

# Foreign Language Anxiety – For Beginners Only?

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## Introduction

Anxiety associated with foreign or second language learning and communication has long been in the focus of second language (L2) researchers. It has been investigated in the broader context of individual learner differences potentially responsible for differential success at language learning since the 1970s (Dörnyei, 2005; Horwitz, 1990). The past twenty years, however, seem to have seen a real increase in the number of studies dealing with anxiety in the L2 domain. Attempts have been made to develop a firm theoretical basis for clarifying the construct of language learning anxiety, its development and maintenance, as well as its dimensions (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989; 1991; 1994).

Instruments have been developed to measure general and skill specific types of anxiety arising in the context of learning a new language (Gardner 1985; Horwitz et al., 1986; Kim, 2000; MacIntyre, 1988; Saito, Horwitz, & Garza, 1999). As a result of these 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 L2 research. It has been documented in learners of diverse target languages (TL) in various instructional settings and has been generally found to be one of the best predictors of performance and achievement in a foreign language (Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre, 1999, 2002; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Young, 1991, 1994). Correlational studies have established a moderately negative association between anxiety level and a wide range of language production measures, indicating that learners with higher levels of language anxiety tend to score lower on indices of L2 performance than their less anxious counterparts. Quantitative findings on L2-related anxiety have been complemented by insights gained from qualitative inquiries as well. Some of these examined anxiety from the learners' perspective (Bailey, 1983; Cohen & Norst, 1989; Hilleson, 1996; McCoy, 1979; Phillips, 1992; Price, 1991; Young, 1990), while others investigated anxious learners' reactions to their own performance (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Gregersen, 2003). In spite of the significant advances and the substantial volume of research conducted in the field, however, some very basic, fundamental questions about L2-related anxiety still appear to be unanswered.

The paper deals with one of these unresolved questions in the study of anxiety associated with second language learning. Specifically, it addresses the question whether foreign language anxiety (FLA) is generally characteristic at the early,

beginning stages of language learning or may also be a problem for learners at more advanced levels of L2 proficiency – which is essentially asking whether proficiency is a primary factor in anxiety about foreign language learning and performance. As evidenced by the literature, this is an issue on which researchers are sharply divided and empirical findings are inconclusive. In a number of studies beginning learners were found to carry higher levels of L2-related anxiety than learners at more advanced levels of L2 proficiency (e.g. Gardner, Smythe, & Brunet, 1977; Gardner, Lalonde, & Pierson, 1983). Based on such findings MacIntyre and Gardner (1991, 1993) hypothesise that “as experience and proficiency increase, anxiety declines in a fairly consistent manner” (1991, p. 111), which implies that FLA is more characteristic at the earlier stages of language learning and is becoming less of a problem for more advanced learners. Contrary evidence was found, however, in a number of other studies. Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, and Daley (1999) reported no significant differences between the anxiety level of beginning, intermediate and advanced foreign language learners, and several studies indicated that advanced learners scored higher on anxiety than their lower proficiency counterparts (cf. Cheng, 2002; Kitano, 2001; Saito & Samimy, 1996). Qualitative studies, investigating anxiety from the learner’s perspective, also appear to indicate that some learners experience more anxiety than their proficiency would indicate (Hilleson, 1996). Rodriguez (1995) and Horwitz (1996) go even further and suggest that foreign language anxiety can be an important issue not only for language learners but even for non-native language *teachers*, notwithstanding the fact that they are supposed to be highly proficient speakers of the target language. Based on conversations with practising teachers Horwitz (1996) asserts that “*many* non-native foreign language teachers experience foreign language anxiety” (p. 365) (my emphasis), whereas Rodriguez’s (1995) quantitative study documented anxiety among pre-service teachers.

These contradictory results clearly call for the re-examination of the role of proficiency level in feelings of foreign language anxiety. The inconsistent findings may suggest that anxiety about L2 learning and communication cannot simply be attributed to an insufficient command of the target language, i.e. proficiency level (Cheng, 2002; Horwitz, 1996). What is more, proficiency may not even be “the primary factor that determines the rise or decline of language anxiety” (Cheng, 2002, p.653). Since most previous studies focused on anxiety experienced by beginning and intermediate level learners, relatively little is known about anxiety at more advanced stages of L2 learning (e.g. Aida, 1994; Horwitz, 1996; Young, 1994). The current research aims to fill this gap by examining advanced learners’ feelings of L2-related anxiety in a Hungarian EFL context. The aims of the study were (1) to find out how pervasive FLA was among university students majoring in English, and (2) to examine their attributions of the causes of FLA. The paper first explores the scope, severity, and most salient features of participants’ English-related anxiety, then it looks at what learners themselves had to say about FLA. The findings of the study have important implications for teachers of foreign languages at an advanced level.

