# *Foreign language anxiety and high school language learners' productive skills: Negative events in the EFL classroom*

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## Abstract

This paper aims to examine emotion-related events while speaking and writing. The three research questions pertained to the level of speaking anxiety, and the level of writing anxiety, the most prominent speaking anxiety related events, and the most prominent writing anxiety related events. The data were collected from 86 Polish high school students by means of a questionnaire which included the speaking anxiety, and the writing anxiety scales in the form of a Likert scale, as well as the open-ended questions. The study revealed that writing anxiety was generally slightly higher than speaking anxiety. Firstly, when it comes to speaking anxiety, the data analysis revealed that vocabulary-related events were the most threatening, and they were caused by learners' limited vocabulary and the fear of forgetting a given word. Secondly, as for writing anxiety, vocabulary-oriented events were again identified as the most threatening emotion-related situations. The findings are used as a basis for providing pedagogical implications for language teachers.

*Keywords*: foreign language anxiety; speaking anxiety; writing anxiety; productive skills; negative events

## 1. Introduction

The foreign language classroom environment is a learning space which can be either bathed in light, or covered in darkness. Language learners experience positive emotions, such as enjoyment, pride, and determination which facilitate their second or foreign language (L2) performance, or negative emotions, such as anxiety, shame, or guilt which get in the way of language performance. From the present author's past experiences as an EFL learner, emotions are the key component of the process of language learning. This article places a spotlight on the negative swing of the pendulum, which, in this case, is anxiety.

As mentioned above, the foreign language classroom is a place where various negative forces can emerge, one of which, foreign language anxiety (FLA), a construct that engenders, or is an outcome of negative events. FLA can dishearten learners, prevent them from using the target language (TL), and cast a shadow on their overall perception of language-oriented events. This paper, however, focuses more specifically on speaking anxiety, and writing anxiety.

When it comes to the dimensions of speaking and writing, FLA can manifest itself in various negative events, in which learners succumb to negative thoughts, or other forces, such as physiological reactions. These dimensions can be internally inhibited by, for example, learners' self-esteem (Ellis, 1994; Szyszka, 2017), perfectionism (Frost et al., 1990; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002), and neuroticism (Dewaele, 2002), or externally by teachers' beliefs (Young, 1991) and the frequency of L2 use (Gardner et al., 1977).

Even though in recent years, research into FLA and its relation to productive skills, namely, speaking, and writing, has been gaining momentum (e.g., Dracopoulos & Pichette, 2011; Gkonou, 2011; Kasbi & Shirvan, 2017; Mak, 2011; Quvanch & Kew, 2022; Sabti et al., 2019), not many researchers have attempted to examine both speaking anxiety and writing anxiety simultaneously at the level of secondary school. The present paper aims to fill the gap in the literature by reporting a study which set out to determine high school language learners' levels of speaking and writing anxiety and to identify their sources as well as effects on L2 speaking and writing performance.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Revisiting FLA

Anxiety can be understood as "a painful emotion experience by excitations in the internal organs of the body" (Hall, 1954, p. 61), or as "the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of

the autonomic nervous system" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 125). FLA, however, is "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). Furthermore, this phenomenon is also defined as "the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language" (MacIntyre, 1999, p. 27). As for productive skills, writing anxiety, or, in other words, *writing apprehension*, is a form of anxiety, which, in their study, Erkan and Saban (2011), depict as "the tendency of a person to avoid the process of writing-particularly when it is to be evaluated in some way" (p. 181). On the other hand, speaking anxiety, sometimes also referred to as *communication apprehension*, remains pertinent to the way FLA is viewed, because of its concern with interpersonal communication. This manifestation of anxiety is a "type of shyness characterized by fear of or anxiety about communicating with people" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 127).

Szyszka (2017) underlines the existence of manifold categorizations of causes of FLA (cf. Ohata, 2005; Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008; Young, 1991); however, all of them are related to sources either governed internally or externally. As Szyszka (2017) explains, there are various internal causes of anxiety which embrace learners' perceptions of themselves in language learning contexts, or in the presence of the teacher and other learners: *self-esteem*, namely, the extent to which persons are self-assured and convinced of their salience (Ellis, 1994), and *perfectionism*, which is regarded as the cause of establishing unduly demanding performance-oriented requirements among students and correlates with anxiety (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). While Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) discuss perfectionism, Dewaele (2002) suggests another personality trait related source of anxiety, namely, *neuroticism*, which he portrays as "a minor nervous disorder" (p. 27). Moreover, Dewaele and Tsui Shan Ip (2013) mention that learners who cope with ambiguity in learning a foreign language more efficiently are less likely to experience anxiety in the foreign language classroom. *Tolerance of ambiguity* "entails an ability to deal with ambiguous stimuli without frustration and without appeals to authority" (Ellis, 1994, p. 518). Internal causes of anxiety also concern learners' beliefs about the L2 learning process. Deeming pronunciation to be a vital aspect of their knowledge of the target language, learners succumb to resentment and strain (Young, 1991), which, in light of the disparity between learner's beliefs and reality, as Szyszka (2017) claims, may contribute to high levels of anxiety, if they do not manifest a high level of motivation.

