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A Case Study of Anxiety in the Spanish Classroom in Australia

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Abstract

This study investigates the links between anxiety during oral activities in the Spanish language classroom and the teacher's role, as well as the strategies students use to cope with their anxiety. Most of the studies on language anxiety have focused on beginner groups; however, such anxiety is not limited to just that group. As this study has found, second-year students learning Spanish also experience a certain level of anxiety, many times caused by different factors from those that might have caused them anxiety in their first year of learning. This study uses different methodologies to investigate those factors, including a journal and a semi-structured interview. Based on the results, this study shows some strategies that students use to overcome anxiety, and ways for teachers to effectively support students in their learning process.

Keywords

anxiety, Spanish language, strategies, teacher, Australia

Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

Spanish-language study by Australian university students has significantly increased since 1990. Only five universities in Australia taught Spanish in the late 1980s, whereas 25 universities now teach it (Martinez-Exposito 2012). Spanish has become one of the most popular languages among university students, although the majority of them never studied Spanish in high school due to the very small number of schools that teach it. Many of these students have also never studied a foreign language before, and adopt Spanish as a trial language. Consequently, language learning anxiety has become a teaching and learning issue. As Young (1991) indicated in her study, the teaching of learning strategies has become very important towards decreasing students' anxiety. Almost everyone who has been in a foreign language classroom has experienced some anxiety in one way or another, and students in Australian universities are no exception.

Language anxiety has long been a concern for researchers and teachers, who have attempted to understand its causes and what can be done to help students cope with it (Aida 1994; Cheng, Horwitz & Schallert 1999; Horwitz 2001; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope 1986; Stephenson & Hewitt 2011; Liu & Jackson 2011; MacIntyre & Gardner 1991; Ortega Cebreros 2003; Phillips 1992; Saito & Samimy 1996; Von Wörde 2003; Yan & Horwitz 2008; Young 1986, 1991; Zhang 2004). Although most studies, such as Horwitz et al. (1986), Phillips (1992), Young (1986, 1991) and Yan and Horwitz (2008), have indicated that teaching practices probably contribute to foreign-language anxiety, apart from Von Wörde's study, few in-depth studies of interactive classrooms have explored what teachers can do about language anxiety after hearing students' suggestions. Thus this study recognises the importance of hearing students' experiences related to their anxiety, considering their feedback and putting it into practice in teaching strategies that aim to reduce anxiety in the classroom. Moreover, most studies on oral anxiety have been conducted with first-year language learners. Aside from the study of Ortega Cebreros (2003) among Spanish students learning English, the work of Saito and Samimy (1996) among students of Japanese, the research of Phillips (1992) among students of French and the study of Gardner, Padric and Garnet (1977) among English-speaking students learning French, relatively little research has been done with second-year learners. Hence, this study focuses on second-year students learning Spanish, particularly on what stressors of anxiety arise in Spanish oral classes, so as to understand students' coping mechanisms and the implications for teachers, as well as the role that teachers play and what they can do about the issue of language anxiety. The author believes that second-year language learners are more aware of their language-learning goal and their understanding of how to learn a language. Therefore, it is expected that their degree of anxiety will be lower and that the coping strategies that they use are well-developed, though these strategies may be based on their first-year learning experience, something this study will explore. The study aims as well as to find how these students cope with their existing anxiety, mainly during the oral activities and how teachers might effectively contribute to reducing students' anxiety, given the ideas they express.

Awareness of Foreign-language Anxiety in the Classroom

Foreign-language anxiety is defined as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon (Young 1991) that refers to "the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning" (MacIntyre & Gardner 1994, p. 284). Horwitz and his colleagues were the first to theorise that foreign-language anxiety is a unique type of anxiety exclusive to foreign-language learning, which led them to construct the Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (FLAS) (Tran 2012). Many studies have used the FLAS among first-year learners, and the results have consistently shown that communication apprehension, test

anxiety and fear of being evaluated are the main types of foreign-language anxiety in the learning process. Communication apprehension refers to the discomfort, frustration, fear or shyness of talking to other people due to the limitation that the person has in expressing his/her thoughts and in understanding what others are saying (Horwitz et al. 1986). Test anxiety refers to the fear of failure rather than to a medium of communication (Horwitz 1986). In a foreign-language classroom, it is important to provide some type of assessment; thus, test anxiety is relevant to consider when one talks about foreign-language anxiety. Additionally, students in a foreign-language classroom are likely to be aware of making mistakes and of being judged or evaluated by those who consider themselves more knowledgeable, and this can cause fear or anxiety about participating in the class (MacIntyre & Gardner 1991). Although these three types of anxiety are important contributors to understanding foreign-language anxiety, few studies have explored how students cope with them and the degree to which current teaching practices contribute to foreign-language anxiety in a classroom of second-year learners. Thus, this study aims to investigate such matters.