## Method

### Participants

The participants included 117 first-year English majors from one university. The majority of these students were women, with a male-female ratio of 27:90 (76.9 % female). Their ages ranged from 18 to 24, with an average age of 19.37 (SD = 1.17). They had studied English for an average of 8.41 years (SD = 2.66), with a minimum of 3 and a maximum of 14 years, and achieved an average of 516.5 scores on the TOEFL, with a minimum of 403 and a maximum of 630. The majority of these learners (71.8 %) had never visited an English-speaking country, and only a tiny minority (8.5 %) had spent considerable time (a year or more) in the target language environment. The remaining 19.7 % of the participants had only stayed for a few weeks or months (not exceeding six months) in either Great-Britain or the USA. In view of this, they can be considered typical EFL learners in the Hungarian context, learning the target language almost exclusively in a monolingual classroom.

### Instruments

Anxiety was operationalised by the Hungarian language version of Horwitz et al.'s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale. The Hungarian FLCAS (HFLCAS), checked through back-translation, tested for response and construct validity as well as reliability, has shown to be both reliable ( $\alpha = .93$ ) and valid (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, as manifested in negative performance expectancies and social comparisons (a sample item is 23: "Mindig az az érzésem, hogy a többiek jobban beszélnek angolul, mint én" / *I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do*), psychophysiological symptoms (e.g. 20: "Angolórakon majd kiugrik a szívem, amikor érzem, hogy mindjárt felszólítanak" / *I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in English classes*), and avoidance behaviours (e.g., 17: "Gyakran szeretnék inkább távol maradni az angolórától" / *I often feel like not going to my English class*). 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 (a sample item is 27: "Izgulok és zavarodott leszek, amikor angolórán meg kell szólalnom" / *I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English classes*), fear of negative evaluation (e.g., 31: "Attól tartok, hogy a többiek kinevetnek, amikor angolul beszélek" / *I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English*), and test anxiety (e.g., 21: "Minél többet tanulok egy angol tesztre, annál inkább összezavarodom" / *The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get*).

To enquire into participants' attributions of the causes of foreign language anxiety, an open-ended question was designed, which read as follows.

According to surveys, many language learners feel embarrassed, tense, or even anxious when communicating in a foreign language in class, or other situations. What do you think the reasons may be for this phenomenon?

To elicit truthful responses Dörnyei's (2003) practical suggestions for handling sensitive issues were kept in mind when phrasing the open-ended question, such as presenting behaviour - in this case FLA - as rather common, and suggesting that the question is not personal but refers to other people. It was expected that students' answers to this question would not only point to potential causes but also provide information on how severe a problem language anxiety appeared to them.

## Data analysis

To assess the scope and severity of foreign language anxiety experienced by first year English majors, and to identify its most important aspects, descriptive statistics were used. For each participant an anxiety score was derived, by summing up his/her ratings of the 33 items of the HFLCAS. The responses were quantified as follows: "strongly disagree" = 1, "disagree" = 2, "neither agree nor disagree" = 3, "agree" = 4, "strongly agree" = 5. The nine items of the scale worded in such a way as to reveal a lack of anxiety (a sample item is 18: "Magabiztosnak érzem magam, amikor angolórákon angolul beszélek" / *I feel confident when I speak in my English classes*) were reverse scored before calculating the total score, so that in all instances, a high score represented high anxiety (the other eight items were the following: 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 22, 28, and 32). Based on their anxiety scores participants were grouped according to the degree of anxiety they exhibited. The most anxiety-provoking aspects of English classes were determined by examining (1) item means, and (2) the frequency of responses with numerical values of 4 and 5, which are indicative of considerable/high levels of anxiety.

Participants' answers to the open-ended question of the anxiety questionnaire were analysed using the constant comparative method as described by Maykut and Morehouse (1994). The analysis 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.

## Results

### The scope and severity, and the most salient features of first year English majors' FLA

To find out whether first year English majors felt anxious in their university English classes and L2 communication in general, first their scores on the anxiety measure were consulted. Descriptive statistics for FLA total scores and item-ratings are given in Tables 1 and 2. Judging from the average item-rating ( $M = 2.56$ ) and the corresponding FLA total score ( $M = 84.59$ ), participants as a group could be described as slightly anxious, carrying a relatively low level of anxiety. However, the wide range of ratings (1.48 – 4.12) indicated that this group was not homogeneous in terms of how anxious its members were. The difference between the anxiety score of the least anxious vs. most anxious participant of the study was as huge as 87, with the former scoring 49, and the latter 136 on the HFLCAS.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for item-ratings and FLA total scores

	Mean	Std. deviation	Actual range (Possible range)
Item-rating	2.56	.59	1.48 - 4.12 (1 - 5)
FLA Total Score	84.59	19.34	49 - 136 (33 - 165)

Table 2: Distribution of participants according to item-ratings and FLA total scores

Item-rating	FLA Total Score	N (%)
1 - 2: non-anxious	33 - 66	23 (19.7)
2 - 3: slightly anxious	67 - 99	68 (58.1)
3 - 4: considerably anxious	100 - 132	24 (20.5)
4 - 5: very anxious	133 - 165	2 (1.7)

Based on individual anxiety scores, participants were classified as (1) *non-anxious* (if they had a total score between 33 and 66, revealing virtually no anxiety), (2) *slightly anxious* (with scores between 67 and 99, indicative of moderate levels of anxiety), (3) *considerably anxious* (with scores 100-132, reflective of more than moderate anxiety), and (4) *very anxious* (in the 133-165 band, suggestive of high levels of anxiety). As Table 2 shows, more than half of the students (58.1 %) fell into the slightly anxious category, about one-fifth of them (19.7 %) formed the non-anxious group, and slightly more than another fifth of them (22.2 %) could be described as considerably or very anxious.