When it comes to external causes, students' perception of external stimuli may induce anxiety. Therefore, the way in which learners view teachers, their behavior, teaching styles, classroom practices, and methods of evaluation is fundamental (Szyszka, 2017). For example, Young (1991) argues that teachers' beliefs

about language teaching may in some cases enhance language anxiety. This happens when teachers see themselves as controllers who correct errors whenever they are made, believe that they are the ones who should speak most of the time, and do not allow students to work in pairs so as not to lose control of the class. According to Szyszka (2017), FLA does not only originate from learners, but it might also be a result of the experiences they face in classroom and non-classroom environments (Szyszka, 2017). For example, as Baker and MacIntyre's (2000) research indicates, students belonging to the immersion group scored lower on the second language anxiety. As for frequency of language use, Gardner et al. (1977) found that as proficiency and practice increase, anxiety over speaking French decreases. Similarly, Matsuda and Gobel (2004) concluded that learners who had had experiences abroad exhibited lower levels of anxiety.

## 2.2. Conceptualizing FLA

To offer insights into the development of research into FLA, MacIntyre (2017) reviewed three broad approaches: (1) *the confounded approach*, (2) *the specialized approach*, and (3) *the dynamic approach*. The first phase, namely, the confounded approach, can be called this way, because not having scrutinized the concept regarding L2 learning thoroughly, researchers borrowed theories about anxiety and how it impacts learning from a blend of numerous sources. During this phase, Alpert and Haber (1960) presented the first distinction between *debilitating* and *facilitating* anxiety, while Spielberger (1966) distinguished between *trait anxiety*, which is overall proneness to anxiety, and *state anxiety*, which can be defined as experiencing anxious reactions in specific contexts. The trait/state division has been plausible as a concept, contrary to the facilitation/debilitation distinction which has not been an effective path for researchers in second language acquisition. Due to the emergence of specific constructs of language-related anxiety, the confusion surrounding various types of anxiety and their applicability to L2 learning began to draw to an end (cf. MacIntyre, (2017).

    As indicated by MacIntyre (2017), the confounded approach was followed by the specialized approach. Horwitz et al. (1986) strongly argued in favor of the reorientation of reconceptualization and measurement of anxiety in SLA, which eventually contributed to the establishment of anxiety as situation-specific construct, allowing research in this field to thrive. Attention was subsequently shifted to the causes of anxiety, and the ways in which language anxiety impacts language learning. The developing research into FLA and its effects, however, was called into question at one point by Sparks and Ganschow (1995), who believed that anxiety is only an outcome of linguistic coding issues as well as aptitude, questioning the fundamental hypothesis of discourse, namely, that anxiety

is the culprit of difficulties in L2 learning. Scrutinizing language anxiety in particular language processes also led to research into specific skill-oriented target language spheres, such as writing anxiety or speaking anxiety which are the main foci of this paper. For example, Cheng et al. (1999) developed the *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale* (FLCAS) and L1 writing anxiety scale.

The third phase, which is the dynamic approach, embraces a divergent epistemology in comparison to most of the earlier mentioned research. For instance, dynamic systems are multitudinously regulated, and they manifest themselves on various timescales, engendering nascent attributes recognized by learners as qualitatively diverse conditions (cf. MacIntyre, 2017). One of the issues MacIntyre (2017) elaborated on was the salience of L2 learners' interpersonal, social, psychological, emotional, and physiological operations. Studies adopting the dynamic approach highlight that anxiety is influenced by complex interactions of manifold factors, that is, anxiety, perceived competence, willingness to communicate as well as various aspects of learning and communication circumstances. In line with the dynamic approach, case studies, such as Kasbi and Shirvan's (2017), captured the dynamic nature of speaking anxiety (see subsection 2.3 for more details).

## 2.3. Research into speaking anxiety and writing anxiety

Several researchers have attempted to provide insights into various aspects of speaking and writing anxiety. In one study, Kasbi and Shirvan (2017) aimed to investigate EFL learners' speaking anxiety from an ecological perspective within the framework of nested ecosystems and complex dynamic system theory (Larsen Freeman & Cameron, 2008), and examined the dynamic nature of speaking anxiety. To elicit responses from a mixture of EFL students in terms of their anxiety level, the researchers chose four female participants, whose average age was 15. The group consisted of 16 adults who were from an Iranian English Institute and participated in an intermediate EFL course in Mashhad. The researchers collected the data by means of semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom monitoring and motometer (an A4 sheet of paper with thermometer-shaped figures with a 0 at the lowest and 100 at the highest point of anxiety) over the period of two months and five classroom sessions. Kasbi and Shirvan (2017) observed that the students' level of speaking anxiety can be influenced by developments within the dynamics of classroom ecology in a different way. For example, even in situations where learners with low anxiety are highly anxious, highly anxious learners can be relaxed. Kasbi and Shirvan (2017) also found that each participant displayed similar trends while encountering attractor states.

