

# FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY AND ADVANCED EFL LEARNERS: AN INTERVIEW STUDY

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**Abstract:** Is anxiety about learning and using a foreign language mainly apparent at lower levels of language competence, or is anxiety also relevant at higher levels of proficiency? While considerable research has been conducted on the various sources of foreign language anxiety at the beginning stages of language learning, relatively little is known about anxiety at more advanced levels. To fill this gap this small scale qualitative inquiry examines the construct of foreign language anxiety in the case of advanced-level language students: English majors. It aims to provide an insight into the nature and sources of L2-related anxiety from the advanced learner's perspective: through the personal accounts of anxious learners themselves. The participants were students with high levels of foreign language anxiety, selected from a larger group of English majors based on their scores on the Hungarian version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale. They took part in a one-on-one in-depth interview concerning their learning and communication experience in EFL. The findings show that foreign language anxiety is not restricted to the early, beginning stages of language learning. Implications for teachers of foreign languages who teach advanced-level classes are discussed.

**Keywords:** foreign language anxiety, advanced-level language learners, English majors, highly anxious FL learners, reticence

## 1 Introduction

The anxiety provoking potential of learning and using a second or foreign language (L2) has long been recognized in second language acquisition research. Anxiety, together with other affective variables like attitudes and motivation, has been examined as a potential factor influencing language learning success since the 1970s; however, it was not until the mid-1980s that it was defined as a conceptually distinct variable in L2 learning (Dörnyei, 2005; Horwitz, 1990; MacIntyre 1999). According to current understanding, the anxiety non-native speakers experience when learning and using a new language is not simply the manifestation of a general, personality trait of anxiety (i.e., a predisposition to become anxious in a wide variety of situations) but rather a form of what psychologists describe as *specific anxiety reaction*: one specifically associated with L2 contexts (Gardner, 1985; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; MacIntyre, 1999).

Research findings suggest that although this anxiety, particular to language learning, shares certain characteristics with anxieties like communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1970), fear of negative evaluation (Watson & Friend, 1969), and test anxiety (Sarason, 1978), it is not merely the sum of these more general forms of anxiety transferred to language learning (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Horwitz, 1986). Rather, it is viewed as a “distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 128).

What makes this anxiety, called foreign language anxiety (FLA), different from other academic anxieties is a unique metacognitive element, which manifests itself in learners' awareness that "deprived" of their normal means of communication (i.e., the L1) they are to communicate via a language in which they do not have full competence. This is supposed to entail feelings of inadequacy not only in terms of academic achievement but because of the intimate relationship between language and self-expression, in terms of self-presentation as well (Schlenker & Leary, 1985). Aware of their linguistic limitations, language learners may experience a feeling of disparity between their "true" self and a more limited self they can present in the L2 (Horwitz et al., 1986). This is because "language and self/identity are so closely bound, if indeed they are not one and the same thing, that a perceived attack on one is an attack on the other" (Cohen & Norst, 1989, p. 76).

It would be safe to say that the better command of a FL the learners have, the more efficiently they can use it as a means of communication; consequently, the less likely they are to experience the above feelings of inadequacy precipitating anxiety. Logical as it may seem that L2-related anxiety should be more pervasive and higher in degree at the beginning stages of learning a language than at more advanced levels of L2 competence, empirical findings suggest that the relationship between learners' proficiency and foreign language anxiety is not as straightforward as it seems. In a number of studies, beginning learners were indeed found to carry higher levels of L2-related anxiety than learners at more advanced levels (e.g., Gardner, Smythe, & Brunet, 1977; Gardner, Lalonde, & Pierson, 1983). On the basis of these findings MacIntyre and Gardner (1991, 1993) conclude that "as experience and proficiency increase, anxiety declines in a fairly consistent manner" (1991, p. 111), which, by implication, suggests that anxiety levels are highest at the early stages of language learning and that anxiety becomes less of a problem for more advanced learners.

Some studies have lent further empirical support to this view (e.g., Frantzen & Magnan, 2005); however, contrary evidence was found in several others. Onwuegbuzie et al. (1999) found no significant differences among the anxiety levels of beginning, intermediate and advanced foreign language learners. Liu (2006), who examined anxiety in EFL learners at three different proficiency levels, did not find significant differences in anxiety among the three groups either. Similarly, Pichette's (2009) study reports no difference in anxiety between first-semester language students and their more experienced peers. Moreover, a number of studies have indicated that advanced learners score higher on anxiety than their lower level counterparts (cf. Cheng, 2002; Kitano, 2001; Marcos-Llinás & Garau, 2009; Saito & Samimy, 1996); and some researchers even suggest that foreign language anxiety may be an important issue not only for language learners but also for non-native language *teachers* (Horwitz, 1996; Heitzmann, Tóth, & Sheorey, 2007; Rodriguez, 1995). Some qualitative studies of L2-related anxiety also report high levels of anxiety among advanced-level learners. Ewald (2007) for instance examined foreign language anxiety in upper-level Spanish classes and found that many students claimed to experience more anxiety in these classes than in lower-level language learning courses (see also Hilleson, 1996).