Yan and Horwitz's (2008) study of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in China indicated that two of the stressors that students relate to anxiety are the teacher (personality, language-teaching skills) and the class arrangement (class activities, textbooks and other materials, student-teacher ratio). They used journals and interviews in their research, with the purpose of encouraging the students to reflect on how anxiety influences their language learning; they asserted that this information has the "potential to yield a richer understanding of learner's perception of how anxiety functions in their language learning, which in turn, might lead to a clearer understanding of the general role of anxiety in language learning" (Yan & Horwitz 2008, p. 153).

One main reason for this study is the researcher's observation of classroom anxiety in her own teaching, leading to the need to be able to identify anxious students in the classroom setting. As Horwitz et al. (1986) and Phillips (1992) indicated, anxiety could have a profound effect on the process of learning a foreign language. According to Young (1991, p. 429), "helping teachers to recognize the signs of anxiety in language learners is an important step in responding to anxiety in the classroom." Thus, it is the duty of a teacher to find ways to control or avoid anxiety in the class. To do this, it is essential for teachers to find out what the stressors are, how teachers contribute to the anxiety, and what they should do to implement or improve their teaching techniques to help relieve the anxiety.

Although some studies of foreign-language anxiety have suggested techniques that teachers may use to reduce anxiety, no study thus far has reported any feedback on whether or how those techniques have been successfully used by teachers (Young 1991). In addition, apart from Yan and Horwitz (2008), Liu and Jackson (2011) and Von Wörde (2003), few studies have asked students face-to-face about how they cope with their anxiety in a foreign-language class, how the teacher's role or activities can cause them to feel anxious and what they recommend the teacher should do or improve to help relieve their anxiety. In light of this, the following research questions were formulated for this study:

1. How do students cope with their anxiety during oral activities in their second year of language learning?
2. How might teachers effectively contribute to reducing a student's anxieties, given the ideas expressed by students?

The Study

Methods

The participants in this study were all volunteers, and none of the tasks was part of the course work. The project used a combination of methods, including weekly reflective journals and a semi-structured interview. The first semester at RMIT University consists of 12 weeks, and each session comprises three hours of contact per week. To avoid any tiredness, boredom and distraction during the three-hour session, the teacher structures the class in the following way. She first asks students about their weekend or last week's activities, asks what was learned last week, then checks the homework. After that she writes what the lesson of today will include. Based on that, oral activities are done in pairs or groups, followed by reading comprehension, listening exercises and grammar exercises from the textbook or handouts. The teacher always uses humour and activities that will engage students. There is a 10-minute break after an hour-and-a-half. The teacher uses a communicative approach, and the language used in the class is Spanish, although English is used occasionally to explain a grammatical structure when a student indicates that he/she has not clearly understood the lesson even after the Spanish explanation has been given.

In weeks 5 and 9, students are given a listening and written quiz (15% each = 30%). Each week from weeks 3 to 12, a pair of students is assigned to make an eight- to 10-minute oral presentation (15%) in front of the class about the festivals in any Spanish-speaking country; at the end of the presentation, the students must address three questions to the class about the topic they have presented. On the last week, students have their listening (10%) and oral (20%) exams. The final written exam (two hours, 25%) is centralised, which means that the university allocates the date. All three exams include all material studied during the semester. On week 6 of the semester, I introduced a volunteer conversational class for all Spanish 3 students, in which no grades were given for their participation.