Studies adopting CDST are not the only studies that attempt to examine speaking anxiety. The FLCAS can also be used to identify factors contributing to

speaking anxiety, which was done in the present paper where both causes and effects of this type of anxiety were considered. For example, Mak (2011) examined a group of 313 Chinese ESL first-year university students in Hong Kong, adapting the FLCAS. Factor analysis allowed identification of five factors: speech anxiety and fear of negative evaluation; uncomfortableness when speaking with native speakers; negative attitudes towards the English classroom; negative self-evaluation; and fear of failing the class/consequences of personal failure. The results also revealed that speaking without preparation in front of classmates, error correction while speaking, the lack of opportunities to use L1 in the second language classroom, and insufficient wait-time (i.e., the time given to the learner before he or she is expected to answer a question) also enhanced learners' speaking anxiety.

There are also studies which have focused on writing anxiety. Sabti et al. (2019) explored individual differences in Iraqi EFL learners' writing self-efficacy, writing achievement motivation as well as with respect to the construct relevant to the topic of the present paper, which is writing anxiety. The sample included 100 Iraqi undergraduate students who were English majors at two public universities. The researchers administered three questionnaires, that is, the *Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory* (SLWAI, Cheng, 2004), the *Achievement Goal Questionnaire* (AGQ, Elliot & Church, 1997), and the *Writer Self-Perception Scale* (WSPS, Bottomley et al., 1998). They also implemented one descriptive writing activity which involved writing 200-250 words essays within 45 minutes. It was uncovered that higher levels of self-efficacy and writing achievement motivation contributed to more efficient writing performance, while higher levels of writing anxiety hindered writing performance. Similarly, while writing self-efficacy and writing achievement motivation were positively and significantly correlated, writing anxiety and self-efficacy, and writing anxiety and writing achievement motivation were negatively correlated.

Another study focusing on writing anxiety was conducted by Quvanch and Kew (2022) who investigated the level, types, and sources of writing anxiety. The participants were 133 undergraduate Afghan EFL students. The scholars employed SLWAI and the *Cause of Writing Anxiety Inventory* (CWAI, Rezaei & Jafari, 2014). The results indicated a moderate level of writing anxiety, the dominant type of which was cognitive anxiety. While there were no significant differences in the level of writing anxiety in terms of learners' gender and years of learning, there was a significant difference among students from different backgrounds possessing different proficiency levels. In addition, Quvanch and Kew (2022) identified time pressure, linguistics problems, the pressure to be perfect, and the fear of being evaluated by teachers as the most prominent writing anxiety triggering factors.

Despite the studies on speaking anxiety and writing anxiety that have been conducted over the years, the juxtaposition of the two constructs still remains an

under-researched topic. Therefore, the present study aimed to compare the two types of anxiety simultaneously in the high school educational setting. The literature review introduced above suggests that research into both speaking anxiety and writing anxiety can lead to inspiring conclusions and directions for future studies. These could include, for example, a focus on further causes and effects of speaking anxiety and writing anxiety, the dynamic trajectories of the two phenomena, and correlations between these two constructs as well as variables affecting them.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Research questions

The study aimed to investigate FLA with respect to productive skills, namely, writing and speaking. Therefore, three research questions are formulated:

RQ1: Which productive skill caused a higher level of anxiety: speaking or writing?
RQ2: What are the most prominent speaking anxiety related events in the EFL classroom?
RQ3: What are the most prominent writing anxiety related events in the EFL classroom?

### 3.2. Participants

86 students participated in the study. There were 48 female learners, 29 male learners, while nine learners preferred not to reveal their gender. The participants' mean age was 16.5 years old ($SD$ = 1.48), oscillating between 14 and 19 years. On average, they had been learning English for 10.5 years ($SD$ = 2.03). The participants were also asked to self-evaluate their ability to speak and write in English on a scale from one to six. Whilst their mean of self-assessment of speaking in English amounted to 4.02 ($SD$ = 0.93), the mean of self-assessment of writing in English amounted to 4.00 ($SD$ = 1.05). When asked to describe their goals in learning English, the most common ideas were related to communication (61), career (18) and self-development (18).

### 3.3. Procedures and data collection

The data were collected by means of a questionnaire that included three parts. The first part concerned the participants' demographics: gender, age, years of learning English, the self-assessment of speaking in English ability, the self-assessment of writing in English ability and goals of learning English. The second part

was divided into two sections: the speaking anxiety scale and the writing anxiety scale took the form of a Likert scale. Each scale comprised ten items, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), which pertained either to factors that are related to speaking anxiety (e.g., "When I am anxious, I do not use sophisticated vocabulary in my utterances in English"), or writing anxiety respectively (e.g., "While writing different texts in English, I fret over my inadequately rich vocabulary"). The third part comprised two open-ended questions. The first one focused on the situations which cause stress while speaking in English, and the second one pertained to events which cause stress while writing. To test the internal consistency of the speaking anxiety and the writing anxiety scales used in this study, the Cronbach's alpha values were calculated. They amounted to 0.85 for both the speaking anxiety scale and the writing anxiety scale, which indicates a satisfactory level of internal consistency reliability.