As evidenced by these inconsistent findings, the role of proficiency in L2-related anxiety is an area where further research is needed. As a result of significant advances in theory and measurement since the mid-1980s, L2-related anxiety has become one of the major, most highly examined psychological variables in second language research, investigated among learners of diverse target languages (TL) in various instructional settings (for overviews, see Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; MacIntyre, 1999; Young, 1991, 1994). However, as most previous studies have focused on

learners at the beginning or intermediate level, relatively little is known about anxiety at the more advanced stages of L2 learning. Although it has been voiced in the research literature that more attention should be paid to anxiety at higher levels of proficiency, few studies have focused specifically on advanced learners (Ewald, 2007; Horwitz, 1996; Pappamihiel, 2002; Phillips, 2003; Young, 1986). This study aims to fill this gap by examining the construct of foreign language anxiety in the case of advanced-level language students: English majors in a Hungarian EFL setting.

## 2 Background and aims

This small scale, qualitative inquiry is a follow-up to a questionnaire survey of the scope and severity of English major students' foreign language anxiety (Tóth, 2009). That study revealed that the FLA mean score of the investigated sample of Hungarian EFL majors was not remarkably different from those of lower proficiency learners reported in previous studies using the same anxiety instrument (cf. Aida, 1994; Bailey et al., 1998; Horwitz et al., 1986; Tallon, 2009). What is more, it was significantly higher than that of a non-English major comparison group from the same university who had studied the language for a shorter period of time than the English majors and who were enrolled into pre-intermediate English classes (i.e., were less proficient than them in the TL). Although most English majors did not score high on FLA, a sizeable minority (22.2 %) reported high levels of TL-related anxiety. The participants of this study are those English major students whose FLA levels were found to be the highest in the sample. To explore the specific sources that precipitate anxiety in advanced-level learners and gain an insight into the nature and workings of FLA from the perspective of learners themselves, these highly anxious EFL majors were interviewed about their learning and communication experiences in the target language. It does not fall within the scope of this article to give an account of all the rich data yielded by the interviews; the paper focuses on participants' in-class experiences. It aims to examine how advanced learners' foreign language anxiety can be characterized and what factors account for its development. Specifically, it explores the following research questions:

- (1) How do advanced learners with high levels of FLA feel and behave when learning and using their TL?
- (2) What are the sources of the anxiety of advanced-level language students?
- (3) What do anxious learners' language learning histories reveal about the origins of L2-related anxiety?

## 3 Method

### 3.1 Design

The results of the anxiety survey preceding the study reported here provided a quantitative account of the scope and severity of English major students' FLA (Tóth, 2009). To achieve a deeper understanding of the construct of FLA in the case of advanced-level language students, the present investigation follows a qualitative design with an aim to gain an *emic* perspective on anxiety. Interview participants were selected through purposive sampling. Based on the results of the questionnaire survey, the purposive sample of extreme

cases (i.e., learners with the highest anxiety scores) was selected to allow an examination of FLA through the personal experiences of anxious learners themselves.

### 3.2 Participants

The participants were five English major students in their first year of study from one Hungarian university. With scores ranging between 125–136 on the anxiety measure, these learners were identified as the most anxious participants in the examined sample of first year EFL majors ( $N = 117$ ), whose mean FLA score was 84.59 with a standard deviation of 19.34 (Tóth, 2009). Table 1 presents basic information about the five interviewees in terms of gender, anxiety scores, age, and language learning background.

| Name* | Anxiety score** | Age | Years of English | Time spent in TL country |
|-------|-----------------|-----|------------------|--------------------------|
| Zsófi | 136             | 19  | 9                | -                        |
| Klári | 134             | 18  | 9                | -                        |
| Judit | 129             | 19  | 8                | -                        |
| Rita  | 129             | 22  | 7                | -                        |
| Edit  | 125             | 20  | 10               | -                        |

\* Participants are referred to by pseudonyms.

\*\* The possible range is: 33-165.

Table 1. Interviewees' profiles

All five interviewees were females, between the ages of 18 and 22. They had studied English for an average of 8.6 years, with a minimum of seven and a maximum of ten years before entering university. They all started to learn English in primary school (between 9 and 11 years of age). None of the participants had ever visited an English speaking country. In this respect, they can be regarded as typical EFL learners, learning the target language almost exclusively in a monolingual classroom, typically from non-native teachers of English, with limited opportunities to use the language for communication outside the classroom.

### 3.3 Instruments

Anxiety was measured by the Hungarian language validated version of Horwitz *et al.*'s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale ( $\alpha = .93$ ) (Tóth, 2008). The HFLCAS is a 33-item Likert-type scale with five possible responses ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". It is meant to assess the degree of foreign language anxiety in the EFL classroom and in conversation with native speakers of English. The items of the scale are reflective of the three anxieties that are regarded as conceptually important aspects of FLA according to Horwitz *et al.*'s (1986) theory: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety.

