and practices of appraisal devices. *Issues in Higher Education, 59*, 237-259.

Onwuegbuzie, A., Bailey, P., & Daley, C. E. F. (1999). Factors associated with foreign language anxiety. *Applied Psycholinguistics, 20*(2), 217-239.

Pan C., & Zhang X. (2021). A longitudinal study of foreign language anxiety and enjoyment. *Language Teaching Research.* https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168821993341

Pawlak, M. (2011). Anxiety as a factor influencing the use of language learning strategies. In M. Pawlak (Ed.), *Extending the boundaries of research on second language learning and teaching* (pp. 149-165). Springer.

Piniel, K., & Csizér, K. (2015). Changes in motivation, anxiety and self-efficacy during the course of an academic writing seminar. In Z. Dörnyei, P. D. MacIntyre, & A. Henry (Eds.), *Motivational dynamics in language learning* (pp. 164-194). Multilingual Matters.

Price, M. L. (1991). The subjective experience of foreign language anxiety: Interviews with highly anxious students. In E. K. Horwitz & D. J. Young (Eds.), *Language anxiety: From theory and research to classroom implications* (pp. 101-108). Prentice Hall.

Sheldon. K. M., Houser-Marko, L., & Kasser, T. (2006). Does autonomy increase with age? Comparing the goal motivations of college students and their parents. *Journal of Research in Personality, 40*(2), 168-178.

Sparks, R. J., & Ganschow, L. (1991). Foreign language learning differences: Affective or native language aptitude. *Modern Language Journal, 75*, 2-16.

Suleimenova, Z. (2013). Speaking anxiety in a foreign language classroom in Kazakhstan. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences, 93*, 1860-1868.

Wentzel, K. R. (1998). Social relationships and motivation in middle school: The role of parents, teachers, and peers. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 90*(2), 202-209. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.90.2.202

Yang, D. (2001). Anxiety of middle school students-the role of teacher-student relationship and peer relationship. *Chinese Mental Health Journal, 13*(2), 78-80.

Young, D. J. (1991). Creating a low-anxiety classroom environment: What does language anxiety research suggest? *Modern Language Journal, 75*(4), 426-437.

Zheng, M., Guo, X., Chen, Z., Deng, J., & Hu, M. (2023). Association between interpersonal relations and anxiety, depression symptoms, and suicidal ideation among middle school students. *Frontiers Public Health, 11*, 1053341.