The scale concerning speaking anxiety was based on several scales. The first was the *Public Speaking Classroom Anxiety Scale* (PSCAS, Yaikhong & Usaha, 2012) which was developed to measure anxiety in the EFL public speaking class in the Thai context. For example, the scale included the following statements: "I am afraid that other students will laugh at me when I am speaking English," or "I can feel my heart pounding when I am going to be called on." The second scale, the *Personal Report of Communication Apprehension* (PRCA-24, McCroskey, 1970), was created to measure trait-like communication apprehension. The scale included six items for each of the following dimensions: speaking in small groups (e.g., "I dislike participating in group discussions"), speaking in meetings (e.g., "I am afraid to express myself at meetings"), speaking in dyads (e.g., "I am afraid to speak up in conversations"), and public speaking (e.g., "While giving a speech, I get so nervous I forget facts I really know"). The third scale, the *Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety* (PRPSA-34, McCroskey, 1970), concerned feelings related to giving a speech in public contexts (e.g., "I have no fear of giving a speech;" "I breathe faster just before starting a speech;" "I have trouble falling asleep at night before a speech"). Finally, the *Speaker Anxiety Scale* (SA, Clevenger & Halvorson, 1992) was employed to measure state anxiety since it was developed to examine situational anxiety with respect to public speaking. Many items included in the SA were arguably reproductions of items of the PRPSA-34 and the PRCA-24. The writing anxiety scale was based on Zhang's (2011) *ESL Writing Anxiety Questionnaire*. Zhang's (2011) scale was designed to tap into ESL writing anxiety among Chinese English majors and to determine its level. The instrument included 22 items that were divided into three categories: cognitive anxiety (e.g., "While writing in English, I'm not nervous at all"), somatic anxiety (e.g., "I feel my heart pounding when I write English compositions under time constraint"), and avoidance behavior anxiety (e.g., "I usually do my best to avoid writing English compositions").

The study was conducted during EFL lessons at the level of one Polish high school.[1] Six groups were examined. To raise the participants' awareness of speaking anxiety and writing anxiety and their role in the EFL classroom, a brief introduction to the topic was made by the present researcher who acted in the capacity of the teacher. After the students were familiarized with the aim of this study, the questionnaire was handed out to them in paper form so that the present author could closely supervise the entire data-collection procedure. The participants received a Polish version of the questionnaire to avoid any comprehension difficulties. The study design was cross-sectional which means the data were collected at only one point in time. The data collection approximately took from 10 to 15 minutes.

## 3.4. Analysis

The data analysis, which was mainly quantitative in nature, involved calculating the mean values for speaking anxiety and writing anxiety, and the mean values of individual items to identify the most prominent speaking anxiety and writing anxiety related events. The mean value of self-assessment of the ability to speak in English and the mean value of self-assessment of the ability to write in English were also calculated to account for the mean values of speaking anxiety and writing anxiety, respectively. The values of standard deviation for the level of speaking anxiety and writing anxiety, the items included in the scales, and for the mean values of self-assessment were calculated. The Cronbach's Alpha, however, was computed to check the scales' reliability. All participants' open-ended responses were listed, counted, and the consistencies between the answers were explored. On the basis of similarity of answers, several categories were created and labelled, as well as presented in percentage.

## 4. Results

## 4.1. The scales

With regard to the first research question (i.e., "Which productive skill caused a higher level of anxiety: speaking or writing?"), the findings indicate that the learners experienced a low level of speaking anxiety and a slightly higher level of writing anxiety. As can be seen in Figure 1 and Table 1, the overall mean of speaking anxiety among all participants was 2.60 ($SD$ = 0.49), and the overall mean of

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[1] The present author wishes to express his gratitude to Alina Wesołowska-Lisiak for her indispensable help in data collection.

writing anxiety amounted to 2.67 (*SD* = 0.47). The difference between the mean values was minute and the values of standard deviation are almost identically low.
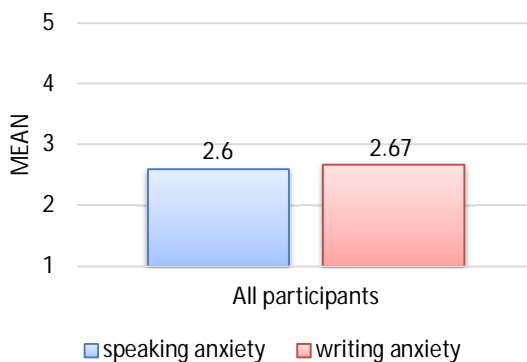


Figure 1 The levels of speaking anxiety and writing anxiety (*N* = 86)