To tap into highly anxious participants' experiences of learning and using their target language, one-on-one, semi-structured long interviews were conducted. The interviews centred on the following four topic areas.

1. Language learning history  
(starting when, where, what languages, memories of first English class/teacher, early learning experiences, English classes in primary/secondary school, language exams, time spent in English speaking countries, frequency of contact with native speakers of English, etc.,)
2. Attitudes to English  
(reasons for choosing English as a major, career goals, motivation, effort expended, satisfaction with competence, ease or difficulty of learning, feelings of success/failure, self-reported aptitude, etc.,)
3. Impressions of and attitudes to university English classes  
(atmosphere, participation, likes and dislikes, teacher personality preferences, group dynamics, problems/difficulties for first year students, things to be improved, etc.,)
4. Attitudes to communication in English  
(in and outside classroom, ease of communication, problem areas, aspects to be improved, etc.,).

For each theme the interview protocol contained a set of keywords to prompt interviewees rather than questions in a rigid order. All topic areas were covered with all five participants in order to provide some uniformity across the interviews, but the order of themes, their relative proportion, and the actual questions varied depending on interviewees' individual experiences.

### **3.4 Procedures**

The interviews were conducted in Hungarian and lasted between 45 and 70 minutes. They were tape-recorded with the consent of the participants and then transcribed including hesitations, pauses, and interviewees' emotional reactions (laughter, intonation, words specifically stressed, etc.). The transcripts were analysed using the constant comparative method (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The coding procedure began by careful reading of the data in order to identify recurring themes and sub-themes. Initial groupings were modified and/or new headings created as a result of the procedure involving a constant checking of the established categories against the data. During the coding process, the following main themes were identified: evidence for the presence of FLA, various manifestations of FLA, sources and effects of FLA, past situations in which participants felt anxious, potential factors accounting for the development of FLA. To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of data collection and interpretation the following techniques were used: peer debriefing, member checking, keeping a reflexive journal, and creating an audit trail.

## **4 Findings**

The interview findings are presented according to the research questions of the study. First, I examine how highly anxious English major participants feel and behave in their classes at university. Second, I explore the perceived sources of these advanced-level learners' FLA. Finally, I look at what participants' language learning histories reveal about the origins of their L2-related anxiety.

#### 4.1 How do learners with high levels of FLA feel and behave when learning and using their TL?

The in-depth interviews revealed that the five first-year EFL majors with high FLA scores displayed anxiety reactions of various kinds – emotional, bodily, and behavioural – typical of anxious learners, as documented both in the psychological literature and L2-related anxiety research (Horwitz et al., 1986; Price, 1991; Sarason, 1984).

##### NEGATIVE FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS

When asked about their university English classes, all five anxious interviewees related some negative experience. Rita described herself as “very very tense” (p. 10)<sup>1</sup> all the time, Klári said these classes “somehow make her feel ill at ease” (p. 14), Judit said she was “afraid of the lessons” (p. 4), while Edit felt so distressed that she said she would rather avoid English classes altogether:

I’ve never been so anxious before, so I don’t like attending these classes, no, I don’t, it’s so unpleasant; it doesn’t feel good attending them. (p. 12)

What emerged from highly anxious English majors’ accounts of their current language learning experience is that they simply did not feel comfortable in their classes at the university. The single, most important reason they offered as an explanation for their feelings of insecurity and discomfort was the fact that they dreaded being called upon and having to speak up in class. This fear, this anxiety, manifested itself in their being constantly on edge in classes, concentrating hard on not being singled out to answer, as the following excerpts show:

What I’m most nervous about is being called on by the teacher and having to say something, [...] this is what makes me feel uneasy. (Judit, p. 5)

I always feel "oh, my God, I hope he won’t ask me", it’s OK to listen to him, but to speak myself, no, that’s terrible. (Edit, p. 5)

I feel this all the time; it’s a subconscious thing, what’ll happen if I’m called on now. (Klári, p. 6)

##### PSYCHO-PHYSIOLOGICAL SYMPTOMS

Besides negative feelings and emotions, participants’ English-related anxiety also manifested itself in the form of rather unpleasant psycho-physiological symptoms. As shown by the following comments, anxious students’ abject fear of speaking up was sometimes accompanied by physiological changes like trembling, sweating (Edit), faster heart beat (Klári); physical activities like self-manipulation; or having a quivering voice (Zsófi), which only increased their anxiety and caused further embarrassment.

I virtually start to tremble and break out in sweat when I’m called on to speak. Sometimes I’m beginning to go numb, don’t know whether it has ever happened to you, but it’s very [...] very unpleasant. (Edit, pp. 3, 4)

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<sup>1</sup> The quotes are presented in the author’s translation. Page numbers refer to the transcripts.