Responses to all items of the Hungarian FLCAS are reported in the Appendix, where the percentages refer to the number of students selecting each alternative. The most important aspects of participants' FLA were determined by (1) the frequency of responses with numerical values of 4 and 5, indicative of considerable/high anxiety level, and (2) item-means above 3, again suggestive of considerable levels of anxiety. As evident from Tables 3 and 4, the same items surfaced according to both criteria.

Table 3: Items showing the highest frequencies of responses coded as 4 or 5

Item	Frequency of 4s and 5s	%
11 (understanding why people can get upset over English classes)	71	61
10 (worry about no meeting the requirements)	54	46
2 (apprehension about making mistakes)	54	46
16 (anxiety about English classes even if wellprepared for them)	43	37
18 (lack of confidence when speaking English in class)	38	33
8 (anxiety during tests)	37	32

Table 4: Items with the highest means

Item	Mean
11	3.56
10	3.32
2	3.21
18	3.16
8*	2.92
16	2.84

\*Note: The means of items 8 and 16 are slightly below 3, but in terms of the frequency of 4s and 5s they seem important to be considered.

These results show that the relatively high levels of anxiety among first-year English majors were related to the following variables: “understanding why people can get upset over English classes” (item 11), “worry over not meeting the requirements” (item 10), “apprehension about making mistakes” (item 2), “anxiety about English classes even if well prepared for them” (item 16), “lack of confidence when speaking English in class” (item 18), and finally, “anxiety during tests” (item 8). Two clear patterns seem to emerge from the above findings. One of them is anxiety over inadequate classroom performance, reflected in responses to items 10, 2, 8, and 18. Almost half of the surveyed first-year English majors (46%) reported having fears about not meeting the requirements of their English classes, the same percentage of them turned out to be worried about making mistakes in these classes, and approximately a third of them (32%) reported feeling anxious during English tests. Only 23% of the students said they felt confident when speaking English in the classroom (see Appendix), and 33% of them completely rejected this statement. The second pattern that surfaced concerns students’ general feelings about their English classes, more precisely, their self-perceived anxiety level in these classes, expressed in responses to items 11, and 16. More than half of the respondents (61%) said they understood why people can get upset over English classes, and a considerable 37% reported they felt anxious about these classes even if they were well prepared for them.

## Students' attributions of the sources and causes of FLA

Participants' responses to the individual items of the HFLCAS were supported and complemented by those given to the single open-ended question of the anxiety instrument, formulated as follows:

According to surveys, many language learners feel embarrassed, tense, or even anxious when communicating in a foreign language in class, or other situations. What do you think the reasons may be for this phenomenon?

All but two students responded to the question, and the 115 questionnaires generated almost three hundred (297) responses addressing various sources of FLA. The high response rate seemed to indicate that first year English majors were not unfamiliar with L2-related anxiety, and they did understand "why people can get upset over English classes", as suggested by their responses to item 11 of the HFLCAS. Although the question was worded as if it referred to "other people", the depth and intensity of the answers gave the impression that many students relied on their first-hand experiences, which was also evidenced by their using the first person singular when expressing their views.

A review of responses indicated that the question was interpreted by participants in two different ways. Some 65 comments enumerated fears and worries related to L2 learning and performance, addressing the question "What is it that learners are afraid of?" A greater number of responses (216) were concerned with the deeper causes of anxiety, addressing the question "What factors may provide an explanation for the existence of language learning anxiety?" Responses in the two categories are presented in the subsequent two sections.

### Student-identified fears and worries associated with FLA

As Table 5 shows, the 65 comments made by participants clustered around five main categories. The most oft-mentioned concern was related to mistakes. According to respondents, it may show up in anticipating and fearing *making* mistakes, and feelings of discomfort on *realizing* them. Respondents referred to fears of "speaking inaccurately/with mistakes", "making grammatical mistakes", "using incorrect grammar", "employing wrong sentence structure", as well as the fear of "facing one's own mistakes", etc., and described feelings of "uneasiness", "embarrassment", and "frustration" as a result of realizing them. As evidenced by responses to item 2 of the HFLCAS, virtually every other first-year English major (46%) was worried about making mistakes in English classes.