Participants

In this study, 11 Anglo-Australian students participated: three males and eight females, ranging in age from 19 to 24 years, with an average age of 20. All participants were studying Spanish as a mandatory second-language requirement, and were second-year students of a three-year international-studies undergraduate program in the first semester of 2012 at RMIT University. These students were enrolled in Spanish 3 (level A2 according to the European framework). All of them had studied Spanish for a year at RMIT, except for one student who had completed one year at another university in Australia. All except one had been in a Spanish-speaking country for a holiday before studying Spanish or after one year of studying the language. The students were so enthusiastic and motivated to learn the language that they were committed to three years of learning Spanish, which included participation in classes abroad in the second semester of 2012 or in the spring semester at the end of the year. Of the 11 students, only four had studied a foreign language (French, German, Indonesian and Polish) in their high-school years.

Materials

The researcher combined two instruments: weekly reflective journals and a semi-structured interview. Before knowing the numbers of participants the researcher considered using the FLAS, but due to a low number of participants chose not to. However, some of the questions from the FLAS were considered in creating some questions for the interview.

Reflective Journal

This was used to gather data about the personal and affective dimensions of the students' Spanish-language learning, particularly their experiences regarding the oral presentation, which they were required to do in pairs in front of the class as part of their assessment. The students were asked to write reflective journal entries on a weekly basis for nine consecutive weeks (from week 4 to week 12). They were also asked to not write their names in the journal so that they could openly talk about their feelings without fear of being identified. Probes were given to help the students write their entries and reflect on them. For instance, in week 4 an e-mail was sent to remind each participant to start writing entries in their journal. The e-mail read:

*I want to remind you that there are no right or wrong answers.
As guidance in writing your journal, I suggest that you consider the following questions:*

- 1. How did I feel in class today?*
- 2. Did I feel anxious at any time? What caused that anxiety – for instance, the teacher, my peers, the lesson, etc.?*
- 3. What did I do to cope/deal with the anxiety?*

Also, the researcher later reminded the students to write about how they felt on the day of their oral assessment, with the aim to consider test anxiety:

- 4. How did I feel during my oral presentation?*
- 5. How anxious was I during my final oral exam?*

These are just ideas. It is your journal so feel free to write whatever you feel about the class, keeping in mind the terms anxiety and reticence.

The researcher also reminded the students face-to-face during the class to reflect on why they felt anxious, why they had chosen a particular coping mechanism over others and how effective the mechanism was for them.

(ii) Semi-structured Interview

This was used to obtain a more comprehensive insight into the participants' anxieties and feelings in their Spanish-language classroom. The questions covered such aspects as educational experience, attitudes towards active students, the role of the teacher, feeling of anxiety when speaking Spanish in class, reasons for being reticent and anxious and coping strategies. The interviews were conducted after the final exam by a research assistant, not the teacher, so as to avoid bias, and lasted 35 to 60 minutes each. Each question was placed in one of the three domains created under the types of anxiety used in the analysis of this data. Domains were grouped under the three types of anxiety: communication (oral activities, ask for help), test anxiety (quizzes, oral presentation and oral test) and fear of being evaluated (teacher and classmates). The questionnaire covered the following three domains with the actual interview questions:

1. Communication

Students' way of communicating in Spanish was examined by exploring their fears, shyness, frustration and limitations in understanding and being understood. This was done by asking six questions: 1. Was there anything in particular that caused you to feel anxious or restrained in the Spanish class this semester?; 2. Did you feel anxious as much as you did in your first year of

Spanish? What has changed this?; 3. Have you participated more in class this semester than in your first year of Spanish? Why?; 4. Do you think you are the type of person that doesn't seek clarification answer the teacher's question, or say "I don't know", and does this have an impact on your learning?; 5. Have you been in a Spanish-speaking country? Did you feel anxious at all talking with locals? [Please give] examples; and 6. After coming back from [Spanish-speaking country] have you felt less anxious participating in class? Has it helped you cope with your anxiety? How?

2. Test Anxiety

One of the purposes of this study was to find out how participants feel on the day of their evaluation, what important aspects or techniques they use to cope with the anxiety caused by the evaluations or activities and what they suggest might help. This was examined through four questions: 7. What sort of things did you do to cope with anxiety in oral Spanish lessons and during evaluations?; 8. What activities make you feel anxious? What do you suggest the teacher change [each activity mentioned]?; 9. Does the teacher make you feel anxious? Give some examples. How can she improve?; and 10. At any stage during the class did you feel panic if the teacher asked you questions?