My heart is in my mouth. (Klári, p. 11)

Usually my hands are totally red, 'cos I keep wringing them, and I seem to drop my voice, then the teacher says, "speak up!", and I can't, don't want to, and that's the end. I can't say anything else. (Zsófi, p. 16)

Apart from these bodily reactions, Rita also talked about more severe psychosomatic symptoms that she thought to have developed as a result of negative affect associated with English classes for an extended period of time:

Towards the end of the term my hair started to fall out, I had stomach problems, and my blood pressure wasn't OK either. (Rita, p. 6)

## LANGUAGE CLASS AND COMMUNICATION BEHAVIOUR

Interviewees' L2-related anxiety was also manifested in their reluctance, or as they put it, "inability", to participate more fully and actively in the class, which is to be seen as a behavioural manifestation of their anxiety. Talking about their own language behaviour in classes, all five of them said they tended to remain silent even when having something to say about a given topic or a question posed and complained about their inability to volunteer answers. As Klári put this:

I tend to say nothing even if I know I would be able to answer. I know I could speak about the picture or some topic, I've got the sentences in my mind, but when the teacher asks us to volunteer, I just can't. (p. 8)

Consequently, they only spoke up when it was absolutely necessary, and even then they tended to say as little as possible, as shown by the sample comments below.

If it's possible, I keep silent and don't speak up. It's almost like a phobia, I don't want to speak, more precisely, I don't like speaking. (Edit, p. 12)

I try not to speak much; in fact I only speak if I'm really, completely, 100%, that is, dead sure what I'm going to say is good. (Zsófi, p. 16)

This behavioural manifestation of anxious English majors' anxiety was not restricted to teacher controlled whole-class activities, but was also typical during pair- and group-work as well. Although all five students felt relatively more comfortable when talking to one or two fellow-students rather than a whole seminar group of them; yet, even in these situations they tended to employ sub-conscious or semi-conscious communication strategies in order to minimise using their target language and save themselves from the unpleasant for them affective concomitants of speaking English. Judit and Rita described themselves as good *listeners*, and Rita's self-irony suggests that she was fully aware of why she preferred listening to others rather than speak herself:

I've noticed something interesting about myself; it's a subconscious thing; I tend to ask clever questions ... [laughter]. I don't do this consciously, it's just that it's stuck so deeply in my mind that I'm surely unable to say three sentences in English that I'd rather ask others than say something myself. (Rita, p. 14)

When we work in small groups, I usually just listen to what my classmates are saying rather than talk myself. (Judit, p. 3)

To summarise, anxious English major participants (1) experienced negative feelings and emotions in and about their English classes, (2) reported rather severe psychophysiological symptoms, and (3) displayed reticent classroom behaviour.

#### 4.2 What are the sources of the anxiety of advanced-level language students?

The question arises what is it that advanced-level learners of English, EFL major students, can find so anxiety provoking about their English classes? What is it that brings about the negative emotions and bodily reactions they report to experience? Why do they dread speaking up in their target language? The interviews have revealed that the answer has to do, on the one hand, with highly anxious students' perceptions of the learning situation and their perceptions of their own L2 competence on the other, with the two factors going hand in hand, mutually affecting each other.

##### LANGUAGE CLASSES VS. REAL-LIFE SITUATIONS

In an English class there are other students, you hear them speaking and that sets a standard, and of course you don't want to fall short of that standard, plus there's a teacher, and all this in a confined space where everybody is watching you when you speak up. (Rita, p. 7)

Rita's description of English classes nicely encapsulates the most important, in her view, "ingredients" of anxiety inherent in language learning in a classroom setting: (1) the presence of other students, (2) a perceived level or standard, and (3) the teacher. All five interviewees appeared to be unanimous in their opinion that speaking the TL in the classroom was different from and more anxiety provoking than communicating with native speakers or foreigners.

In an English class you have to prove that you have a firm knowledge of grammar, and a wide range of vocabulary, and that your English is at the required level. (Judit, p. 11)

Real life is different from sitting in an English class where you know you get asked to demonstrate your knowledge in front of an English teacher and your classmates. (Edit, p. 13)

As shown by anxious interviewees' comments, they tended to see their English classes as an ongoing language exam in front of an audience, where they constantly had to prove their L2 competence was up to standard. Judit actually made an explicit comparison between the two situations, saying, "in the classroom, like on a language exam, you are supposed to speak differently from the way you normally do outside the classroom" (p. 10). While things such as making mistakes, not finding the right words, or resorting to body language, etc., were seen by highly anxious students as normal and acceptable when speaking English outside the classroom, the same things were believed to be unacceptable, or at least, undesirable, in their university English classes. As Zsófi put it:

If you talk to a native speaker or foreigner, and you can't explain something in English, you can point to objects or use body language to make yourself understood, but it would be funny if you did that in an English class, here you're expected to be at a higher level than that. (p. 5)



## MISTAKES

One of the major concerns shared by anxious English majors in the classroom was their fear of speaking the language inaccurately, “with mistakes”, a major source of anxiety for them. To give sample comments:

What makes me anxious is that I know if I spoke English in class the way I do outside of the classroom, with mistakes and not always appropriately, etc., it wouldn't be enough here, they expect more. (Edit, p. 12)

English majors are expected to speak fluently and without mistakes. This makes those who want to live up to expectations even more anxious. (Klári, p. 9)

Talking to foreigners or native speakers they did not feel this pressure to speak with impeccable grammar and vocabulary and felt more comfortable as a result.

