Exploring Foreign Language Anxiety through English Foreign Language learners' perceptions

Explorando la ansiedad en el idioma extranjero a través de las percepciones de los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera

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ABSTRACT: The current study is based on a phenomenon that has been labeled as Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) which is, in accordance with Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), a series of ideas about oneself and others, or specific attitudes that emerge from the process of learning a foreign language. This type of anxiety is widely recognized for hindering students' learning achievement when studying a different language from the native one (Horwitz et al., 1986; Krashen, 1982; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989).

For this reason, this qualitative study aimed to interpret the perceptions and identify the reasons why students who are Spanish native speakers experience FLA in their English language classes, how this phenomenon affects their learning achievement, and how they deal with this problem. Through a phenomenological approach, a standardized questionnaire was applied to 17 English language learners from a Language Center in a public Mexican university. After analyzing the data, findings showed that the main cause of the development of FLA is that students did not feel satisfied with their English level; therefore, they felt that everybody else was better prepared than them and it became a source of anxiety. In the same way, students mentioned that FLA did affect their learning process and that they did not perceive an improvement of their language skills because of it. Finally, they said that what they do to deal with this problem is relaxing and practicing so as to be better in the language.

KEYWORDS: Foreign Language Anxiety, foreign language learning, English as a foreign language, Foreign Language Learners, perceptions.

RESUMEN: El presente estudio está basado en un fenómeno identificado como ansiedad en el idioma extranjero, el cual, de acuerdo con Horwitz, Horwitz y Cope (1986), puede ser definido como una serie de percepciones sobre uno mismo y los demás, o actitudes específicas que surgen en el proceso de aprendizaje de un idioma extranjero. De la misma manera, este tipo de ansiedad es ampliamente reconocido como una barrera que dificulta el aprendizaje de un idioma diferente al nativo (Horwitz et al., 1986; Krashen, 1982; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989).

Por esta razón, este estudio cualitativo ha tenido como objetivos principales identificar las razones por las cuales algunos estudiantes de habla española experimentan ansiedad en el idioma extranjero en sus clases de inglés, explorar cómo este fenómeno afecta su aprovechamiento académico y entender la manera en que ellos lidian con este problema. A través de un enfoque fenomenológico, un cuestionario estandarizado fue aplicado a 17 estudiantes de inglés de un centro de idiomas de una universidad pública en México. Después de haber analizado la información, los resultados mostraron que la principal causa del desarrollo de ansiedad entre estos estudiantes fue que no se sentían satisfechos con su nivel de inglés y, por lo tanto, creían que sus demás compañeros eran mejores que ellos en el idioma. De la misma manera, los participantes mencionaron que este fenómeno afecta su proceso de aprendizaje. Finalmente, algunas de las formas en las que ellos lidian con este problema es mediante técnicas de relajación y práctica para mejorar en el idioma.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Ansiedad en el idioma extranjero, aprendizaje de idiomas extranjeros, inglés como lengua extranjera, estudiantes de lengua extranjera, percepciones.

Introduction

Day to day, more students are interested in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) because it will certainly increase their possibilities to find a better job in this world in which communication has become one of the most important sources of success. As well, "learning another language provides access into a perspective other than one's own, increases the ability to see connections across content areas, and promotes an interdisciplinary perspective while gaining intercultural understandings" (Moeller & Catalano, 2015). However, learning a foreign language is not as easy as many may think, and this may cause that some students have certain problems at the moment of learning and performing in this language. For example, in a foreign language classroom, there can be some students who feel anxious when they are asked to participate or speak in front of the classroom, others that are afraid of failing their foreign language exams, etc. (Horwitz, et al., 1986; Huang, 2012). Consequently, these feelings may hinder their learning achievement.

Some authors (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989; Dewaele & Al-Saraj, 2015; Bensalem, 2018) have found these kinds of problems are related to the phenomenon called Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). This concept is defined as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 128). Thus, it can be concluded that this problem involves certain characteristics that are developed in the classroom when students are learning a foreign language, in this case, English.

Plenty of research has been made in regard to the causes and consequences of this phenomenon. Horwitz et al. (1986)

identified three components that lead to FLA, which are: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Other studies have found that what provokes students to be anxious is the way they perceive their knowledge in regard to the target language (Ewald, 2007; Yim, 2014; Dewaele & Al-Saraj, 2015; Garcia de Blakeley, Ford, & Casey, 2017; Lien, 2016). Interestingly, some research is focused on how FLA influences students' development on a specific language skill. There are authors who were interested in finding how this phenomenon affects students' pronunciation (Baran-Łucarz, 2013), reading (Alkhateeb, 2014; Lien, 2016), writing (Macayan, Quinto, Otsuka, & Cueto, 2018), and speaking skills (Woodrow, 2006; Mak, 2011; Liu, 2018; Macayan et al., 2018).