Table 5: Student-identified fears/worries associated with FLA

Fears/Worries	Number of responses
Concern over mistakes	27

Fear of peer derision	13
Worry about pronunciation	10
Fear of not meeting requirements	9
Fear of failure	6
Total	65

Fear of mistakes was followed by that of peer derision in the number of comments referring to it. Respondents wrote about fears of being “laughed at”, “looked down”, “run down” by group mates, and a dread of “ending up with egg on one’s face” in English classes. In fact, only 18% of the students reported that they find it embarrassing to speak English in front of peers, as indicated by their responses to item 24 of the HFLCAS, and a mere 8 % was afraid of being laughed at by classmates (item 31). The third language learner fear that appeared frequently in responses to the open-ended question concerned L2 pronunciation. Students identified two pronunciation-related worries as causes for concern, that of “Hunglish accent” and “mispronouncing English words”. Fear of not meeting the requirements, manifested in feelings of “not being good enough”, apprehension over “rapid pace of classes”, and “fear of lagging behind” was the fourth concern respondents identified as an important contributor to student anxiety. Although mentioned as a source of anxiety only by nine students, this fear was expressed by 46% of the first-year English majors, as evidenced by responses to item 10 of the HFLCAS (see Table 3). Finally, an unspecified fear of failure was the fifth concern students associated with feelings of FLA.

### Student-identified factors accounting for FLA

Table 6 presents an overview of factors respondents offered as explanations for the L2-related fears and worries discussed above. As can be seen, the 216 responses centred around the following seven categories: (1) the very nature of FL communication, (2) personal attributes of the language learner, (3) majoring in a FL, (4) interpersonal factors, (5) competence in the FL, (6) instructional practices, and (7) lack of practice in FL communication. Within some of these main categories, students’ responses fell into several subcategories.



Table 6: Student-identified factors accounting for FLA

Factors	Number of responses
The nature of FL communication	9
Personality of learner	35
Being a FL major	6
Interpersonal	55
Classroom language learning	17
Teacher	20
Peers	18
TL Competence	63
Objective	19
Subjective	31
Processing-related aspects	13
Instructional Practices	26
General	16
Pre-university	8
Current	2
Lack of practice	22
Total	216

Comments belonging to the first category were reflective of the view that some anxiety is inherent in L2 communication. Students contrasted the “naturalness”, the “matter-of-course-ness” of using one’s mother tongue, which is “your own language” with the inherent “strange-ness”/“foreignness” of speaking another: a *foreign* language “you do not use every day, every hour”. Respondents also referred to feelings of uneasiness stemming from problems of self-expression/self-presentation in the FL. The sample comment below is representative of responses in this category.

I find it a natural reaction that someone feels embarrassed when speaking in a foreign language, because if you don’t know something, it gives the impression that you can’t speak, can’t express yourself, and this is a very awkward feeling, as if you were stupid. (respondent 117)

As evidenced by the second group of responses, a considerable number of students were of the opinion that it is also a question of personality whether a learner feels anxious in the language classroom and in other L2 contexts. The following personal attributes figured most prominently in respondents’ comments as features accounting for FLA: “being too shy”, “full of inhibitions”, “suffering from some inferiority complex”, “lacking self-confidence”, “overconcerned about other people’s opinions/reactions/expectations”, “do not trust themselves”, “have some sort of social phobia”, “don’t like to/dare to speak up in Hungarian either”, “suffer from stage fright”, “generally nervous, not only in English”, “maximalists”, “always want to speak perfect English”, “can’t take failures in their stride”. It was an interesting finding that some respondents associated many of these features with what they believed to be “the typical Hungarian national character”,

and tended to attribute feelings of FLA, to some extent, to these personal/national characteristics. Some sample comments:

We've got too many unnecessary inhibitions. This is a general Hungarian problem. (respondent 75)

One reason is maximalism characteristic of Hungarian people. We're afraid of mistakes, because we set very high standards for ourselves. When we have to speak in a foreign language, we immediately want to speak it as if it was our native language, even if we know it full well, we don't stand much chance to do so, it is not realistic at all. (respondent 111)

Responses forming the third category were concerned with the trials and tribulations of majoring in English. Respondents expressed the view that the very fact of being a foreign language major may contribute to students' L2-related anxiety. To cite a few opinions:

A student majoring in English has to fulfil very difficult requirements, which automatically causes stress, which, in my view, is a hindrance in foreign language communication. (respondent 15)

English majors are expected to speak fluently and without mistakes. This makes those who want to come up to expectations even more anxious. This is why they make mistakes even in very basic things. (respondent 103)

In addition, the general atmosphere of the English department, "with the shadow of dropping out hanging over us", to borrow one student's words, was also considered by respondents a contributor to English majors' feelings of anxiety.

Social/interpersonal aspects related to instructed foreign language learning were also identified by respondents as an important factor accounting for FLA, as shown in Table 6. 17 comments referred to general characteristics of the classroom situation itself, 20 referred to some personal attribute or behaviour of the teacher, and there were 18 references to peers, all three presented as potential explanations for learner anxiety. As for the first subcategory, respondents contrasted the "artificiality and formality" of classroom language learning, the "frightening presence of so many people", "the strangeness of the environment" with the cosiness and naturalness of real-life communication. A sample comment is:

I don't know why other students are anxious, but as far as I'm concerned, I simply don't like to tell my opinion in front of *almost total strangers*, and don't like to discuss *compulsory topics* with people I hardly know. (respondent 85) (my emphasis)

Several comments pointed to anxiety induced by “not having anything to say about set topics”, which, according to one respondent, is aggravated by the fact that very often “students get to know each other via these conversations in English” (respondent 94).