When I speak English outside the classroom I don't pay so much attention to grammar and feel more relaxed, but here in class it's different, I don't dare to do the same, 'cos I'm afraid that everybody will hear I said something wrong, made a mistake. (Klári, p. 4)

In the classroom, however, anxious English majors make a conscious effort to speak their TL correctly, trying hard to avoid mistakes and find the most appropriate words, as a result of which they perceive speaking in the L2 as a laborious and, at the same time, very stressful experience. As Judit and Zsófi put it:

What makes me very tense is that I always have to think it over what I want to say before saying it, and concentrate hard on being as accurate as possible. If I didn't do this, my sentences would be grammatically incorrect. (Judit, p. 10)

I worry about not being able to say what I want correctly. The bad thing is I always have to be very careful not to make mistakes. (Zsófi, p. 4)

## THE TEACHER

Speaking up in the classroom was anxiety provoking for participants not only because they were aware that their use of the TL was not always grammatical or error free but also because they believed that failure to come up to expectations or meet the required standard would affect their grades.

Speaking English in class is frightening because of its possible consequences. I feel if I made too many mistakes, I would simply get worse grades. (Judit, p. 11)

There's a lot at stake here, I say something wrong, the teacher hears it, and who knows [...] (Klári, p. 3)

Besides the anxiety caused by the feeling that their TL performance was constantly monitored and tested by the teacher, the five interviewees also voiced another teacher-related concern as an important source of anxiety: the humiliation of being corrected in public, especially if accompanied by disparaging remarks by the teacher. To give a few examples:

It's very embarrassing if a teacher corrects you in front of the whole class, you feel very uneasy, and even more so if they say things like "You should have known this ages ago!",

"even a secondary school pupil is supposed to know this", "You'd better choose another major." (Zsófi, p. 6)

"The English department is not a language school." (Edit, p. 14)

## CLASSMATES

Embarrassing and frustrating as teachers' corrections and negative remarks may have been, the five anxious interviewees did not attach as much importance to teachers in creating anxiety as to their fellow classmates. As shown by the comments below, English majors with high levels of FLA expressed a greater concern about the opinions of their peers and felt more apprehensive about potential negative evaluation on their part.

I'm more afraid of my classmates than the teacher; I think teachers are more tolerant than students. (Edit, p. 6)

Teachers are not so important in this respect [i.e. her anxiety]; I can feel very anxious even if the teacher is very nice. (Rita, p. 4)

What are they [i.e., other learners] going to think when I speak up, whether they will look down on me, this is what I worry about. (Klári, p. 3)

These peer-related fears and worries, it came to light, were not the result or consequences of actual negative experiences with classmates, such as being laughed at or ridiculed by them, rather they seemed to be induced by the mere presence of fellow students, as the following comments suggest.

[...] nobody has ever made a negative remark or something, it's just my bug. (Edit, p. 6)

I have never felt that other students look down on me, or laugh at me, it's just something you feel inside, it comes from within. (Rita, p. 5)

I don't think the others really care if I make a mistake or not, still I feel embarrassed before them. (Zsófi, p. 8)

What appeared to bring about anxious English majors' peer-related anxiety was their own deep-seated fear of appearing less competent than others and having their inadequacies exposed in front of classmates, as evidenced by Judit's comment:

It's very important for me that my classmates don't think, more precisely don't find out, that I may know less. (p. 11)

The interviews also revealed that highly anxious interviewees had a marked tendency to compare themselves to others in class. How anxious they actually felt in a given group, they said, was closely dependent on how competent their classmates appeared to them.

I remember, in the first classes I tried to survey how much my group mates knew, how good they were, and this determined how anxious I felt in a particular seminar group. (Judit, p. 17)

As they tended to measure themselves against others, a major source of anxiety for these learners was the presence of students perceived to be "better", i.e., more proficient in English than them. Hearing these students speak the TL caused them to doubt their own L2 skills and

abilities and feel extremely apprehensive about speaking up before them. To quote some remarks:

I feel inhibited if somebody speaks very well, 'cos then I go "Oh, my God, I don't dare to say a word". (Zsófi, p. 5)

There are students who are much better than me, it was all different in the secondary school, 'cos I did well in English, I was good in my group, but here, it's harder to beat others, I feel very anxious about speaking here. (Edit, p. 4)

It was a common concern shared by all five anxious participants that they had not spent any time in a native-English-speaking environment and simply felt intimidated and frustrated in the company of students who had, as they felt they could not compete with them.