There is also research concerned about the strategies students use in order to reduce their levels of anxiety (Woodrow, 2006; He, 2017). Nevertheless, there is a lack of information when it comes to Spanish speakers who are learning English as a foreign language. Most of the found research has been carried out in Asiatic and European countries and, for now, it was not possible to find any information related to this problem from the perspective of the Mexican context.

The purpose of this study was to identify the reasons why students from a Language Center in a public Mexican university feel anxious in their English classes, how this phenomenon affects their learning achievement, and how they deal with this problem in their daily lives. Thus, the significance of this study is to provide information about how FLA is produced and to make teachers aware of this common problem so that they work on action plans in order to reduce their students' FLA as well as to encourage them to improve their English skills.

To fulfill the purpose of this study, the following questions were addressed:

- Why do students feel anxious in their English classes?
- How does FLA affect students' learning achievement?
- How do students deal with FLA?

Literature Review

Anxiety in Foreign Language Learning

Learning a new language is supposed to be a new opportunity for students to learn how to communicate with people all around the world so as to be able to share ideas, perspectives, etc.; nonetheless, there are factors that can be an impediment for students to learn the target language in a profitable way. One of the most studied factors is anxiety, which has been identified as a negative factor that hinders the process of learning a foreign language (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989).

Anxiety is defined as "the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system" (Spielberger, 1983, as cited in Huang, 2012, p. 2). MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) have identified three types of anxiety: trait anxiety, that is related to "an individual's likelihood of becoming anxious in any situation" (Spielberger, 1983, as mentioned in MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991, p. 87); state anxiety, which is "an unpleasant emotion-

al arousal in face of threatening demands or dangers such as taking a test" (Huang, 2012, p.2); nevertheless, it is said that the scales used to measure this type of anxiety do not inquire the subject to make a connection between anxiety and the situation that provokes it (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991); and the latter one, situation-specific anxiety, which differs from the others because this one focuses on a specific context and it is also the most linked to FLA (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

According to Horwitz et al. (1986) "when anxiety is limited to the language learning situation, it falls into the category of specific anxiety reactions" (p. 125). Thus, as the present study was concerned about the causes and consequences of anxiety and the strategies used to cope with it in the context of learning English as a foreign language, it can be concluded that this type of anxiety fit in a better way with the research purposes.

Foreign Language Anxiety
As mentioned before, FLA has been a topic of great interest in regard to the process of learning languages. This phenomenon is defined as "the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning." (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994, as cited in Dewaele, 2007, p. 391). As well, Garcia de Blakeley et al., (2017) defined it as "[an] specific anxiety (emotional, cognitive and physiological symptoms) arising from the process of learning and communicating in a second or foreign language" (p. 1). As it can be seen, these definitions agree with the idea that it is a specific anxiety reaction (Hor-

witz et al., 1986) that appears when certain affecting variables are present in the process of learning a language different from the mother tongue.

It has been proved that this phenomenon has a great impact during the learning and production process of the target language (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). The sources and consequences of FLA have been largely studied too. Hashemi (2011) found that according to Iranian English language learners, what causes them to be very anxious is trying to speak like a native person; giving a presentation in front of the class; and the idea of having very formal English classes, which provokes them to feel more stressed. Quite interesting is the study carried out by Ewald (2007), in which she found out that half of the number of participants did not feel confident enough with their foreign language skills; actually, some of them believed that their partners were better than them in the language. As well, the pressure of the teacher was also a source of anxiety.

Interestingly, Woodrow (2006) found that what provokes the learners to be more stressed about speaking is the idea of performing in front of the class and speaking with native speakers of the target language. As a result, they reported to experience blushing, sweating, and mind going blank. Equally interesting, Macayan et al. (2018) found that anxiety influences speaking in a negative way. The participants reported that the fear of being criticized by their peers and the need of making a good impression with the teacher were the main sources of speaking anxiety for them. However, they did not see writing as an anxiety source since they have the

time to think what they have to write, and no one is pressing them; nonetheless, their writing anxiety is present when they think about grades and evaluations. Worth mentioning is that "students' fear of speaking and being called on is a major source of their Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA)" (Huang, 2012, p. 8).