As for the second group of comments related to interpersonal aspects of the classroom, respondents seemed to be unanimous in their opinion that teachers play a particularly strong role in how much anxiety learners experience in language classes. In their own words,

It is the teacher’s task to create a relaxed atmosphere. (respondent 57)

It depends, to a large extent, on the teacher whether learners are at ease or not. (respondent 69)

Sense of humour, “willingness to laugh and joke with students”, “putting some life into classes”, “being informal”, “praising and encouraging learners” were highlighted as teacher attributes contributing to an atmosphere conducive to language learning.

When I enjoy myself in class I can learn much more, and perform much better than when I feel ill at ease. (respondent 69)

In contrast, disparaging remarks like “even a secondary school pupil is supposed to know this”, “lack of humaneness towards learners”, being “excessively strict”, “teaching the curriculum rather than students”, “not being patient enough to listen to halting speech” were mentioned by respondents as important contributors to learner anxiety. Several comments referred to the teacher’s handling of mistakes. Teachers whose corrections were perceived by learners as “not benevolent, but rather wanting to prove how bad your English is”, those impatient ones “who keep interrupting you and finishing your sentence for you”, as well as those “who find fault with every word you say”, and “correct mistakes in such a way that everyone finds embarrassing and humiliating” were, in respondents’ opinion, responsible for many students’ feelings of FLA.

The third aspect of classroom language learning respondents identified as a factor explaining learner anxiety was the presence of other learners. Comments in this category pointed to the problem that students inadvertently compare themselves to others, which may lead to feelings of anxiety if they are, or *think* they are less competent in the foreign language than their peers. To give some examples,

In every group there are people who speak the given language very well, which makes those who *are not* so good feel anxious. (respondent 30)

They are tense and anxious because they *think* the others are better than they are. (respondent 77) (my emphasis)

Pointing to challenges posed by more confident peers as a source of anxiety, one respondent highlighted a very important issue:

As group numbers are very high, it's very easy to hide in the crowd. After a while the teacher will gauge the group's level based on the performance of the few who are active all the time, and will form expectations accordingly. As time goes on, those who are not so active will find it more and more difficult to speak up in English. (respondent 95)

As evidenced by the high number of comments (63) in the fifth category, referring to TL competence, many students believed there was a strong link between FLA and one's command of the foreign language. There were 17 responses reflective of the view that anxiety experienced in L2 learning and communication is "very much dependent on how well the learner knows the language". "Lack of vocabulary"/"poor vocabulary", and "inadequate knowledge of grammar" were identified as primary reasons for feeling anxious. Sample comments for this subcategory are the following:

If someone does not know enough words with which to express his thoughts, or doesn't know the right ones, it will make him tense and embarrassed when using the language. (respondent 25)

Insufficient knowledge of grammar and vocabulary cause tension and fears in learners. (respondent 115)

While this group of responses seemed to suggest that FLA is attributable to actual language problems, that is, learners' limited linguistic abilities, almost twice as many comments (31) were indicative of the opinion that it is how learners *feel* about their own competence, whether they are satisfied with themselves that determines how anxious they feel when using the FL. The following phrases were used by respondents to describe feelings of linguistic insecurity, accounting, in their view, for FLA: "not feeling confident about one's competence in the FL", "not trusting one's knowledge of the language", and "feeling that one does not know the foreign language well enough". A sample comment is given below:

The learner cannot feel at ease because he is not confident about his command of English. He is more concerned with not knowing something or making mistakes than with saying what he wants to say. (respondent 20)

Also related to the incomplete mastery of the FL was a third group of responses, smaller in number (13), which identified processing-related difficulties as sources of anxiety in learners. Students referred to concerns such as the gap between receptive and productive skills, with speaking perceived as posing the biggest challenge, therefore arousing the most anxiety. As one respondent put it:

It's strange, it seems we have no particular problems with vocabulary, we understand what we read or what's taught in classes, we can even produce quite sophisticated things in writing, still when it comes to speaking nothing comes to my mind, I can say much less than what I can understand. (respondent 24)

As other causes for concern students also mentioned the “frustrating imbalance between active and passive vocabulary”, the “impossibility of applying so many grammar rules when speaking”, and the “difficulty posed by understanding native English speech precisely”.

Answers belonging to the sixth category revealed that instructional practices were also seen by respondents as largely responsible for learners' anxiety about FL learning and communication. The acrimonious comments made on Hungarian language teaching practices indicated that students viewed FLA as the direct consequence of grammar-centred teaching.