The trouble is there are huge differences here between students in terms of proficiency. There are many students who have lived in England or the US, or others with a native speaking parent [...]. It makes me feel uneasy if somebody is very good. (Zsófi, p. 5)

I find it so frustrating when people who have spent years, or months abroad speak up so easily. Unlike me, they dare to speak, 'cos they have more experience and self-confidence, not necessarily more knowledge, but definitely more self-confidence. I don't see how I could catch up with them; the contrast is too strong. (Rita, p. 9)

To sum up, highly anxious students' perceptions of the learning situation appear to be a key factor in the anxiety they experience in their advanced-level language classes. Specifically, the following major sources of anxiety have been identified: (1) perceived differences between using the TL in vs. outside the classroom, (2) pressure to do well in classes for language majors, (3) aiming at avoiding mistakes, (4) focus on accuracy and appropriacy, (4) potential negative evaluation by the teacher (poor marks, being corrected, critical remarks), (5) potential negative evaluation by peers, (6) fear of appearing less competent than others, (7) classmates' L2 proficiency, and (8) classmates' experience in TL countries.

## PERCEPTIONS OF OWN L2 COMPETENCE

Besides the perceptions concerning the language-learning situation (required standard, teachers' expectations, peers' proficiency), perceptions of their own TL competence were found to be another important source of anxiety for the interviewed English majors with high levels of FLA. All five of them expressed dissatisfaction with their L2 proficiency, particularly their speaking skills. In addition to making mistakes as the biggest source of anxiety (see above), interviewees pointed to other features of their own L2 speech that caused them to feel anxious when speaking their TL. Rita, for instance, complained about the disparity between the speed of her thoughts and the fluency of her speech, which she found frustrating.

My English is halting and slow, I always stop to think, and I feel my mind is much quicker than my sentences. This is a frustrating feeling; it makes me upset and afraid to speak. (p. 7)

Talking about her dread of "long silences", Edit also referred to a similar, fluency-related concern. What made her tense and self-conscious about speaking English was the realisation that she could not react as quickly and easily in the TL as she would have liked, as she needed

time to put her thoughts and sentences together, and the ensuing “silences” made her feel terribly uncomfortable.

The reason I dread being called on is that I need time to think, and long silence can be so embarrassing. (Edit, p. 12)

Zsófi’s comment below exemplifies another recurrent concern of the interviewees. They had the feeling that they could not express themselves in the TL as well or precisely as they would have liked to – an uncanny feeling that rather than saying what they *wanted* to, they said what they were *able to*, as if someone else was speaking, not they themselves.

What I say is very often different from what I’d like to say; somehow it’s not as effective or impressive. I find this embarrassing, and the more I feel this, the more anxious I become. In the end, I don’t know what I wanted to say. (Zsófi, p. 21)

Judit referred to a similar concern when talking about the frustration she felt at the realisation of the gap between her native- and foreign language competence.

Sometimes I play a game: I say something in Hungarian, and then I try and express the same ideas in English. When I feel I can’t, or the way I can is grammatically incorrect, it makes me very upset. (p. 13)

As these excerpts suggest, facing their limitations in the TL and failure to live up to their own personal expectations was a major source of anxiety for the interviewed English majors.

After so many years of learning English I should be at a higher level. I should be able to speak English any time, with greater ease and correctly. (Judit, p. 13)

Judit’s words above appear to be reflective of a growing impatience these advanced-level learners felt because of not being able to attain greater facility in the target language after long years of commitment to learning it.

#### **4.3 What do anxious learners’ language learning histories reveal about the origins of their L2-related anxiety?**

While anxiety was the predominant theme of the five interviewees’ experiences in university English classes, the same topic was conspicuously absent from their accounts of their past (i.e., pre-university) language learning experiences. All five students appeared to have nice memories of English classes in primary and secondary school, and none of them mentioned any negative experiences related to learning English or any other language at the earlier stages of their language learning career. On the contrary, the interviews revealed that they had positive attitudes to their target language and felt motivated to learn it; moreover, they were good at English in the secondary school, which in turn led to their choosing English as their major. To quote Klári:

The truth is I was always among the best pupils; I always got a ‘5’ [the best mark in Hungarian schools] in English, both in primary and secondary school. And, the knowledge of being a good pupil, it may sound silly, gave me self-confidence. (p. 2)

When explicitly asked whether they could recall when or where they had first experienced anxiety about using their TL, they mentioned formal language exams, like the Hungarian State Language Exam for instance, which they had taken during their secondary school years. However, they were unanimous in their opinion that apart from testing situations like this, in which anxiety is presumed to be natural, their English-related anxiety began to surface in their *university* English classes. To give sample comments:

It essentially started here at university. In primary school I didn't feel uneasy about things like these at all, neither did I in the secondary school, there I wasn't afraid to volunteer answers or ask questions, and I never worried about what my classmates would think if I said something totally wrong. And another important difference between the secondary school and university is that I was never afraid of having to speak English, in fact I enjoyed it, not even before the oral of the language exam was I as afraid as here before an English class. (Judit, p. 17)

I feel baffled as to what is happening to me, how it reached such a degree, as I didn't feel this anxiety in my English classes in the grammar school. (Klári, p. 11)

In short, participants' FLA was found to be very strongly related to the current language learning situation.