3. Fear of being evaluated.

The aim of these questions was to find out how the participants felt and thought about their performance, their classmates, their teachers or anybody else who heard them using Spanish. The questions asked were: 11. Were you afraid at any point during the class to lose face in front of your classmates and teacher?; 12. What do you think about those students who participate more than you and those students who do not participate at all?; and 13. Do you think you are the type of person who will provide an explanation to another student if they don't understand?

Procedure

The study was conducted during the 12 weeks of the first semester of the 2012 academic year. In the second week of teaching, students were asked to voluntarily participate and sign the consent form for their participation. It was emphasised to the students that the study was not part of their assessment, and thus would not affect their academic results. Of the 40 Australian students, divided into two groups, who were taking this course, 20 of them signed up to participate in the study: 16 from the first group and four from the second group. Of those 20, only 11 completed all the tasks; the others withdrew from the study without completing any task, although all 40 students continued with the course and completed it. On week four of the semester, an e-mail was sent to the students to remind them to start completing their journal. On week 12, another e-mail was sent to the students to notify them to sign up for their interview at a timetable posted on the language board. The interviews were conducted by a research assistant between 18 and 21 July, after the students had completed their final exams (oral, listening and written). The researcher booked the room for the interviews, prepared the questions to be asked and provided the audio recorder and a notebook for any extra notes the research assistant might wish to make. The researcher met with the research assistant before the interviews to clearly explain the objectives and scope of the research project and to ensure that the research assistant was familiar with the room and facilities to be used. The researcher then asked the research assistant to conduct a pilot interview using the exact questions prepared for the participants, during which the research assistant was encouraged to ask appropriate probing and follow-up questions. This was to ensure

that the research assistant would conduct the interviews in a respectful manner and produce rich and valid data.

Results

Data Analysis

Keeping in mind the research questions of how students cope with anxiety in oral activities and how teachers can help reduce anxiety in the classroom, the data was grouped under one of the three domains: communication, test anxiety and failure of being evaluated. The interviews were transcribed by the research assistant and checked by the researcher/teacher of this study. Together with the journal, interview and observations, the transcriptions were then triangulated to one of the domains mentioned above in order to do a content analysis.

a) Stressors

The majority of the students indicated that some of the stressors that cause them to become anxious or nervous were:

- 1. Lack of preparation.** All the participants stated that when they had not done the homework and had not prepared for class, they were afraid and nervous that the teacher would catch them on the spot, or that they would give an incorrect answer or not pronounce the words correctly.
- 2. Introduction of new concepts or grammatical structures.** The majority said that it was hard to put new concepts or grammatical structures into oral practice. Other students reported that learning new concepts, new rules, or new grammatical structures was overwhelming and caused anxiety.
- 3. Length of class time.** Most students indicated that the class sometimes went so fast that it was hard to grasp everything. The fact that they had a weekly three-hour class with a 10-minute break had a big effect on their concentration; thus, they felt anxious about not understanding the context of the class. As one student said, "Whatever I learn in the last hour, I find it hard to recall the next week, and I find it hard to do the homework about that, and I just find it hard to concentrate for the last hour."
- 4. Perception of other students' superior performance.** Four of the 11 students reported feeling anxious that those students who had been in a Spanish-speaking country knew more than they did. They perceived these students' accents, vocabulary and conversational skills to be far superior to their own; this made them feel quite nervous. This factor also caused one student to feel more anxious in this course than the course she had done two years ago. However, for the rest of the students, this factor made them want to go to a Spanish-speaking country and come back with a higher level of Spanish-language skills. According to the students, the sense that the class was moving ahead without them because they were not quick enough to grasp the lessons, or that other students were quicker than they were, made them nervous and anxious. One student said, "It wasn't so much the teacher making me anxious but it was other people's ability to understand what she was saying more quickly that made me anxious." Many times these students did not ask questions because they felt that they would be hindering the progress of the class if the teacher had to stop and explain something.
- 5. Expectations.** Only one student who had been in Latin America during the previous summer break reported feeling nervous: he felt that everyone in the class expected his Spanish to be better since he had spent three months in South America.

- 6. Oral activities.** Twenty percent of the students said they felt anxious when they did their oral presentation because the thought of standing in front of the class was too much. Two students cited that another activity made them nervous: moving around the class and talking to their classmates in Spanish. However, the same activity was very well received by other students, who stated that such activities pushed them out of their comfort zone.