Unfortunately, FL teaching in Hungary, even today, is very old-fashioned. What I mean by this is the relentless teaching of grammar rules without learners' having the chance of using the language in various situations. It's not surprising they feel anxious if they are told to aim at speaking accurately, without any mistakes, rather than encouraged to say what they can, the way they can. (respondent 17)

As a result of “rule-ridden language teaching” and “too much emphasis on accuracy”, many learners, in the respondents' view, “approach the language only from a grammatical point of view”/“look upon the foreign language as a collection of frightening rules and definitions” rather than a tool to communicate with. They “keep thinking of grammar rules as they speak”, and “have the feeling that the more grammar they learn the less they know”, and this is what creates anxiety in them. The main problem, according to students, is that disproportionately less attention is devoted to developing oral skills than to “theoretical grammar instruction” (often in Hungarian!), “translation practice”, or “exercises from the book”, and this focus on grammar and written skills is reflected in testing and examination practices as well.

It is grammar that tends to be tested. Real, practical knowledge of the language is not what they focus on, not even at the intermediate language exam. It's not whether you can speak fluently that is the main thing there. (respondent 108)

Most critical remarks were directed at language instruction at the secondary school level, however, some students expressed dissatisfaction with their current university English classes as well.

Not even here, at university, do you have enough opportunity to speak English in class. (respondent 100)

We should have more classes where we do nothing but speak. (respondent 117)

The last group of responses pointed to the lack of practice in authentic target language communication as a factor accounting for learners' feelings of FLA. Respondents expressed the view that students who spent no significant time in a target language country, for whom the primary locus of FL communication is the classroom, are very likely to experience FLA, as "they are simply not used to speaking the foreign language"/"lack the experience of communicating in the FL"/"speaking English is not a real-life experience for them". This is because, in the respondents' view, "in language classes they are not provided with enough opportunity to practice speaking", and "they speak very little English outside classes". The sample comment below is representative of responses in this category.

Communicating in a foreign language can be very frustrating for people who haven't spent enough time in English speaking countries. As *speaking* the language is still in the background in language classes, learners who have no other chance to speak English feel tense and embarrassed about using it, because they don't have any hands-on experience. (respondent 100)

As evidenced by the wealth and richness of the ideas presented above, first year English majors had a lot to say about foreign language anxiety. According to their opinion, some anxiety is "part and parcel" of L2 communication, however learners with certain personality traits are more liable to experience L2-related fears and worries. FLA, in most respondents' view, is closely related to learners' competence in the FL, and their subjective feelings about it. Teachers, peers, the learning context, instructional practices, and lack of experience in TL communication were also mentioned by students as factors potentially responsible for language learning anxiety.

## Discussion

The first aim of the study was to explore how pervasive FLA was among advanced level students of English in a Hungarian university context. The investigation was motivated by the debate in the literature about whether L2-related anxiety is typically characteristic at the early stages of language learning or may also be a problem for learners at more advanced levels of L2 proficiency. According to the results of the anxiety survey, most first year English majors in the study did not score high on FLA. At the same time, a sizeable minority (22.2%) of them was found to carry high levels of TL-related anxiety.

Compared to the claims of studies conducted in a North American college/university context, talking about "alarming levels of"/"significant" FLA in a "large number of"/"many" students (Campbell & Ortiz, 1991, p. 159; Horwitz et

al., 1986, p. 19; Horwitz, 2001, p. 121), with as many as 25-50% of them experiencing “debilitating anxiety” according to one estimation (Campbell & Ortiz, 1991, p. 159), and “about one third” of them “moderate to severe levels” according to another (Horwitz, 2000, p. 257), the present study, in a culturally/linguistically very different but also post-secondary FL setting, did not find FLA to be such an all-pervasive phenomenon among the university students surveyed but rather a problem severely afflicting a minority of them. However, in view of the fact that the participants of the study were representatives of a special learner population with more than average dedication to learn English, the finding that one in five of these highly motivated learners: would be English teachers or other EFL professionals, reported high levels of TL-related anxiety and more than half of them a moderate amount, indicates that FLA is not a negligible issue in the Hungarian EFL context either, not even among advanced learners.

The comparison of the results of the current research with those of previous investigations using the same anxiety instrument (Horwitz et al.’s FLCAS) reveals that the FLA sample means obtained in studies conducted in various instructional contexts with various target languages and learners with different levels of proficiency do not show a wide diversity. The 117 Hungarian first year English majors’ FLA mean score ( $M = 84.59$ ) was somewhat lower than those of learners in introductory FL courses in the American college/university setting (cf. Aida, 1994; Bailey, Onwuegbuzie, & Daley, 1998; Horwitz, 1986), but not considerably lower, as it fell into the same anxiety category (*slightly anxious*, band 67-99 on the FLCAS) as those of the aforementioned beginners. The similar sample means, irrespective of differences in learners’ L2 competence, can be taken to indicate that proficiency level by itself is by no means a reliable predictor of FLA, in other words, high feelings of FLA may be experienced by learners not only at the early stages of learning, but at more advanced levels as well. The finding that first year English majors’ anxiety level was not radically different from those of students in beginning FL classes appears to be in line with the results of a group of studies which - contrary to MacIntyre and Gardner’s (1991) assertion that FLA is more characteristic of the earlier stages of L2 learning and “declines in a fairly consistent manner” “as experience and proficiency increase” (p. 111) - indicated that advanced learners did not differ significantly from their lower proficiency counterparts in the amount of anxiety they carried, or, in some cases, even scored higher than them (cf. Cheng; 2002; Kitano, 2001; Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999; Saito & Samimy, 1996).