## 5 Discussion

The interviews show that the five English major students, identified by the Hungarian Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale as the most anxious of 117 first year EFL majors surveyed, did indeed experience high levels of FLA in their university English classes. The anxiety reactions these advanced-level language students reported – negative feelings and emotions in and about classes, psycho-physiological symptoms, reticence/TL avoidance – are all well-known manifestations of language learning anxiety, documented among learners at lower levels of L2 proficiency (e.g., Horwitz et al., 1986; Price, 1991). The presence of the same anxiety responses of similar severity in learners at more advanced levels of instruction shows that long years of commitment to learning a foreign language and a relatively high level of proficiency do not necessarily confer a sense of confidence in using the target language to every learner. Far from being confident, the interviewed students, as we have seen, felt so uncomfortable and stressed in their classes at university that their anxiety made them reluctant to use the TL.

As for the sources of participants' FLA, essentially two major sources have been identified, namely (1) certain aspects of university English classes as perceived by highly anxious students (level/standard, teacher expectations towards them, classmates' L2 proficiency) and (2) the perceptions, feelings of these learners concerning their own L2 competence (inaccuracies, limited fluency, reaction time, quality of self-expression, etc.). The unexpected finding that the interviewed English majors did not experience foreign language anxiety prior to starting their English studies at university deserves attention and calls for explanation; at the same time it helps the interpretation of the reported sources of participants' FLA.

The fact that these learners did not feel anxious in their English classes either in the primary or secondary school rules out the possibility that they had found language learning in a classroom setting in general or something about learning English in particular inherently

anxiety provoking. The interpretation that it may have been some past negative or unpleasant experience encountered at the early stages of language learning that could have disposed them to L2-related anxiety (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989, 1991; MacIntyre, 1999) does not seem plausible either, since the language learning histories of these students did not reveal anything in their past experiences with English (e.g., problems or difficulties, lack of success, a specific teacher, or a set of classmates) that could have, in any way, been related to their anxiety.

What is it then that brought about a sudden change in these learners' feelings about learning and using their target language? What is the explanation for the anxiety they claimed to have developed in their *university* English classes? The findings point to the current learning situation. Specifically, they suggest that it was the transition from secondary school English classes to a new and radically different language learning situation, majoring in English as a foreign language, that had set the stage for these first year language students' FLA. This transition entails a number of important changes and challenges for learners, fresh from secondary school, which can potentially be anxiety provoking.

One of these is the change in the status of the target language. From a twice or three times a week *school subject* in the secondary school, English has turned into a *means of communication* in the classroom. Language classes for EFL majors are conducted in the target language with emphasis on interaction and active TL use. What is more, students majoring in English do not only study the language itself but also other disciplines (literature, linguistics, culture, etc.) through it. This *English only* environment imposes new and heavier linguistic demands on learners, which itself can cause anxiety, as was the case with the participants of the study. Edit's comment below seems to support this interpretation:

This is what was different in the secondary school: that the classes here are in English and you have to speak English all the time, and very well; in the secondary school it wasn't that serious, sometimes we talked in Hungarian with the teacher, and the level was not as high as here. (p. 3)

Becoming an English major also entails a change in the status of learners themselves and the expectations towards them, according to how anxious participants saw what majoring in a foreign language meant. The interviews revealed that learners' perceptions of what is expected of them as *language majors* (i.e., advanced-level learners and would-be English teachers or other EFL professionals) can be a major source of anxiety for students who have chosen to specialise in FL study. While in their English classes at lower levels of instruction or when using the language outside the classroom the five anxious interviewees felt relatively comfortable, in their classes at university, as we have seen, they began to worry about their TL performance. This is because in this context they felt the need to present themselves as high-level, accomplished speakers of English before their teachers and fellow English-specialist classmates and simply feared not being able to fulfil the image of the *expert-user* of the TL. This interpretation is in line with the theory of why even non-native language *teachers* are susceptible to FLA (Horwitz, 1996). It also explains the seemingly paradoxical finding that English major students as a group scored higher on FLA compared to less proficient non-English majors in the questionnaire survey to which this interview study was a follow-up (Tóth, 2009). This is in line with previous findings indicating higher anxiety among learners who take language courses/programmes for career reasons, whose anxiety is partly attributable to the importance L2 competence has for their future work (cf. Campbell & Show, 1994; Kitano, 2001; Marcos-Llinás & Garau, 2009; Rodriguez, 1995).

Another new challenge awaiting participants in the new learning situation was what they perceived as tough competition with peers. Whereas in their secondary school English classes the five anxious participants of the study were all among the top learners, in their classes at university, surrounded by fellow English-specialist students with similar or potentially better TL skills and abilities, they found themselves in a more competitive learning environment, which they apparently found emotionally challenging. This is what explains their abject fear of appearing less competent than others as well as their feelings of discomfort and frustration in the company of students perceived to be more competent or experienced in using the TL than themselves. The findings of the interviews support those of Bailey's (1983) diary study among adult L2 learners, indicating a close link between competitiveness and anxiety. Classmates' proficiency has been reported as a major source of anxiety among students in upper-level classes in other instructional settings as well, which shows that competition with peers is an important element of anxiety in the case of advanced level language students (cf. Ewald, 2007).

Finally, the findings of this study demonstrate that learners' expectations of themselves are a crucial factor in language learning anxiety at more advanced levels of instruction. Learners like the participants of this study may be relatively proficient in the language; however, their own personal expectations of themselves as L2 speakers are also higher compared to those of learners at lower levels of proficiency. Rather than being satisfied with making themselves understood, learners at this level, as we have seen, would like to speak *elaborately* and *easily* in the foreign language, as they do in their L1 and as native speakers do; consequently, discrepancies between this ambition and their actual L2-related self-perceptions can be a great source of anxiety and frustration for them (cf. Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002 on anxiety and perfectionism). An intensive language learning environment such as university courses for FL majors, where students are not merely language learners but language users, is more likely to bring to light language deficiencies than language classes at lower levels of instruction. In addition, the more proficient the learners become in the L2, the more easily they can recognise their own mistakes and other linguistic limitations, which, as evidenced by interviewees' experiences, plays a major role in their being apprehensive about using their TL (cf. Ewald, 2007; Gregersen, 2003; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Horwitz, 1996).

## 6 Conclusions and future directions

This paper reported on a small-scale qualitative inquiry, the aim of which was to examine the construct of FLA in the case of advanced-level learners. It has found clear evidence that foreign language anxiety is not specific to beginning foreign language learning but can also be an important issue for learners at more advanced levels of L2 proficiency. The English major participants of this study felt more apprehensive in their English classes at the university than at lower levels of instruction – a finding also reported in previous research in the context of upper-level language classes (cf. Ewald, 2007). These findings demonstrate that proficiency level itself is not sufficient to account for such a complex psychological experience as foreign language anxiety and factors besides and beyond proficiency should be explored to gain a better understanding of this unique anxiety particular to L2 learning.

One such factor, according to the results of this study, is the actual L2 situation in which the foreign language is learned and/or used. How much anxiety learners experience in a given instructional or other L2 context appears to be closely dependent on their perceptions of

various salient aspects of the given situation, such as (1) what is expected of them as L2 speakers, (2) whether they can meet the perceived expectations, (3) how their L2 competence compares with those of peers/conversation partners, and (4) what is at stake for them in this particular situation. In short, FLA is very strongly situation-dependent. This explains why the interviewed students felt more anxious in the more demanding and competitive atmosphere of their university English classes relative to language classes at lower levels of instruction or when using the TL outside the classroom.

Focusing on English major participants' *in-class* experiences of FLA, the present investigation has shown how anxiety might be heightened in advanced level courses. Future studies should explore the sources of advanced level learners' FLA in out-of-class situations, (e.g., when talking to native speakers or foreigners in real life contexts). Another area where further research is necessary is the exploration of various routes the development of FLA can take. While the literature suggests that it is learners with negative experiences at the early stages of language learning who are likely to develop FLA, either because they had problems with language acquisition, or because of a specific language learning context, or simply because of their personality (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989, 1991; MacIntyre, 1999), the interviews did not provide evidence for any such experiences in the anxious English major participants' language learning histories. The development of their FLA does not seem to follow the predicted path: high anxiety at the early phases of language learning gradually diminishing with experience and increasing proficiency. Therefore, it will be task of future research to examine how the development of the five participants' FLA compares with those of other learners in similar and other instructional settings (e.g., language schools, bilingual secondary schools, advanced courses for non-language major students). This could also allow further insights into the role of different learning situations or course types in FLA. Future studies could also investigate anxious learners' personality in order to explain why certain learners respond with more while others with less anxiety to the same learning situation.

Finally, the implications for language teachers need to be considered. Teachers of advanced-level foreign language courses, including those teaching other subjects in FL departments, should not believe that affective factors like learner anxiety are not to be reckoned with at higher levels of language instruction. Therefore, they should not look upon pedagogical approaches and techniques promoting a relaxed, low-anxiety learning environment as unnecessary extras, which can be dispensed with when dealing with learners at more advanced levels. While it is true that most learners do not exhibit anxiety of such severity as reported here, teachers should be aware of the possibility that at least some of their learners may experience similar fears and worries as the English major participants in this study. Awareness of and sensitivity to this issue is the first step to creating a positive, supportive classroom environment, one encouraging co-operation and collaboration rather than competition between learners, one that is a place for *learning* rather than just *demonstrating knowledge*. As evidenced by anxious English majors' experiences in the study, this is no less important for learners at more advanced levels of L2 learning than for their less advanced counterparts.



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