This study does not focus on other micro skills (writing, listening and reading) apart from oral proficiency. Nevertheless, eight of the 11 students indicated that listening activities caused them more anxiety than did oral activities. One or two listening exercises were played once a week and with different Spanish accents (Cuban, Mexican, Spaniard, Argentinian and Colombian). This anxiety about listening activities could be as a result of not being able to see the person's face, making it difficult to comprehend. Another explanation, based on the teacher's observation, could be that they were not confident that they could understand; this explanation was supported by their final listening results, as they did significantly better than they had expected.

b) Teacher's Role/Activities

Some studies, such as Yan and Horwitz (2008), have treated the teacher's role and activities as separate categories. In this study, the two factors are considered as one. The researcher believes that these factors go hand in hand and play an important role in the classroom.

- 1. Oral presentation.** Some students reported that the oral presentation was somewhat anxiety-inducing, although most said that it was a great activity because it forced them to constantly read and do oral practice. For this activity, in week 2 the teacher explained the assessment criteria of the presentations and randomly set the groups so no one could choose whom to present with. The students had the freedom to pick their own relevant topic. The teacher observed that all the presentations were very well prepared, but still some students showed signs of anxiety. However, they managed their anxiety through the use of humour and pantomime/gestures.
- 2. Conversation class.** This activity was conducted outside of normal class time on a weekly basis for six weeks. It was well-received because it helped the students to feel comfortable participating in class when asked questions by the teacher. It motivated some students to work collaboratively and speak Spanish with their classmates as much as possible instead of working through the problem by writing answers alone and in a non-interactive manner. Those students who participated said that they felt more confident than at the beginning of the semester.
- 3. Learning environment.** All the students expressed the view that the teacher had created a very positive learning environment that tended to make them feel more comfortable in speaking. The fact that the teacher took time to explain, waited for their answers, used humour and listened to them helped create a comfortable learning environment. The teacher could observe that students had created a strong bond amongst themselves, which allowed them to help each other. For instance, at one point the teacher was explaining gerunds and one student was getting confused, as he wanted to use it as it is used in English, to indicate the future, and one student politely asked the teacher if he could give an example which it made it clear for the other student. This bond also fostered a level of comfort in which the students could laugh at and with each other when they made mistakes, and in which the teacher and students could all use humour.
- 4. Class size.** The students commented that the class size of 20 made them feel very welcome and made the process of learning more bearable.

c) Coping Mechanisms

The students repeatedly indicated some mechanisms they used to cope with their anxiety.

- 1. Approaching the teacher.** The students recognised the importance of approaching the teacher for clarification.
- 2. Commitment.** The students reported that extra commitment or work outside of class in terms of conversation and pronunciation practice helped them cope with or decrease their anxiety. Studying, or even just looking at the next topics before each class, helped them as well, as the concepts and vocabulary did not seem so new in class. As one student put it, “I usually like to prepare. Know the rules, how to apply them, why and how should I say it. Know what is coming for the next week; prepare more for the new topic.” The teacher could also observe that those students who had attended the conversation class were more willing to participate and wanted to speak only Spanish or write e-mails to the teacher using only Spanish, which the teacher encouraged.
- 3. Positive attitude.** The students said that if they still felt nervous despite having studied hard and prepared well, having a positive attitude helped them answer well during the oral exam. Some students also indicated that for their evaluations they would say to themselves, “I know this so I should not be nervous. I will be all right. I just have to relax and answer the question right.”

d) Contrasting First- and Second-Year and Overseas Experiences

Most of the participants reported that they had felt more anxious in their first year because everything was new. In the first year, they had been trying to figure out the most appropriate way to go over their notes, whereas in the second year, they believed that they had enough of a foundation from the previous year and thus were able to acquire more knowledge and understand the best way for them to study the language. The students also acknowledged that they had a broader knowledge of Spanish grammar and vocabulary in the second year, so it was easier to create sentences. However, one student who felt more anxious in her second year of Spanish than in her first year had an opposite view, saying, “I was probably less anxious then just because, uh, I had already had a smaller base of Spanish then so I felt like it was just reconfirming a lot of stuff whereas now, in Spanish, in, in later classes of Spanish, um. It’s all been new stuff to me, stuff that I haven’t learnt so, um, yeah, I feel a bit more thrown into the deep end in that regard.” Another student also reported feeling more anxious in the second year because she/he felt that she/he should know more than in the first year and thus should do better in class. The teacher had the opportunity to have some students in her class whom she had had in the previous year, and she could observe that they were more confident, and more willing to participate in the oral activities and do their homework. The student who felt more anxious is a very capable student with a strong will to learn, but who likes everything perfect and wants to know everything on the spot.