Consequently, since anxiety deprives students from speaking, participating, being confident with their knowledge about the language, etc., this leads to decrease the students' abilities in the language they are learning, as well as it makes them take more time to learn it. As Huang (2012) mentions, "the most commonly affected areas include communication apprehension, reading comprehension, speaking abilities, communicative skills, listening skills, and writing skills" (p. 9).

The Effect of Anxiety on the Affective Filter Hypothesis

As it was stated before, learning a foreign language which is "learned largely in the classroom and is not spoken in the society where the teaching occurs" (Moeller & Catalano, 2015, p. 327) is not an easy process. For that reason, there are a great number of second language acquisition theories (see Aravena et al., 2015) that seek to explain the way in which learners acquire a foreign language. One of the best-known theories about second language acquisition is the Monitor Model Theory, or sometimes called the Input Theory, proposed by Krashen in 1982. This theory is made up of five different hypotheses: The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis, the Natural Order Hypothesis, the Monitor Hypothesis, the Input Hypothesis, and the Af-

fective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982). Therefore, since anxiety is very related to the last of these hypotheses (Huang, 2012), it is particularly important to analyze it so as to be able to understand the importance of maintaining low levels of anxiety among EFL learners.

According to Krashen's Affective Filter hypothesis (1982), which was first proposed by Dulay and Burt (1977), attitude, motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety are the most important affective factors that will cause students to fail or success in the target language. In the words of Lin, Chao and Huang (2015), this affective filter "acts like an invisible wall between learners and input, interfering with and limiting the delivery of language input" (p. 229). This means, if a student is highly anxious or unmotivated in his foreign language class, his affective filter will be higher and it will decrease his chances of understanding the given input leading not to acquire the appropriate information (Echevarria & Graves, 2007, as mentioned in Huang, 2012).

After having understood how the Affective Filter works, it is very important that teachers try to understand that "a positive affective learning environment enhances language learning" (Huang, 2012, p. 5). Consequently, it is the teachers' responsibility that students feel comfortable in the classroom in order for them to have a lower affective filter that allows them to learn in a better way.

Methodology

Methodology Description

This study was carried out through a qualitative methodology. Creswell (2007) sug-

gests that "qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to social or human problem" (p. 37), contributing to a large degree to the reason of which it was decided to use this method. In the same way, it is widely recognized that "the allure of qualitative research is that it enables you to conduct in-depth studies about a broad array of topics, including your favorites, in plain and everyday terms" (Yin, 2011, p. 6). Therefore, qualitative research is a way of conveying the concerns about the world in a way that it represents the vision of other people or groups and the meaning they give to these problems or situations. Qualitative research fit with this project because it consists of analyzing the perceptions that students who learn English as a foreign language have about experiencing anxiety during their process of learning. By using this approach, it was possible to find out the reasons why they feel like that and how this problem affects their learning achievement.

Moreover, qualitative research aims to explore in a deeper way those questions that quantitative research is not interested in answer. As Creswell (2007) mentions, quantitative theories provide a general view of a problematic, but they do not take into account the experiences and personal interpretations of the ones that participate in the surveys, the context in which they live, and all the characteristics that affect their responses, such as their beliefs, the way they behave, their manners, etc. For this reason, qualitative research was very helpful for this study because it was possible

to get to know in a deeper way how FLA affects students who are learning English as a foreign language, taking into account that they live in a context that is pretty close to a country whose native language is English.

From a qualitative perspective, this project used the phenomenological approach. According to Creswell (2007), it is the description of the different meanings that several individuals give to a specific situation, concept, or phenomenon and how they have experienced it throughout their lives. In the same way, it is considered that phenomenology is "the study of lived experiences or the life world [...]. The 'life world' is understood as what we experience pre-reflectively, without resorting to categorization or conceptualization [...]" (van Manen, 1997, as cited in Laverty, 2003, p. 22).

One of the characteristics of phenomenology is that its center of interest is related to human lived and shared experiences. According to Creswell (2007) phenomenology research focuses "on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon" (p. 57-58). In addition, Roberts (2013) mentions that the goal of phenomenology is to describe those experiences and to understand the phenomenon through the descriptions and interpretations of people who have lived the problem give to it, in this case, to FLA. Also, as Eddles-Hirsch (2015) says, "the task of a phenomenological researcher is to uncover the essence of the phenomenon that they are attempting to study" (p. 252).

As it was mentioned before, a phenomenology study involves the descriptions taken from the participants. According to Eddles-Hirsch (2015), "the description

should present "how" the participants experienced the phenomenon investigated rather than any preconceived perception the researcher may have of the phenomenon being studied" (p. 252). There must be objectivity from the researcher, who needs to be willing to listen to the perspectives that each participant may have and that could differ from the researcher's conceptions as well.

Some characteristics of this method in relation to the researcher and the participants were mentioned, but what kind of studies could phenomenology be used for? There is a wide of options because "phenomenologists are interested in all types of human experience" (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015, p. 251). The important thing when carrying out a phenomenological research, besides identifying the phenomenon that will be studied, is for all of the participants to have experienced the same thing; otherwise, their descriptions may differ in a significant way and the study could lose its sense. Moreover, the approach that was adopted for this research is the transcendental method which, according to Creswell (2007), it is concerned about the participants' descriptions of their lived experiences rather than on the researcher's interpretation of the phenomenon.

The use of this method has both advantages and disadvantages. One of its advantages is, according to Creswell (2007), "[that] phenomenology provides a deep understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by several individuals" (p. 62). For Husserl (cited in Laverty, 2003) this method is a mean for getting in touch with a phenomenon in a very close way and it is defined "as a way of reaching true meaning through penetrating deeper and deeper into reality" (p. 23).

On the other hand, Creswell (2007) identifies some disadvantages or challenges that a researcher could face by using this method. One of them is that it could be difficult to understand the philosophical perspective of phenomenology. Also, it is highly important for all the participants to have experienced the same phenomenon as it had been delimited by the researcher; this could be a problem during the selection of the sample. Furthermore, there may be difficulties for the researcher at the moment of putting his or her background aside so as to not let it interfere with the participants' interpretations of the phenomenon. The latter disadvantage is a very important reason why *hermeneutical phenomenology* was developed. In Eddles-Hirsch (2015) words, "Heidegger believed that it was impossible to set aside one's own presuppositions and beliefs" (p. 253). As well, it could be an obstacle when trying to leave aside the experiences and beliefs about a phenomenon, in this case, FLA.

Based on the foregoing, it was considered that analyzing the phenomenon of FLA with the help of these two approaches (qualitative and phenomenological) was going to be very fruitful due to the fact that qualitative research can help to explain in a deeper way the reasons why the participants experience this problem without limiting them to give certain answers; and, on the other hand, phenomenology was useful to best examine the research problem or phenomenon because the purpose was to analyze the different perceptions that EFL learners had about it. That means that a description of what and how they have

experienced it in their English language classes would be done (Moustakas, 1994, as mentioned in Creswell, 2007).

Context and Sample
The population used for this research was the Language Center from a public Mexican University, specifically the students who were studying English from Monday to Saturday. They were English learners from B1 to C1 (4th to 9th semester). The sample of our study consisted of 17 students (11 females and 6 males) whose native language was Spanish. We chose this population because we had access to this place and we believed that this research could help them to identify some of the reasons why students suffer FLA, how it affects their language learning process, and how they deal with it while studying English.

Instrument for Collecting Data
In order to gather the needed data to answer the research questions, a standardized questionnaire, based on an episodic interview, was applied. According to Flick (2009) an episodic interview "[…] includes a combination of narratives oriented to situational or episodic contexts and argumentation that peel off such contexts in favor of conceptual and rule-oriented knowledge" (p. 186). Therefore, this type of interview helps researchers to ask participants to answer questions related to a specific moment of their lives; it means that here it is not required to narrate what a concept is, but it is necessary to ask them to speak about a moment in which they have experienced that phenomenon. In this case, since this kind of instrument is used for collecting verbal data and there was not enough time

to apply it, a questionnaire that had some characteristics of an episodic interview was designed. In the same way, a standardized questionnaire consists of a series of open questions in which "each participant is to be exposed to the same questions and the same system of coding" (Siniscalco & Auriat, 2005, p. 3), and, in this way, it could be ensured that the differences among all the answers were due to different experiences that the participants have lived and not because of the different ways in which the questions were developed. Thus, this "mixed" instrument was easier and quicker to use so as to collect the data. As McLeod (2018) pointed, "data can be collected relatively quickly because the researcher would not need to be present when the questionnaires were completed" (para. 2). Consequently, this questionnaire based on an episodic interview helped gather the needed data in an easier way and it provided different experiences that the participants have lived.

In this instrument, which was composed of 8 different questions, the participants were asked to narrate different moments of their lives in which they had experienced anxiety while learning English. The questions were about: their own concept of FLA; the main causes that make them feel anxious, nervous, or ashamed in their classes; the ways in which they consider that this phenomenon has affected their learning achievement; how they deal with this problem; and, finally, how their learning process would be if anxiety did not exist.

It is important to emphasize that regardless the intermediate or advanced level of students in English, this standardized questionnaire was made in Spanish so that

the students could fully understand and answer all the questions. Subsequently, they were able to write their ideas in a successful way because they did it in their native language; otherwise, they may have avoided writing something because they did not know the vocabulary or any other reason that could have affected their answers in a significant way.

Data Analysis and Results

Pilot Test

In the pilot test two questionnaires were applied to two students from the Language Center. This questionnaire was a previous version of the instrument. In addition, they were explained what the instrument was about and how important their participation was. Through this pilot test, we realized that all the questions were understandable and that there would be no problems for the future participants to answer it.

Data Analysis and Results

Once the instrument was applied, the process of analysis was ready to start. This process was very important because it was the base from where the research questions were going to be answered. Creswell's (2012) data analysis process was used. It consists of several steps that help you organize and interpret the retrieved data in a profitable way. To do so, first, each questionnaire was separated per question; as the instrument consists of eight questions, eight different files were created. The number of participant was also identified for all the different answers.

After having organized the data, it was very important to analyze everything in a computer program so as to make the whole process more visual and easier to handle. Thus, the software *MAXQDA 2018* was downloaded, which is a qualitative data analysis computer program. This kind of program is very useful because "[it] stores data, organizes your data, enables you to assign labels or codes to your data, and facilitates searching through your data and locating specific text or words" (Creswell, 2012, p. 241). Therefore, the process of coding was easier to carry out. As well, this program was very useful for the creation of categories and subcategories, which were very important so as to identify the elements that were going to help to answer the research questions.

In a general way, through the application of questionnaires, some information about the problem of FLA in students from the Language Center was gathered. The collected answers helped to obtain four different categories: causes, consequences, solutions, and advantages of not having FLA in their classrooms.

The category of *"causes"* consisted of all the responses obtained from the questions formulated to identify the ideas students had about what might have provoked them anxiety in an English class. Consequently, this category was divided into different subcategories: academic worries, organization, activities, and opinions. In regard to academic worries, the participants wrote about their language skills, especially about their lack of vocabulary and their pronunciation, which made them struggle when they wanted to convey a message. As participant 6 mentioned, *"la falta de vocabulario puede ser una razón, ya que a la mayoría de los estudiantes no les gusta participar haciendo*

comentarios porque nunca pueden dar la idea que ellos quisieran. "Likewise, they worried about their grades because it was important for them to do things right.

Equally important, in the subcategory of organization, it was found that the time dedicated to the English class or to study the language, as well as the content, influenced in a certain way when students experienced anxiety and nervousness in determined moments. In the same way, the lack of preparation before an exam or an important activity, just as to learn things by memory made them struggle and had uncomfortable moments. As explained by participant 8:

> *Cuando tuve mi primer examen oral de este semestre entré en nervios porque no sabía con seguridad de qué tema iba a hablar, sentía que no estaba lo suficientemente preparada. Una vez que la maestra nos dio los temas, tuvimos 10 min para pensar un poco en lo que íbamos a decir, pero no me podía concentrar por pensar en que ya era mi turno. Al momento*

de iniciar a compartir mi punto de vista de dicho tema, mi mente estaba completamente en blanco, pero de alguna manera comencé a sacar a flote la conversación. Sentía mucha ansiedad y ya quería que se acabara mi tiempo para poder dejar de hablar.

In the third subcategory, students gave some answers that explained that there were different activities that caused them to feel anxious in their English classes. In the first two codes, oral activities or exams and participation, they said that these kinds of activities were the greatest sources of anxiety for them. For example, participant 3 mentioned "*lo que me pone más nerviosa en la clase de inglés son las actividades orales*". On the other hand, the subcategory of opinions was created because the participants wrote that what their classmates or teachers thought about them had a huge impact in how anxious they felt in certain occasions. In the same way, what they thought about their abilities was also a very important source of anxietyas shown in figure 1.

Figure 1. Category of causes
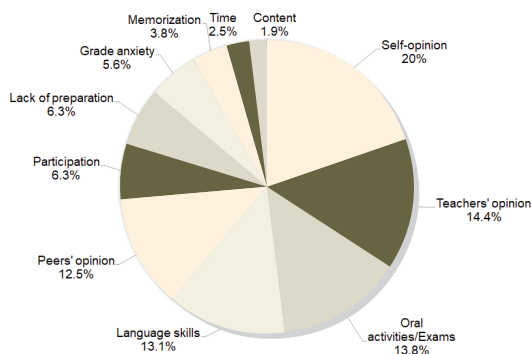
Source: Own elaboration.

Likewise, participants were asked to answer some questions related to how they believed FLA affected their learning process and learning achievement during their English classes. Therefore, the next category was labeled as *"consequences"*. There were multiple responses that were categorized into three different subcategories: academic achievement, emotions, and health. In the first subcategory, academic achievement, the participants mentioned different ways in which they felt affected; for example, they considered that anxiety had a great impact on their language skills. One of the participants stated that "*el nerviosismo o ansiedad se pueden presentar al tener algún obstáculo en el desarrollo de cualquiera de las habilidades del lenguaje*" (Participant 2, Female). Through this answer, it was noticeable that any of the abilities that are supposed to be developed during the learning process can be disturbed by the FLA phenomenon.

On the other hand, most of the students thought that anxiety had a negative effect during the learning process. As participant 15 mentioned, "*nerviosismo y ansiedad usualmente son causas para que los estudiantes no participen en clase, lo cual afecta el proceso de aprendizaje*". This makes students feel demotivated because they think they are not learning as they should be. As well, it also affects students' opportunity to practice when they avoid participating in class for being afraid of making mistakes.

Similarly, the participants considered that their grades were influenced by their anxiousness because they get lower grades after making mistakes due to this phenomenon. As mentioned before, students also believed that they tended to forget what they had learned when they felt anxious or nervous in a determined moment: "*... al momento de estar frente a todos mis nervios me invadieron y comencé a trabarme mucho y a olvidar cosas que ya me había aprendido*" (Participant 14, Female).

The second subcategory, emotions, is about all the different feelings students experienced when they committed a mistake or forgot what they were going to say because of FLA. Most of the participants said that they felt nervous and pressured in this kind of situations. For instance:

> *Hubo un momento donde sentí demasiado nerviosismo, estaba exponiendo un examen oral, usualmente no estudio demasiado para estos y aun así tengo muy buenas calificaciones, pero esa vez no logré estudiar y me fue mal, con la maestra viéndome en todo momento, sentí que me estaban obligando a hablar en inglés, me sentí mal, porque un idioma que me gusta no lo podía aprender bien (Participant 16, Male).*

Through the previous example, it was noticeable how at the same time he felt nervous during his oral exam because he had not studied, and he also felt pressure over himself because his teacher was kind of forcing him to speak in English.

The latter subcategory, health, consisted of all those moments in which anxiety and nervousness made students react in a way they could not control. In regard to body reactions, some students mentioned that they started trembling, feeling dizzy, or breathing rapidly. As someone explained: "*…todos se me quedaron viendo no supe que decir y respondí temblando y pronuncié mal algunas palabras*" *(Participant 10, Male)*. All this information is summarized in figure 2.

Figure 2. Category of consequences
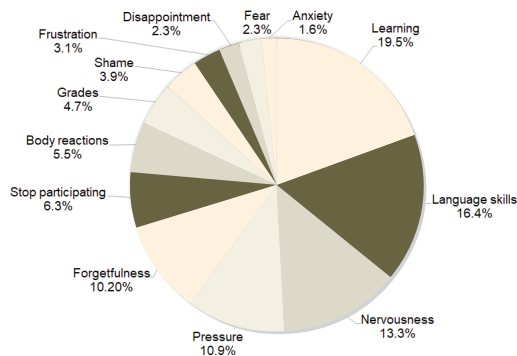
Source: Own elaboration.

Subsequently, the category of *"solutions"*, which is represented in figure 3, was divided into three main subcategories: good environment, performance, and positive thinking. In the first one, good environment, students gave information about how their peers helped them cope with this problem. For example, participant 5 said *"referente al nerviosismo que se presenta cuando no entiendo ciertas palabras o alguna actividad, me acerco a mis amigos y les pregunto sobre lo que tengo duda"*. This answer can help to understand that even when their peers are sometimes one of the most important sources of anxiety in some students, they can also be a support for them.

In the second subcategory, performance, the participants stated that they dealt with FLA by trying to feel secure of what they knew or what they were able to do because that helped them to get the idea that they were better than they thought. Participant 9, for example, wrote that *"una vez en un examen oral estaba muy nerviosa [...]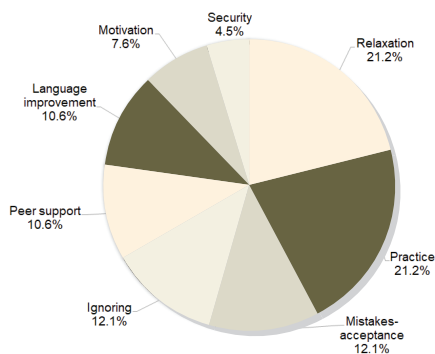 pero me puse a pensar que yo había* estudiado lo suficiente, que participaba y que dominaba los temas que nos tocaba hacer al examen". Another way for them to feel better when they were anxious was to understand that making mistakes was not wrong because it was possible to learn a lot of things from them; participant 3 mentioned that *she was not afraid of failing because she knew that from mistakes she could learn and that her only enemy for not acquiring new knowledge was herself.* Also, students mentioned that ignoring the things that provoked them to feel anxious was another way to overcome this problem. In the same way, practicing what they had previously learned in classes before an exam or a participation was another technique they used to stop suffering from FLA because the more you practice, the master you get.Finally, for this subcategory, participants wrote that one of the techniques they used in order to feel better was to relax themselves. As participant 11 stated *"siento que las personas deben relajarse antes de un examen o una clase, de nada sirve ponerse nervioso"*.

The last subcategory of solutions is positive thinking. The collected answers helped to make two different codes: motivation and language improvement. In the first code, students mentioned that what made them keep learning English was the motivation they had. For example, participant 8 wrote that *she did not care about the mistakes she could have made because she was studying English and she really wanted to learn it.* In the second code, language improvement, students stated that all the things in which they failed or that made them feel anxious would help them to improve their language skills, because as participant 2 indicated *"algo de lo sucedido, no tan esperado, nos dejará una buena enseñanza para mejorar y perfeccionar más el idioma".*

Finally, in the last category students were asked to give us some information about how an English class would be if anxiety were not present in their classrooms. Therefore, this category was labeled *as "advantages of not having FLA in the classroom",* for which it was found four different codes.

The first code, better environment, makes reference to all those aspects of their classes that would be improved if anxiety did not bother them, such as more fun while learning, trust when you speak with your classmates, etc. For example, participant 6 mentioned *"[yo] creo que el ambiente de trabajo sería más fluido".* For the second code, better grades, participants believed that since anxiety affected their grades, an environment free of anxiety would help them to get better scores in their exams if FLA disappeared from their classrooms, because as participant 10 wrote, *"lograríamos tener mejores resultados en cuanto a ejercicios, dinámicas, exámenes o trabajos, como por ejemplo al exponer en un examen oral, al no tener ansiedad ni nervios".* In the same way, the next code, which was labeled as more learning, refers to the fact that they were pretty sure that their learning would be better because, as many of them mentioned, the learning process would be easier and faster. The last code for this category was fluency when speaking. Here the students said that they would

Figure 3. Category of solutions

Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 4. Advantages of not having FLA in the classroom

Better grades
8.8%

More fluency when
speaking
17.6%

More learning
47.1%

Better environment
26.5%
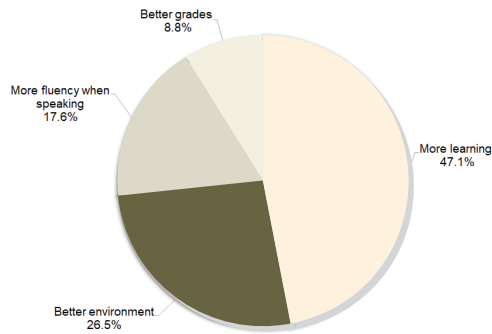
Source: Own elaboration.

be better when they spoke if they were not ashamed or worried about their pronunciation all the time. This information was summarized in figure 4.

Conclusion

As it has been mentioned, experiencing anxiety during the process of learning a foreign language can have a huge impact on students' achievement. This phenomenon "prevents learners from completing academic tasks successfully, and so it interrupts academic learning" (Garcia, 1998, as mentioned in Huang, 2012, p. 1). Thus, it was of great importance to identify, through learners' experiences, the different ways in which FLA is present during their English classes and the way it impacts on their academic achievement in order to start working on solutions so as to reduce the levels of anxiety of English foreign language learners in the Mexican context.

Through this research, important information that allows to give an answer to the three research questions, was gathered. The results obtained from the participants' answers were represented in pie charts for a better understanding of the retrieved data.

In regard to the first research question, the objective was to know from students' perspectives what they thought could be the main reasons why they experience FLA in their English classes. As it was shown previously in figure 1, the main reason students feel anxious is linked to what they think about themselves with respect to their abilities to use the English language. It was perceived that some of them believe that they have not developed their linguistic abilities in a very good way, so they feel less competent than others; therefore, they feel anxious and nervous because they do not feel they have the required English level. Another reason is teacher´s opinions, which is about the relationship between students and teachers and what the latter ones do to make students feel uncomfortable; for example, laugh at them, pressure them to speak English, etc.

Oral activities is another important cause, which is very interesting because most of the participants mentioned to have experienced anxiousness when they were doing an oral activity (especially an oral exam), or when they had to speak in front of others. Only one participant mentioned to have had struggle because of anxiety during a written exam. As well, students stated that their language skills also affect them because most of the times they do not speak fluently enough, or they do not know the required vocabulary for an activity; hence, they feel anxious and nervous.

Another reason that causes them to be anxious is, for instance, when they do not prepare themselves enough before an activity, especially an oral one in which they need to know what they are going to say and how they are going to say it. Some others that were not mentioned that much but that are also important are: thinking about their grades, memorizing content for an exam or presentation, the pressure of time, and when the content of a lesson is difficult.

Regarding the second research question, the objective was to describe how FLA affects students' learning achievement. According to the students' perspectives, they consider that what it affects the most is their learning itself. They consider that this only makes them go backwards. As well, they feel like they are not learning enough or that they do not enjoy the process of learning a foreign language. In addition, it also affects their learning skills because they cannot improve their speaking fluency, listening skills, vocabulary knowledge, etc. Similarly, it makes them forget what they learned before, get lower grades, and decrease their willingness to participate.

On the other hand, it also affects them emotionally, for example: it produces them more nervousness, pressure, shame, frustration, disappointment, fear, and anxiety. In the same way, FLA provokes students experience certain body reactions such as trembling, sweating, rapid breathing, etc. One of the participants even mentioned that she had a muscle contracture because of stress in relation to nervousness and FLA.

Finally, the third research question was about how students deal with the problem of FLA in their English classes. The retrieved data shows that relaxation and practice were the main solutions that the participants use so as to face all the problems that this phenomenon has caused on them. Relaxation refers to what they usually do when they are feeling anxious or nervous in some of their classes; they start doing some breathing exercises in order to calm down and continue doing all their activities in a normal way. On the other hand, practice was seen as one of the key elements in order to succeed when they are feeling anxious because, as they mentioned, practice makes perfect, and when they feel sure about themselves and the things they need to speak, write, or listen about, everything turns easier. On the second place they mentioned mistakes acceptance, which was about not being afraid of making mistakes while they are speaking or practicing English because we learn a lot of things from them; and ignoring, which was mentioned as a way of not taking importance to the things that other people think about them and their development in their classes.

Next, the participants mentioned that another way of dealing with this problem was when their peers help them to under-

stand the things they have difficulty with, or when they give them words of encouragement so as to make them feel more secure about the things they are doing. In the same way, they wrote that all the things that have made them feel insecure or anxious about their speaking in English are going to make them improve their abilities in the language they are studying, and these things help them to keep motivating and trying to learn and practice the target language. Last but not least, feeling secure about what they are doing, speaking, listening, or writing is another way of dealing with FLA because everything will turn more difficult if they are feeling insecure about their knowledge and the things they are capable to do.

Final reflection and recommendations
The aim of the current study was to investigate the causes and consequences of FLA according to the perceptions of students who were learning English in a Language Center from Mexico. Moreover, it was of great interest to know the strategies students use to cope with this problematic. The results suggest that what makes students be anxious in their classes may be due to the fact that they perceive their English level in a poor way. Also, this phenomenon affects their learning development and it hinders their language skills. On the other hand, this study reveals that what students do in order to cope with anxiety is doing relaxation activities and focusing on practicing.

One of the main important contributions to the research field is that this phenomenon also exists in a Mexican context. Most of the found research was carried out in European and Asiatic countries with students whose native languages were Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Polish, etc. but there was a lack of information when it came to students whose native language was Spanish.

Furthermore, future research should focus on elaborating action plans in order to help students to be confident with themselves in regard to their English knowledge. Also, it would be interesting to know the way English teachers perceive anxiety in their Mexican students who are learning English as a foreign language through a qualitative method and, if so, the strategies they use in order to create an environment free of anxiety. In the same way, future studies can be focused on exploring the way in which FLA affects each of the language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening). For instance, it would be interesting to know why speaking is considered to be the most anxiety-provoking activity for students (Young, 1990) by adopting a mixed method to explore their perceptions and measure the different factors that affect students' speaking ability.

Unfortunately, there were some factors that somehow could have affected the results of this study. First of all, the sample of this research consisted of 17 participants; therefore, the findings and the results cannot be generalized. Furthermore, the lack of time was another important limitation in the development of this research because it leads to select a smaller sample than the one that was intended to use. Finally, even though the researchers tried to be as objective as possible, it will always be a little subjectivity when a qualitative method is used because of the judgement in the coding process.

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