Table 1 Mean and SD values for speaking anxiety and writing anxiety items comprising the questionnaire (*N* = 86)

| Productive skill | Statement | *M* (*SD*) |
|---|---|---|
| Speaking | 1. When I am anxious, I do not use sophisticated vocabulary in my utterances in English. | 3.69 (1.14) |
| | 2. I start sweating when the teacher asks me to answer. | 2.52 (1.49) |
| | 3. I feel anxious when the teacher corrects my errors in English in front of everyone in the classroom. | 2.48 (1.40) |
| | 4. I am so worried about the teacher's evaluation of my utterance in English that I make errors. | 2.44 (1.39) |
| | 5. In the English class, I feel that my classmates speak better than me. | 3.16 (1.48) |
| | 6. In discussions held in English, I have got many things to say, I know answers to the questions, but I'm afraid to use them. | 2.74 (1.29) |
| | 7. While giving my speech, I cannot focus on anything else than the teacher's assessment. | 2.07 (1.23) |
| | 8. I find it difficult to speak in English when I hear whispers in the back of the classroom. | 2.36 (1.35) |
| | 9. I hope that no one in the classroom is listening to me when I speak in English. | 2.49 (1.44) |
| | 10. I turn red when I speak in English in front of everyone in the classroom. | 2.07 (1.31) |
| | Total | 2.60 (0.49) |
| Writing | 1. While writing different texts in English, I fret over my inadequately rich vocabulary. | 3.13 (1.14) |
| | 2. I am stressed when I do not know how to spell a word or a phrase in English correctly. | 2.59 (1.22) |
| | 3. My hands shake when I have to read my texts in English aloud in front of everyone in the classroom. | 2.19 (1.40) |
| | 4. My heartbeat accrues when I have to write a text in English under time pressure. | 3.09 (1.39) |
| | 5. I feel insecure about writing longer compositions in English. | 3.09 (1.44) |
| | 6. I am so anxious while writing texts in English that my handwriting becomes intelligible. | 1.94 (1.23) |
| | 7. My mind goes blank when I do not know how to translate words or phrases into English. | 3.20 (1.34) |
| | 8. I feel frustration when I do not know where I should insert commas in my written assignment in English. | 2.22 (1.38) |
| | 9. I fear that I will not cope with the topic on which I have to elaborate in English. | 2.88 (1.35) |
| | 10. Writing texts in English stresses me out. | 2.36 (1.31) |
| | Total | 2.67 (0.47) |

When it comes to the second research question, which was related to the speaking anxiety related events, Table 1 demonstrates that the following statements were identified as the most prominent: "When I am anxious, I do not use

sophisticated vocabulary in my utterances in English" (Statement 1, *M* = 3.69, *SD* = 1.14); "In the English class, I feel that my classmates speak better than me" (Statement 5, *M* = 3.16, *SD* = 1.48); "In discussions held in English, I have got many things to say, I know answers to the questions, but I'm afraid to use them" (Statement 6, *M* = 2.74, *SD* = 1.29).

Addressing the third research question, which pertained to writing anxiety related events, the emotion-related situations deemed as the most prominent were represented by the following statements: "While writing different texts in English, I fret over my inadequately rich vocabulary" (Statement 1, *M* = 3.13, *SD* = 1.14); "My mind goes blank when I do not know how to translate words or phrases into English" (Statement 7, *M* = 3.20, *SD* = 1.34); "My heartbeat accrues when I have to write a text in English under time pressure" (Statement 4, *M* = 3.09, *SD* = 1.39); "I feel insecure about writing longer compositions in English" (Statement 5, *M* = 3.09, *SD* = 1.44).

## 4.2. The open-ended questions

Revisiting the second research question, which concerned the most prominent speaking anxiety related events, the responses to question 1 ("What stresses you out the most when you speak in English? Describe exemplificatory situations"), portrayed the following situations as speaking anxiety triggering (see Figure 2): 26% of learners identified vocabulary[2] (e.g., "Forgetting the words I want to use;" "When my vocabulary is inadequately rich;" "Groping for a better word, which results in repetitions"), 17% of learners identified classmates' presence and evaluation (e.g., "I'm stressed the most when everyone is looking at me;" "I'm afraid of others' evaluation when I make a mistake"), including 5% of answers, which concerned the fear of being laughed at (e.g., "Mocking comments made by classmates;" "When I forget certain words, the classmates might laugh at me"), 15% of learners identified pronunciation as the cause of FLA (e.g. "Occasional problems with fluency;" "The pronunciation of words seen for the first time"), 11% of students recognized grammar and the insecurity about choosing the right tense (e.g., "Not knowing which tense I should use;" "When I'm not sure if the sentence structure is correct"), 10% of responses concerned the lack of knowledge what to say (e.g., "Speaking about the chapter I don't know much about;" "Forgetting what I wanted to say;" "Not knowing what to say and prolonging"), and 9% of learners pointed to making obvious mistakes and slips of the tongue (e.g., "Mistakes that are noticeable by native speakers"). 12% percent of students claimed that nothing made them feel anxious.

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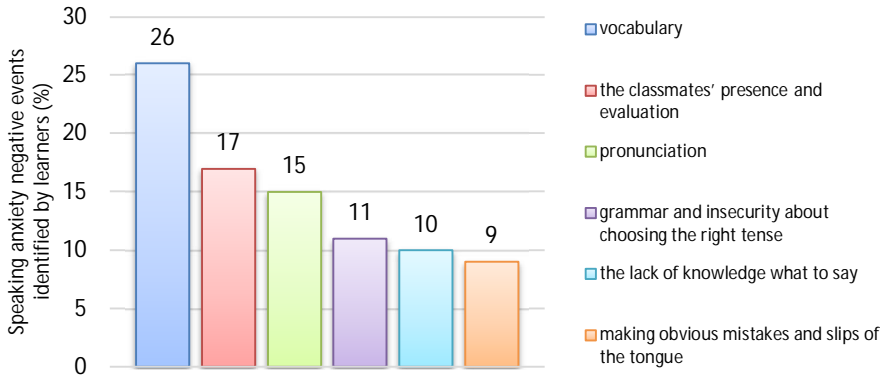[2] All excerpts are translations from Polish to English by the present author.

Figure 2 Factors triggering speaking anxiety

Returning to the third research question, which pertained to the most prominent writing anxiety related events, with respect to question 2 ("What stresses you out the most when you write in English? Provide some examples"), as can be seen in Figure 3, 38% of students also identified vocabulary as a writing anxiety triggering factor (e.g., "Others who have more plentiful vocabulary richness"), 21% of students were anxious about grammar and insecure about choosing the right tense (e.g., "When I don't know how to structure the sentence to make it logical;" "Minor mistakes like 'a' or 'the';" "Using a correct tense, which I confuse more in writing than in speaking"), 19% of students stated that they were anxious about spelling (e.g., "Spelling more complex words correctly;" "Misspelling words I don't use every day"), 11% of responses were related to the stress caused by time pressure. The data analysis also revealed that 11% of learners did not recognize any stressful situations.
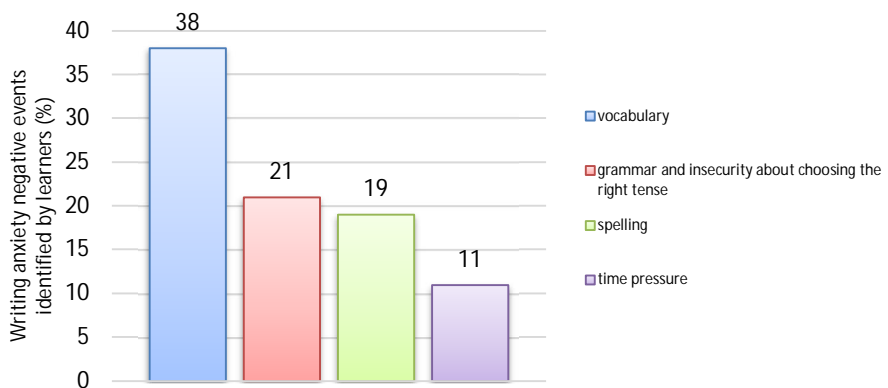


Figure 3 Factors triggering writing anxiety

## 5. Discussion

The present study was aimed to shed light on speaking anxiety and writing anxiety. With reference to the first research question (i.e., "Which productive skill manifested the higher level of anxiety: speaking or writing?"), the skill of writing proved to bring about a slightly higher level of anxiety than speaking. The level of both constructs, however, was fairly low, which could be explained in terms of a friendly learning environment, or their sufficiently high self-evaluation of speaking (*M* = 4.02, *SD* = 0.93) and writing (*M* = 4.00, *SD* = 1.05). While the level of writing anxiety was slightly higher than the level of speaking anxiety, learners' self-evaluation of writing was slightly lower than their self-evaluation of speaking, which corresponds to the level of speaking anxiety, and the level of writing anxiety, and explains the minute differences between them. The majority of statements from both scales, however, scored relatively low, with a few exceptions which will be discussed below.

Concerning the second research question, which referred to the most prominent speaking anxiety related events, it was possible to address it on the basis of quantitative analysis which suggests that vocabulary was the most important emotion-related factor while speaking. Statement 1, namely, "When I am anxious, I do not use sophisticated vocabulary in my utterances in English," being at a moderately high level, scored highest among all other statements, which is consistent with Morena's (2018) research in which anxious learners distinguished cognitive responses such as using simpler means of communication. Moving on to the open-ended answers, based on the responses of 26% of learners, vocabulary was also identified as one of the most distinct speaking anxiety related factors, which is consistent with the findings of the quantitative phase. Whereas Statement 1 pertained to the participants taking a simpler and safer approach, open-ended questions also concerned learners' fear of forgetting the words or worrying about limited vocabulary. Such findings are in line with those reported by Liu (2006). Alongside the lack of practice and low English proficiency, the lack of vocabulary was among the three main factors that generated anxiety while speaking.

Another factor that proved to induce anxiety when speaking is recognizing EFL classmates as superior target language users, which pertained to Statement 5 (i.e., "In the English class, I feel that my classmates speak better than me"). Comparing oneself to other students and recognizing oneself as a worse speaker might be a result of low self-esteem. As Szyszka observed (2017), "a learner with low self-esteem may perceive his L2 pronunciation competence as inadequate or worse than that of others, which in turn may raise the level of language anxiety" (p. 72). Fear of answering questions posed by the teacher, despite knowing the answers (i.e., Statement 6, "In discussions held in English, I have got many

things to say, I know answers to the questions, but I'm afraid to use them"), was another factor contributing to speaking anxiety. Learners might deem their mastery of the target language as insufficient, which once again confirms Szyszka's (2017) observations concerning low self-esteem, or Horwitz et al.'s (1986) study which revealed that 9% of the participants felt uneasy about volunteering.

The analysis of the open-ended responses allowed identification of several speaking anxiety triggering factors. One of them was vocabulary which has already been referred to above. Being observed by classmates in the classroom, which embraces the concept of "stage fright" mentioned by Horwitz et al. (1986), was another anxiety-inducing factor reported by learners. The presence of classmates and their evaluation, which is in line with Statement 5 (i.e., "In the English class, I feel that my classmates speak better than me"), might again indicate learners' low self-esteem (Szyszka, 2017), perfectionism (Frost et al., 1990), or even uneasiness around certain students, either caused by their speaking ability, which is perceived as superior, or their mocking comments and reactions (see subsection 4.2), as was highlighted by some participants (5%).

Moreover, 15% of the participants perceived pronunciation as stressful. This was attributed, for example, to occasional problems with fluency, which could be explained in terms of tense articulatory organs (Szyszka, 2017). The participants also claimed that they were anxious about grammar mistakes or insecure about choosing the right tense, which might imply their inadequate mastery of all tenses nested in contexts, and fear of evaluation, in light of Horwitz et al.'s (1986) research. Another cause of speaking anxiety, which was the lack of knowledge, or forgetting what to say, might be related to insufficient world knowledge, or unfamiliarity with metacognitive strategies such as planning and achievement-compensatory strategies, with which "learners who have encountered a problem in communicating come up with another plan to reach their original goal" (Oxford, 2016, p. 297).

Moving on to the third research question, which concerned the most prominent writing anxiety related events, vocabulary was one of the most important triggers. Similarly to speaking anxiety, the responses to Statement 1 (i.e., "While writing different texts in English, I fret over my inadequately rich vocabulary"), and Statement 7 (i.e., "My mind goes blank when I do not know how to translate words or phrases into English") were consistent with the open-ended responses, since 38% of students identified vocabulary as a stress inducing factor, which was again related to learners' concern about limited vocabulary. In all cases, however, Statement 1 in the writing scale (i.e., "While writing different texts in English, I fret over my inadequately rich vocabulary") and Statement 7 from in writing scale (i.e., "My mind goes blank when I do not know how to translate words or phrases into English") scored lower than Statement 1 in

the speaking scale (i.e., "When I am anxious, I do not use sophisticated vocabulary in my utterances in English"). It could mean that when it comes to vocabulary, facing emotion-related speaking events such as, for example, performing in front of other students, is perceived as considerably more threatening than facing emotion-related writing events, such as writing composition when no one sees it. Such reactions might yet again be a result of "stage fright" or fear of evaluation, as proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986).

Experiencing the feeling of insecurity about writing longer compositions is another example of a threatening situation in writing. It may have been caused by the participants' inadequate metacognitive knowledge, which, as Oxford (2016) observed, provides insight into learners' identity as writers and helps them deploy adequate writing strategies. What is more, the aforementioned insecurity might have been a consequence of the lack of ideas on how to elaborate on a more advanced topic, which, yet again, might have been caused by limited vocabulary, fear of evaluation (Horwitz et al. 1986), or the relationship between metacognitive knowledge and writing performance, as was discovered by Kasper (1997) who examined ESL adult learners.

Interestingly, increasing heartbeat while writing a text under time pressure is an issue to be considered as well. Von Wörde (2003) distinguishes various manifestations of anxiety, one of which is the physical type that includes "pounding heart." Of all physiologically oriented items, which included physical reactions such as sweating, turning red, shaking hands, Statement 4 in the writing anxiety scale (i.e., "My heartbeat accrues when I have to write a text in English under time pressure") scored the highest of all physiologically oriented items, which corresponds with the open-ended findings, since 11% of participants identified writing under time pressure as stressful.

As was the case with factors related to speaking anxiety, the open-ended responses also revealed that 21% of the participants recognized grammar and the insecurity about choosing the right tense among the writing anxiety factors. Surprisingly, one participant claimed that he was anxious about choosing the right tense in writing more than in speaking. This student, however, evaluated her speaking and writing ability equally. 19% of students were also stressed about spelling but the quantitative analysis indicates that the mean of Statement 2 was moderately low.

## 6. Conclusions, limitations, pedagogical implications, and directions

The present study constitutes one of the very few attempts to contribute to existing literature by exploring the nature of both speaking anxiety and writing anxiety simultaneously at the level of a secondary school. The first objective was

to juxtapose the level of speaking anxiety, and the level of writing anxiety. The results indicated that the general level of writing anxiety and the general level of speaking anxiety were moderately low, but the former displayed a slightly higher level than the latter. Another aim of this study was to distinguish factors related to speaking anxiety and writing anxiety, and account for their role during emotion-related events in the EFL classroom. When it comes to causes and effects of speaking anxiety, vocabulary, fear of answering questions despite knowing the answers, feeling that classmates speak better, their presence, pronunciation, insecurity about choosing the right tense, grammar mistakes, and the lack of knowledge and forgetting what to say were identified by the learners as the most common emotion-related events while speaking. As for writing anxiety, learners pointed to several causes and effects of this negative phenomenon such as vocabulary, translating words and phrases, insecurity about writing longer compositions, increasing heartbeat under time pressure, again insecurity about choosing the right tense, and spelling.

Despite the effort made by the present researcher, this study unfortunately suffers from shortcomings which concerned the data analysis, the instruments design, and the sample. First, the research could have included the analysis of speaking anxiety level and writing anxiety level in light of the participants' goals of learning English, or gender, similarly to Dewaele and MacIntyre's study (2014), according to which, female participants experienced a higher level of FLA and a higher level of foreign language enjoyment (FLE) than their male counterparts. Second, when it comes to the participants, the data were collected in only one high school in Poland, which calls into question the generalizability of the sample. Thus, it is recommended that future research projects involve more schools. Third, even though the scales could have presented speaking anxiety, and writing anxiety, as either causes, or effects, to avoid confusion regarding its typology, the present author believes that, in order to truly capture the nature of the two constructs, and provide insight into the general character of emotion-related events, both sides of the spectrum needed to be incorporated, as opposed to Sparks and Ganschow (1995), who questioned anxiety as a culprit of language difficulties. Fourth, the nature of the study was cross-sectional, which means that the investigation did not capture fluctuations in learners' individual trajectories of speaking anxiety and writing anxiety. It also did not provide an analysis of individual and environmental factors which could affect the dynamic patterns of the two manifestations of anxiety.

This study provides a basis for recommendations for EFL teachers to decrease the level of speaking anxiety and writing anxiety in their classrooms. Given that vocabulary-oriented events were the most important causes and effects of speaking anxiety and writing anxiety, the present author recommends

that expanding learners' vocabulary knowledge be one of language teachers' priority. Students should be more aware of the role of vocabulary in speaking and writing contexts. Another possible solution to the problem could be, again, familiarization with learning strategies, this time, vocabulary learning strategies. According to Webb and Nation (2017), being an opportunity to strengthen partially known vocabulary, exposure to L2 in non-classroom environments, on which incidental learning is dependent, is a crucial vocabulary learning strategy. The present author strongly supports the researchers' claim that it is teachers' responsibility to facilitate students' exposure to the target language outside the classroom. One way to achieve that, as Webb and Nation (2017) highlighted, is raising awareness of the importance of exposure to meaning-focused input in non-classroom environments. Another is teaching them to interact with meaning-focused input by means of extensive and intensive reading.

To address prominent emotion-related events while speaking, such as the presence of classmates, and their evaluation, which is consistent with Statement 5 (i.e., "In the English class, I feel that my classmates speak better than me"), several self-regulation strategies could be introduced. Based on Gross's (2014) five families of strategies and the sixth family of strategies proposed by Frankl (1984), Oxford (2016) introduced six affective strategy sets that can be employed to influence emotions. One of the sets is *selecting the situation to influence emotions*, which includes such strategies as taking a seat next to a supportive student or avoiding unfriendly classmates. To address the problem of being afraid to volunteer despite knowing the answer (Statement 6), another self-regulation strategy set could be deployed, that is, *changing cognitive appraisals of situations (internal or external) to shape emotions (reframing)*. For example, when feeling listless, "telling myself that my friend M was able to do this, and I can, too" (Oxford, 2016, p. 228). Mak (2011), however, emphasized the importance of motivating students to take risks in L2, and advised teachers to provide learners with enough time to prepare themselves before speaking.

Regarding issues rooted in pronunciation, Szyszka (2017) believes that "[a] better calibration of pronunciation learning strategies may make an anxious individual more confident in managing challenging pronunciation learning processes, and it may also help him or her to be more inclined to practice pronunciation" (p. 198). Wrembel (2008) also suggested that teachers should develop learners' understanding of learning strategies and encouraged teachers to introduce strategies-based instruction into their pronunciation curriculum by means of mindful consideration of the essence of L2 pronunciation learning. Thus, it is recommended that teachers familiarize learners with pronunciation learning strategies.

Revisiting writing anxiety, the role of emotions in foreign language learning and teaching should be emphasized among the students at all levels of

education. In a similar vein, Sabti et al. (2019) argued that teachers should strive to explain the impact affective factors have on learners' writing. The researchers also encourage teachers to promote problem-solving strategies and try to overcome writing obstacles by means of groupwork and group activities. This recommendation could help students grapple with the issues revealed by this study, such as difficulties in spelling, insecurities over choosing the right tense, and coping with time pressure.

This study also revealed another writing anxiety-oriented event, such as feeling insecure about writing longer compositions. This could be addressed with the introduction of three planning strategies for writing that were identified by Sasaki (2002): (1) *global planning*, which aims at organizing the text at a general level, (2) *thematic planning*, which is a less thorough way of planning how to organize ideas, and (3) *local planning*, which involves making plans for adding ideas.

When it comes to future research, studies should be conducted that would investigate speaking anxiety, and writing anxiety in a longitudinal manner. For example, high school learners' trajectories of writing and speaking anxiety can be examined simultaneously over the course of several semesters. Furthermore, in line with the results of this study, future research into speaking and writing anxiety could shed more light on vocabulary as a source of emotion-related events in the EFL classroom in particular. A new instrument with vocabulary as its focal point could be created, which could potentially lead to the development of more scales dedicated to one factor emerging in manifold events.

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