Most students indicated that they had definitely become more involved in class in the second year because they felt more confident about their speaking abilities. Others stated that they did not participate much at the beginning of the semester, but by the middle of the semester they had gotten over their fear of not knowing whether what they were saying was correct; the main strategy was to participate and be corrected. One student who had studied with us for a year and had stayed in Latin America for three months before the semester started indicated that his experience had really helped him. He felt more confident, and his knowledge of the language was broader and better, which led him to participate more in class in the second year. In contrast, the other students who had been in a Spanish-speaking country indicated that their experience had not contributed much to their Spanish-language skills because they went as tourists and did not know any Spanish. However, they said that their experience motivated them to enroll in the Spanish

class. On the other hand, those students who had not travelled to a Spanish speaking country before felt that they knew less vocabulary, had less of a grasp of grammar, were slower to understand the lessons and were less fluent than the others. These were the same factors that enabled those students to recognise the language-learning benefits that travel can provide. Interestingly, seven of the participants in this cohort went on to complete either a study tour or exchange program in a Spanish-speaking country at the end of the semester.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study of students learning Spanish in their second year examined the links between anxiety during oral activities in Spanish-language classrooms, the impact of the teacher's role on student anxiety and the strategies students use to cope with their anxiety.

The data from this study demonstrates that having a comfortable teaching environment decreases anxiety in the classroom and increases participation, regardless of the type of classroom activity (oral/presentations and written, reading and listening exercises). Moreover, students' anxiety was decreased by certain interactive activities, such as small groups, pairs, games and humour, as well as oral activities that were engaging and practical, and which allowed students to feel they were in a real-life situation. These results are consistent with previous studies in the field of foreign-language anxiety (Ely 1986; Foss & Reitzel 1988; Koch & Terrell 1991; Horwitz 2008; Phillips 1992; Von Wörde 2003; Young 1990).

The students expressed the opinion that the teacher had created an environment that made them feel that it was all right to make mistakes because that was part of the learning process. Those students who felt that they were falling behind suggested that the teacher should slow things down and that, although the class time was limited, the teacher should explain the concepts over and over. This comment was still made even though the teacher did this many times during the semester, probably not slowly enough for some students, but this was difficult at times as the teacher was aware of the time constraints and needed to cover all the topics of the curriculum. Other students said that they liked it when the teacher repeated the lesson until everyone understood it because such repetition was really helpful. The fact that the teacher was a native speaker of Spanish at the time was very well received, and the students saw the benefit of this at their level of Spanish. These results are consistent with other studies (e.g. Gardner, Lalonde & Pierson 1982) that have found that students' attitudes towards the teacher and the class are predictors of motivation and good performance, which produces an environment with lower anxiety.

Throughout the 12 weeks of the semester, none of the participants missed a single class, stating that they enjoyed being in the class and learning the language, despite knowing that the class involved undertaking a large number of oral activities and that the class was almost entirely taught in Spanish. Previous results have demonstrated that oral activities are associated with higher levels of anxiety; thus students tend to dislike them (Bailey 1983). In contrast, 80% of the participants in this study stated that they enjoyed the oral activities and experienced generally no to low-level anxiety. This study found that anxieties normally associated with oral activities may be ameliorated through randomised-pair group work. This may be explained, at least in part, by students' increased awareness of each other's differing levels of proficiency through one-on-one social interaction. However, where larger groups are involved, such as with oral presentations in front of the entire class, students reported heightened levels of anxiety, due mainly to their fear of being evaluated by their peers. Interestingly, students with prior travel experience in a Spanish-

speaking country felt some anxiety towards oral presentations because they assumed that everyone in the class expected them to do better, not knowing that those who looked up to them felt anxious themselves because they wanted to perform equally well. However, most of the students who had been overseas felt less anxious as a result of having a foundation in the language and knowing strategies of how to learn a language. These results are consistent with those of Aida (1994), who found that students in a Japanese-language class who had been to Japan had a lower level of anxiety than those who had never been to or lived in the country.