In fact, the latter turned out to be the case when the anxiety level of the 117 English majors was compared to that of 66 non-English majors from the same university, learning English to meet the university’s language requirement or out of personal interest. Although the vast majority of these students (60 out of the 66) were enrolled in pre-intermediate English classes, and they had studied English for a shorter period of time relative to the English majors (6.28 vs. 8.41 years), they reported significantly lower FLA ( $t = 2.373$ ,  $p = .019$ ). The significant difference between the two populations in terms of anxiety score means ( $M = 84.59$ ,  $SD = 19.34$  vs.  $M = 77.72$ ,  $SD = 17.75$ ) was also reflected in the distribution of students according to anxiety level. The number of respondents reporting no anxiety was considerably higher among non-English majors than among students majoring in

English (33.3% vs. 19.7%); the size of the slightly anxious group was approximately the same (54.6% vs. 58.1%), and there seemed to be notable differences in the number of anxious students. Only 12.1% of the non-English majors reported considerable levels of anxiety, and no respondent was found to be very anxious. The fact that English majors carried more FLA than the less proficient and less experienced non-English major group appears to be further empirical evidence in support of the claim that factors other than proficiency should be considered to better explain differences in anxiety level exhibited by learners with differing levels of TL competence (Cheng, 2002).

First year English majors' responses to the individual items and the single open-ended item of the anxiety questionnaire shed light on such potential factors. Of these, the *current learning situation* seemed to be the key factor in participants' TL-related anxiety, accounting for the relatively higher FLA these more proficient language specialists experienced compared to their less proficient, non-English-specialist peers from the same university. The analysis of English majors' responses to the individual items of the anxiety scale has showed that the items indicative of anxiety among a large number of students, even those with low or average overall FLA scores, were all related to university English classes rather than L2 situations outside the classroom. Specifically, all of these items were reflective of concerns over not being able to meet the demands set in these classes, or feelings of uneasiness associated with them. The fact that almost every other student expressed fears about not meeting the requirements of their university English classes and felt apprehensive about making mistakes, together with the findings that a fair number of them did not feel comfortable speaking English in class, reported anxiety about tests, and felt uneasy about classes even if well prepared for them, indicate that fear of inadequate performance and achievement in university English classes was the most important feature of the surveyed first year English majors' FLA, which can be attributed to the new demands placed on these learners in an intensive language learning situation.

This seems to be supported by participants' responses to the open-ended question of the anxiety survey, in which *being a FL major*, paradoxically enough, was explicitly suggested as one of the factors explaining FLA among students, because of the demanding requirements set for English majors and the high institutional/teacher expectations towards them in a competitive learning environment. The finding that learners' perceptions of/beliefs about what was expected from them as English majors: would-be experts of the English language, caused anxiety in students for fear of not being able to fulfil the image of the *expert-user of the TL*, lends empirical support to Horwitz' (1996) theory about why even non-native language *teachers* are susceptible to FLA. It also corroborates earlier empirical 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; Rodriguez, 1995). It also explains why comparison/competition with peers figured so prominently in English majors' responses as an important contributor to learner anxiety in university English classes.



## Conclusion and pedagogical implications

The most important finding of this investigation is that foreign language anxiety is not restricted to the beginning or early phases of L2 learning. The study of English major students has shown that long years of commitment to learning a foreign language and a relatively high level of L2 proficiency do not necessarily confer a sense of confidence in using the target language to every learner. Advanced L2 learners may indeed be more proficient in the language and more experienced as measured in years, however the expectations towards them, including their own personal expectations of themselves as L2 speakers, are also higher.

Therefore, language instructors should not believe that affective factors like learner anxiety are not to be reckoned with at higher levels of language instruction and thus 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. First year English majors' responses to the open-ended item of the anxiety questionnaire made it clear that *instructional practices, classroom atmosphere, instructor qualities, teacher attitudes toward learners, methods of error correction and other teacher behaviours, etc.*, are seen by learners as factors that do affect how much anxiety they experience in the L2 classroom. Thus, even if some anxiety is intrinsic to language learning, and learners with certain personality traits experience higher anxiety however ideal the learning environment may be, as suggested by participants, language instructors can still control a substantial part of FLA. They can eliminate, or at least minimise, the anxiety that is rooted in certain outdated classroom procedures, ineffective pedagogical practices, unengaging activities and teaching materials, and insufficient rapport with learners, etc., in short, a learning environment not sensitive to learners' affective needs. English majors' voices in this study indicate that a pleasant, supportive, low-anxiety classroom environment, one encouraging co-operation and collaboration rather than competition between learners, is not less important for learners at more advanced levels of L2 learning than for their less advanced counterparts.