A small number of students reported that they felt more anxious in their second year of learning Spanish than in their first year because they felt that their own and others' expectations of themselves were higher. In their first year, they had not been expected to have a good understanding of the language because they had had no prior knowledge or experience. Part of our curriculum is teaching students from the very first class how to learn a language by giving them strategies. The results of this study show that this helped ease students' anxiety. As Young (1991) suggested, it is important for the teacher to apply learning strategies in the class because this allows the students to become familiar with such strategies. The findings of this study also corroborate those of Gardner et al. (1977), who found that anxiety decreases as proficiency and training in the target language increase.

Students recognised that one of the strategies that they should use or need to put into practice was to prepare in advance to feel at ease in class and be able to participate more. This included doing more revision/homework, reviewing new concepts at home, seeking clarification, attending the conversation class and meeting with friends to practise Spanish. In this study, the students opted to not miss a class even when they had not adequately prepared, and found that attending the conversation class served as a coping strategy because it provided them with an opportunity to practise their speaking skills, which increased their confidence to participate more during the regular class. Some students reported that writing down everything they wanted to say and doing listening exercises were helpful. All the students admitted that they had not always been able to prepare for class because of their high workload in their degree course, but whenever they did so, they felt better and participated more.

Some studies (e.g. Horwitz et al. 1986) have shown that being confronted with many language rules is one of the factors that make students feel anxious or overwhelmed. Students in this study suggested that a brief introduction of the next lesson would help familiarise them with the new topic, and therefore make them feel more comfortable in class. The teacher in this study was unable to employ this strategy in the class due to time constraints, but placed the following week's lesson material on the online portal for the students to read ahead of time. In hindsight, the teacher should have used the same material in the classroom to help reduce the students' anxiety, given that familiarisation with a task has been shown to create less anxiety (Bailey 1983).

Overall, it should be acknowledged that not all students will enjoy every language-learning activity, nor will all students find every activity appropriate to their individual learning needs; indeed, some may find that an activity may actually increase their anxiety. Therefore, it is important for a teacher to use a variety of class activities to satisfy all learning preferences.

Limitations of This Study

Some limitations of this study were considered in interpreting the results. First, the teacher of this group was not able to apply all the students' suggestions as intended, due to failure to recall. Second, the teacher should have been interviewed, asked to keep a journal and observed by another researcher for the purpose of monitoring her performance, allowing her to reflect about how she might have contributed to the students' anxiety and how she could have improved her class. Third, although the teacher indirectly observed the students' personalities, these were not measured so as to determine the relationship between personality and anxiety. This was also the case when considering students' motivation, which was indicated by the results. Therefore further research could be done in these areas. Finally, the researcher acknowledges that the small number of participants means that it is unclear whether data saturation was achieved. Notwithstanding these limitations, this sample has yielded a richer understanding of studies exploring anxiety and coping strategies, as well as methods to mitigate anxiety. It is also important to mention that based on the teacher's observations, those students who did not volunteer for this study also felt comfortable and participated in class as much as those who did volunteer. The fact that the teacher got 100% on her good teaching practice assessment from all 40 students indicates that she was using the right activities and the right teaching approach to provide a comfortable learning environment and reduce anxiety.

Despite its limitations, this study found that some of the techniques that are effective in controlling foreign language anxiety and that the teacher is already employing are: oral activities in pairs or groups, setting a comfortable and relaxed learning environment, talking about realistic expectations of the students' learning ability, reminding students that everyone learns differently, teaching students learning strategies, having the students write about their anxiety in a journal and telling the students that learning a language takes time and that everyone in the class, including the teacher, is in the process of learning – thus, it is all right to make mistakes.

Recommendations

One recommendation arising from this study is to strongly suggest the inclusion of discussions about the topic of anxiety in teachers' training, as most educators are either not aware of it or have forgotten that it takes place in the classroom. As Young (1991, p. 428) stated, "The social context that the instructor sets up in the classroom can have tremendous ramifications for the learner."

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