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## Appendix

Hungarian FLCAS items with percentages of participants selecting each alternative\*

		1.....5**				
1	Sohasem vagyok egészen biztos magamban, amikor angolórán angolul beszélek. [I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking English in my English class]	9	31	40	16	3
2	Nem izgatom magam amiatt, hogy hibázom az angolórán. [I don't worry about making mistakes in English classes]	8	38	27	22	5
3	Szinte reszketek, ha tudom, hogy fel fognak szólítani angolórán. [I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in my English class]	39	35	20	6	0
4	Megijeszt, ha nem értem, amit a tanár angolul mond. [It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in English]	21	34	25	16	4
5	Egyáltalán nem aggódnék, ha több nyelvórát kellene felvennem angolból. [It wouldn't bother me at all to take more English classes]	7	25	20	30	17
6	Angolórakon arra leszek figyelmes, hogy olyan gondolatok járnak a fejemben, melyeknek semmi köze az órai anyaghoz. [During English classes, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course]	20	43	30	4	4
7	Folyton azt hiszem, hogy a többi diák jobban tud nálam angolul. [I keep thinking that the other students are better at English than I am]	11	33	32	15	9

8	Általában nyugodt vagyok, amikor angolból tesztet írok. [I am usually at ease during tests in English classes]	10	22	28	32	8
9	Pánikba esem, ha az angolórán váratlanul kell megszólalnom, anélkül, hogy arra előre felkészülhettem volna. [I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English classes]	29	33	26	10	2
10	Aggódok, hogy nem sikerül teljesítenem az angolórákon támasztott követelményeket. [I worry about the consequences of failing my English classes]	8	18	28	27	19
11	Számomra érthetetlen, hogy egyesek miért izgulnak annyira egy angolórától. [I don't understand why some people get so upset over English classes]	17	44	22	12	5
12	Olyan ideges tudok lenni az angolórán, hogy azt is elfelejtem, amit tudok. [In English classes, I can get so nervous I forget things I know]	27	40	20	7	5
13	Engem feszélyez, hogy önszántamból válaszoljak az angoltanár kérdéseire. [It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in an English class]	36	34	20	8	3
14	Nem izgulnék, ha angol anyanyelvű emberekkel kellene angolul beszélnem. [I would not be nervous speaking English with native speakers]	7	7	18	34	34
15	Nyugtalanít, ha nem értem, hogy miért javít ki a tanár. [I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting]	5	22	27	32	13
16	Akkor is van bennem izgalom, ha jól felkészültem egy angolórára. [Even if I am well prepared for an English class, I feel anxious about it]	17	28	18	27	10
17	Gyakran szeretnék inkább távol maradni az angolóráktól. [I often feel like not going to my English classes]	29	44	16	5	5
18	Magabiztosnak érzem magam, amikor angolórákon angolul beszélek. [I feel confident when I speak in my English classes]	11	22	44	20	3
19	Tartok attól, hogy az angoltanár minden hibámat kijavítja. [I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make]	28	48	20	3	1
20	Angolórákon majd kiugrik a szívem, amikor érzem, hogy mindjárt felszólítanak. [I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in an English class]	31	30	30	9	1
21	Minél többet tanulok egy angol tesztre, annál inkább összezavarodom. [The more I study for an English test, the more confused I get]	39	32	16	10	3
22	Nem érzek erős késztetést arra, hogy nagyon jól felkészüljek az angolórákra. [I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for English classes]	32	41	17	10	0
23	Mindig az az érzésem, hogy a többiek jobban beszélnek angolul, mint én. [I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do]	7	33	38	15	7
24	Zavarba ejtő számomra a többi diák előtt angolul beszélni. [I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students]	24	35	23	14	4
25	Olyan gyorsan haladunk angolórákon, hogy félek a lemaradástól. [English classes move so quickly I worry about getting left behind]	23	40	25	7	4
26	Angolórán feszültebb és idegesebb vagyok, mint más órákon. [I feel more tense and nervous in an English class than in my other classes]	37	26	15	15	6

27	Izgulok és zavarodott leszek, amikor angolórán meg kell szólalnom. [I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English class]	20	37	31	9	3
28	Magabiztosan és nyugodtan megyek angolórákra. [When I'm on my way to English classes, I feel very sure and relaxed]	7	22	37	30	4
29	Idegess leszek, ha nem értek minden szót, amit az angoltanár mond. [I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says]	18	44	29	9	0
30	Nyomaszt az a rengeteg szabály, amit meg kell tanulni ahhoz, hogy megszólalhassak angolul. [I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak English]	27	38	14	15	5
31	Attól tartok, hogy a többiek kinevetnek, amikor angolul beszélek. [I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English]	39	44	9	5	3
32	Valószínűleg nem érezném magam feszélyezve angol anyanyelvűek társaságában. [I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of English]	4	11	24	32	29
33	Idegess leszek, ha az angoltanár olyan kérdéseket tesz fel, melyekre nem készülhettem fel előre. [I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance]	21	28	34	15	1

\* Data in this table are rounded to the nearest whole number. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

\*\* 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree