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FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY: INTERACTION WITH GENDER, LENGTH OF STUDY AND SELF-PERCEPTION OF COMPETENCE

Graduation Thesis

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Abstract

This paper investigates language anxiety, a complex phenomenon specific to the language learning context that has been extensively researched over the last few decades. More specifically, the paper deals with the appearance of language anxiety in undergraduate and graduate English majors at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the findings presented in this paper have led to numerous interesting conclusions, confirming that language anxiety in foreign language majors is a topic worth exploring, especially since it was proven that the participants' levels of language anxiety significantly correlated with the independent variables of gender, length of study, achievement, and self-perception of competence.

Key words: *language anxiety, foreign language majors, gender, self-perception of competence, achievement, length of study*

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, the issue of anxiety within the language learning context has gained much attention. Various researchers provided evidence that language anxiety could have a detrimental effect on language learning and performance. These studies emphasized the necessity for further investigations of the phenomenon with the aim of uncovering new teaching techniques and methods which would reduce its levels in learners, thus enabling them to achieve maximal success in the foreign language classroom.

However, most research on language anxiety to date has focused on typical learners enrolled in language courses and has neglected groups of scholarly motivated English learners. University-level language majors are often considered free of language anxiety due to their high motivation and proficiency, an assumption which resulted in the lack of research in this area. This study attempts to elucidate language anxiety prevalent among language majors and assert the importance of a greater understanding of this group's specific challenges.

In order to familiarize the reader with the issue of language anxiety, this paper begins with the theoretical background related to the phenomenon and then moves forward to explain its basic definitions, key terms, sources, and most prominent effects. This first section concludes with a general description of a typical anxious foreign language learner and of the factors likely to increase the risk of the development of high levels of language anxiety.

In addition to this paper's general supporting evidence, the following section includes the description of a study conducted in May 2014 at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, which investigated language anxiety among undergraduate and graduate English majors. In an attempt to portray the exact purpose of the study, its first subsection contains the description of the aims of the study, along with the presentation of the six main hypotheses related to language anxiety levels in English majors and their links to the independent variables of gender, length of study, self-perception of competence, and achievement. In addition, it includes the findings of other important studies related to the hypotheses in question. Furthermore, the second subsection deals with the methodology used in the study. It provides concrete information about the participants, the instrument used, and the procedure followed in the study.

The next two sections present the results obtained by both quantitative and qualitative analyses, and discuss potential reasons of such results.

Finally, the paper concludes with a summary of the findings obtained in the study and some concluding remarks regarding the topic in question.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Defining Language Anxiety

Both language teachers and researchers have long been aware of the large number of students who experience negative emotions and discomfort in the course of language learning. However, even though the Canadian psychologist Robert Gardner introduced the notion of affect in language learning in the 1960s, the roles of motivation, attitudes, empathy, and anxiety were neglected for a long time (Young, 1998b). Up until the 1980s, emotions were seen as unconscious products of cognition (LeDoux, 1996, as cited in Young, 1998a, p. 18) and affective variables in language learning were systematically ignored until Stephen Krashen posited his Second Language Acquisition Theory and Affective Filter Hypothesis in 1982 (Young, 1998a). Krashen explained the role of emotions in language acquisition by using the metaphor of an affective filter. He claimed that emotions acted as a filter, controlling the intake of language into the brain. For instance, if anxiety is at a high level, thereby invoking the inhibitive filter, information is not allowed to flow into the language-learning system (Ekström, 2013).

Krashen's theory initiated a shift of interest away from the overemphasized importance of cognition and over to the role of affective/emotional factors in language acquisition (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008). This motion supported the view that negative emotions, such as anxiety, reduce or inhibit the effectiveness of various learning activities (Ehrman, Leaver & Oxford, 2003). Yet, in spite of the stated advances and the growth of interest in that particular area, research into foreign language learning and anxiety as an affective variable has provided confusing results, corroborating the fact that foreign language anxiety is an extremely complex psychological construct which requires further research and clarification.

When it comes to definitions of anxiety, most dictionaries offer the term *fear* as its synonym. However, Spielberg and Diaz-Guerrero (1976, as cited in Koch & Terrell, 1991, p. 110) claim that both anxiety and fear are unpleasant emotional reactions to a perceived threatening stimulus, but in terms of fear, the threat is known and in an anxious reaction, it is

unknown. Moreover, modern psychology defines anxiety as "a distressing emotion with no definite sources" (Gregory, 1987, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 27), or "an anticipatory state of active preparation for dealing with threat" (Riskind, Williams, Gessner, Chrosniak & Cortina, 2000, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 27). Spielberg, on the other hand, defines it as "the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system" (1983, as cited in Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1991, p. 27). However, the various definitions of anxiety are not extensive enough to include *foreign language anxiety*, a construct distinct from general anxiety which has only recently been set apart from other forms of anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986). Even though research has not adequately defined or described the effect of foreign language anxiety on language learning, many definitions and explanations regarding that phenomenon have been offered.

In general, studies on foreign language anxiety can be divided into two groups on the basis of the most prominent event related to the phenomenon – the first proposition of the concept in the mid 1980s. Even though Stengal used the term *language shock* to explain language learners' experiences in 1939, it was not until 1986 that a separate form of anxiety specific to the language learning context was proposed by Elaine Horwitz (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008). Up until then, foreign language anxiety was viewed as the transference of other types of anxiety to language learning (Chastain, 1975; Kleinmann, 1977, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 58). However, such a view of language anxiety was not able to account consistently for anxiety in the language learning arena, which resulted in mixed and confusing results of various studies. That is why Gardner proposed that, in order to investigate anxiety within the language learning context, it was necessary to concentrate on "a construct of anxiety which is not general but instead is specific to the language acquisition context" (1985, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 58).

The Gardner proposition motivated Elaine Horwitz to introduce the concept of *foreign language anxiety*, a phenomenon which falls into the category of specific anxiety reactions. This term is used to differentiate between people who are generally anxious and those who get anxious only in specific situations (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1991). Foss and Reitzel (1991) also point out that foreign language anxiety shares certain characteristics with communication anxiety; however, due to some differences, the two phenomena cannot be equated, from which follows the definition of foreign language anxiety 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, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 59). After Elaine Horwitz had coined the term and definition of foreign language anxiety, some researchers started using the term *second language anxiety*, which eventually led to the integration of the two terms into a single concept – *language anxiety* (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008). Language anxiety is also defined as "the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language" (MacIntyre, 1999, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 59). In addition to other definitions of the construct, MacIntyre and Gardner classify it as "the apprehension experienced when a situation requires the use of a second language with which the individual is not fully proficient" (1994, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 59).

These definitions make evident the specificity of the language learning situation and the negative feelings of language anxiety induced by students' perceived vulnerability. As various authors point out (Gregersen, 2006; Foss & Reitzel, 1991; Young, 1998b), learning a language is very different from learning other subjects because it threatens the learners' self-image by making them express themselves in a language which is not their mother tongue, thus creating a disparity between the "true" self and a "limited" self as can be presented in the foreign language. The essence of communication is the conveyance of personally meaningful messages, but doing so in an unfamiliar language threatens the learners' self-perception of genuineness and limits their authenticity in foreign language communication (Gregersen, 2006). As Young and Kimball state: "One's speech is a part of one's self. One's ability to interpret history or to do mathematical gymnastics and so forth is a skill, but it's not part of one's self" (1995, as cited in Young, 1998a, p. 5). Along similar lines, Cohen and Norst claim that "there is something fundamentally different about language learning, compared to learning another skill or gaining other knowledge, namely, that language and self are so closely bound, if not identical, that an attack on one is an attack on the other" (1989, as cited in MacIntyre, 1998, p. 33). Precisely for this reason, it is of the utmost importance to identify and describe language anxiety and its negative effects as clearly as possible in order to assist those students suffering from its debilitating levels.

When discussing performance in relation to language anxiety, it is important to mention the three performance anxieties which are, according to Horwitz et al. (1986, as cited in Kayaoğlu & Sağlamel, 2013, p. 143), integral parts of language anxiety: *communication*

apprehension, *test anxiety* and *fear of negative evaluation*. *Communication apprehension*, also known as *stage fright*, can be described as "the level of fear associated with real or anticipated communicative outcomes with another person or group of people" or "the fear or anxiety an individual feels about orally communicating" (Daly, 1991, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 62). Interestingly, the learner's disinclination to use a foreign language is best predicted by their communication apprehension in the mother tongue (McCroskey et al., 1985, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 63), which means that communication apprehension is actually independent of the language used. Among others, the features it shares with language anxiety are the fear of making mistakes, feelings of self-consciousness and perfectionism (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008). The second performance anxiety linked to language anxiety – *test anxiety* – is defined as "a situation-specific form of trait anxiety" (Zohar, 1998, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 63) that causes psychological, physiological and behavioral debilitating reactions in response to a threatening situation. The emotional reactions in question are those accompanied by the evaluation or assessment of one's performance (Hancock, 1994; McDonald, 2001, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 63), hence, test anxiety shares certain characteristics with language anxiety. The final performance anxiety – *fear of negative evaluation* – is characterized as "an apprehension about others' evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively" (Watson & Friend, 1969, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 64). The basic difference between fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety is that the former involves social situations other than testing, which relates it more closely to social anxiety (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008). These three performance anxieties are main roots of language anxiety, so they form a relatively clear picture of the symptoms of an anxious foreign language learner. However, as Horwitz (2010, as cited in Ekström, 2013, p. 14) emphasizes, language anxiety is not composed of these three concepts, but is better approached as a close relative.

Due to the fact that language anxiety severely affects a large number of language learners, it is also important to differentiate between facilitating and debilitating anxiety. If we define language anxiety in terms of its potential effect on language acquisition and performance, it is worth noting that not all students experience its debilitating impact. Debilitating anxiety increases arousal which results in poor performance, while facilitating anxiety actually results in improved performance (Young, 1986). For many students, a mild increase in anxiety can be stimulating and helpful because it motivates the learner to tackle the new task, which promotes

learning (Crookall & Oxford, 1991, as cited in Gregersen, 2006, p. 10). Nevertheless, all language students at all stages of foreign language acquisition experience at least a certain degree of language anxiety (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008). In addition, the results of various studies suggest that the degree of anxiety can be a strong predictor of success in the language class, as well as a predictor of performance deficits (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a). Due to that, it may be concluded that the future examination of this concept and its effects is of paramount importance if the academic community wishes to understand and control the varying influence language anxiety has over linguistic education.

2.2. Development and Sources of Language Anxiety

MacIntyre and Gardner (1989, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 73) and Horwitz and associates (1986, as cited in MacIntyre, 1998, p. 30) propose a model of language anxiety development, asserting that, during the first encounters with the foreign language in question, anxiety appears only as a transient state which is not associated with the foreign language learning process. First it appears early during language acquisition when students have to deal with various grammar, comprehension and learning difficulties. At these early stages, it can be characterized either as state anxiety experienced at particular moments, trait anxiety, or a situation specific anxious reaction that is not limited exclusively to language learning, such as test anxiety or communication apprehension. During the course of time, repeated occurrences of anxiety related to language learning develop into language anxiety, which then becomes a regular experience because learners start associating anxiety experiences with the foreign language, so they start expecting to become anxious in the language learning context (MacIntyre, 1998). However, as experience and proficiency in the foreign language increase, language anxiety declines (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991b, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 75) because the learner's growing proficiency is related to using the language more successfully (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2004, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 75). The fact that most learners are able to adapt to the demands of foreign language learning with the growth of proficiency is an optimistic finding; however, it must not serve as a reason to neglect dealing with this important concept because it has been proven that approximately one third of all students experience detrimental effects of language anxiety in at least some aspects of language learning (Horwitz & Young, 1991). Because of various reasons related to personality and

language acquisition, even students that do well in other subjects may find language courses quite anxiety-provoking. For instance, Skehan (1991, as cited in MacIntyre, 1998, p. 31) argues that shy introverts do well in most school subjects; however, they find language learning to be quite different, which might initiate feelings of anxiety.

Broadly speaking, causes of language anxiety can be divided into two basic groups: *true* and *fallacious* (other) ones (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008). The first cluster comprises Young's (1991, as cited in Zheng, 2008, p. 4) list of six potential sources of language anxiety which stem from three different aspects: the learner, the teacher and the instructional practice. The six interrelated sources he has identified might be viewed as secondary to communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. Those sources are: *personal and interpersonal anxieties, learner beliefs about language learning, instructor beliefs about language teaching, instructor-learner interactions, classroom procedures*, and *language testing*. The other group encompasses sources of language anxiety characterized as "not true" or *fallacious*. Those sources supposedly stem from various learning difficulties, as opposed to the true ones which emerge as a consequence of unrealistic reactions to the learners' foreign language abilities (Horwitz, 1999, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 67).

The first group of language anxiety stimuli – *personal and interpersonal anxieties* which are rooted in social anxiety – refer to "a pessimistic assessment of the student's self-perceived ability level in the situation of social exchange, when learners are afraid that others will perceive them negatively" (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008). In that regard, Clement (1980, 1986, as cited in MacIntyre, 1998, p. 32) argues that language anxiety is actually a part of a larger construct of *self-confidence*, which involves the perception of proficiency in the foreign or second language. The second group comprises *learner beliefs*, which are defined as "general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing learning, and about the nature of learning and teaching" (Victori & Lockhart, 1995, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 68). Bernat and Gvozdenko (2005, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 68) refer to them as "personal myths" about learning which "act as very strong filters of reality" (Puchta, 1999, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 68). These artificial constructs affect the learners' experiences and accomplishments, as well as their behavior and learning outcomes (Horwitz, 1999; van Rossum & Schenk, 1984, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 68). *Instructor beliefs about language teaching*, on the other hand, are "tacit, often unconsciously held assumptions about students, classrooms, and the academic material to be taught" (Kagan, 1992,

as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 69), which "modify the social context that the instructor sets up in the classroom" (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008). They are related to the areas of planning, instruction, classroom management, progress monitoring, assistance, and caring for students (Duke, 1987, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 69) and they affect the degree to which teachers are willing to adjust their teaching approach for students with learning problems. Teachers' personal beliefs influence their actions and practices, which consequently influences the students' performance and behavior by raising their language anxiety levels because of the differences in the students' and teachers' beliefs (Senior, 2001, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 69). *Instructor-learner interaction* also heightens language anxiety. The situation is primarily fueled by the action of error correction (Davis, 2003, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 69) and the differences in students' learning styles and teachers' teaching styles (Bailey, Daley & Onwuegbuzie, 1999, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 69). In addition to instructor-learner interactions, learners' frustrations can stem from unengaging language activities, ineffective instruction, and weak foreign language materials (Young, 1998a). These criteria have been directly linked to *classroom procedures* such as processes, events, and atmosphere. In relation to that, anxiety frequently emerges from the demand to speak in front of others. Since anxious learners fear social interaction, these anxiety sources are connected to the social context of language learning (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008). Lastly, the inevitable participatory activity of *language testing* is often "accompanied by the characteristic features of situational apprehension, such as evaluation, novelty, ambiguity, conspicuousness and prior history" (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008): the ultimate hurdle of classroom language anxiety.

In addition to the six listed true sources of language anxiety, Murphy (2004, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, pp. 70-71) also states that many cases of language anxiety may be caused by the so-called *fallacious* sources. Those sources encompass physiological issues like the neurobiological system, a factor that becomes evident with learning deficits such as developmental dyslexia or reading, writing, or spelling learning difficulties. Learners suffering from these issues experience difficulties in language learning because of individual cognitive differences. In cases such as these, language anxiety may continue even if classroom practices were modified (Horwitz, 1998).

Price (1991, as cited in MacIntyre, 1998, p. 31) also enumerates several possible sources of language anxiety: speaking in front of peers, fear of being laughed at, making a fool of yourself, concern about making errors and not communicating effectively, etc. MacIntyre

(1998) emphasizes that the fear of speaking in front of others while using a foreign or second language is the most prominent source of language anxiety. Along similar lines, Von Wörde (1998, as cited in Kayaoğlu & Sağlamel, 2013, p. 144) reports that the risk of being singled out in speaking activities, along with non-comprehension and the risk of being humiliated through error correction, could make students more anxious than usual. Focusing on other sources of language anxiety, apart from communication apprehension, Daly (1991, as cited in Kayaoğlu & Sağlamel, 2013, p. 144) enumerates genetic disposition, early reinforcement and punishments, exposure to appropriate models of communication, and early communication skills as possible additional factors behind language anxiety. Furthermore, Gregersen and Horwitz (2002, as cited in Kayaoğlu & Sağlamel, 2013, p. 144) suggest that perfectionist tendencies might play a role in the development of language anxiety and Tanveer (2007, as cited in Kayaoğlu & Sağlamel, 2013, p. 144) asserts that intrinsic motivators, such as learners' beliefs, perceptions, and poor command of the language in question, result in anxiety-breeding situations. He also states that, in addition to intrinsic motivators, extrinsic factors such as cultural and social environments could also be possible sources of anxiety-provoking situations. This corresponds to Horwitz's conclusion that "in addition to individual characteristics, larger social circumstances such as the availability of supportive conversational partners and second language role models may play a role in helping language learners avoid or overcome foreign language anxiety" (2010, as cited in Ekström, 2013, p. 14).

All of the enumerated potential sources of language anxiety and the previously described path of its development paint a clear picture of the complexity of the phenomenon. These factors make obvious the large amount of effort needed to deal with and resolve the issue of language anxiety in foreign language classrooms, especially since various studies suggest that the second language acquisition process generally induces anxiety, regardless of the degree of proficiency of language learners (Horwitz, 1999, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 186).

2.3. Effects of Language Anxiety

It is unquestionable that negative emotions, such as language anxiety, reduce the effectiveness of learning activities (Ehrman, Leaver & Oxford, 2003) and interfere with all the three levels of learning: input, processing and output (Tobias, 1979, 1986, as cited in MacIntyre

& Gardner, 1991b, p. 51). At the input stage, learners are afraid they would not be able to understand the entirety of the information, which consequently produces anxiety. At the next level, problems with organizing knowledge can occur and those processing obstacles can result in even more anxiety. Finally, at the output stage, performance difficulties also induce feelings of anxiety (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008). Regarding the effect of feelings on language learning, Scovel even argues that emotions "could very well be the most influential force in language acquisition" (2000, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 56). Some learners' descriptions of their emotions reveal that, due to language anxiety, they perceive language learning as a personal tragedy and a perpetual cycle of errors and feelings of self-consciousness (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008). Those students who exhibit apprehensiveness in communication typically have low self-esteem and perceive their communication as less effective than that of others, which causes constant expectations of failure. Moreover, language learners have additional feelings of incompetence because of the inability to present themselves in a way they interpret as genuine (McCroskey, Daly, Richmond & Falcione, 1977, as cited in Foss & Reitzel, 1991, pp. 130-131). In other words, language anxiety is a consequence of the discrepancy between effort and effects (Price, 1991, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 57), which causes an array of negative emotions due to the learners' perception of the environment as threatening and their inability to express their knowledge and skills in the foreign language.

Furthermore, Mogg et al. (2000, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 60) suggest that language anxiety is composed of three aspects: cognitive, somatic, and attentional. When it comes to the cognitive aspect, learners assess their own unpleasant feelings related to language learning. The somatic component is linked to the learners' consciousness of their bodily symptoms, such as perspiration, a faster heartbeat, or other "fight-or-flight" reactions. The final aspect is attentional or when learners interpret the foreign language learning situation. This aspect involves task-irrelevant cognitions (Deffenbacher, 1978, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 60), which means that anxious learners actually pay selective attention only to those elements of the learning process they perceive as threatening and dangerous. In conjunction with these symptoms is the tendency of solely remembering negative experiences, which are then associated with the foreign language in question and its acquisition (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008). Therefore, anxious language learners focus their attention on their perceived inadequacies and the consequences of potential failure rather than on the task itself. Given the gravity of these impairments, students are not able to work at full potential because their anxiety

limits the working memory capacity, creativity, and concentration, which then causes them to put even greater cognitive effort into performing the required tasks (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008). This means that anxious language learners are not open to learning, but are forced to use their cognitive resources to "survive", thereby hindering their cognitive abilities and performance in the foreign language. What is upsetting in this perceivably threatening situation to anxious language learners is the fact that their concern about performance impedes with their actual performance, which makes them appear less fluent than they really are and leads to "a significant threat to ultimate success in second language acquisition" (Arnold & Brown, 1999, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 57).

MacIntyre and Noels (1994, as cited in MacIntyre, 1998, p. 32) also argue that learners' language anxiety affects their self-perception of proficiency, so the learners with high language anxiety tend to underestimate their proficiency, while those with low levels of language anxiety overestimate their abilities. This means that "language anxiety affects not only the way in which learners perform but also the way in which they perceive their performance, which can serve to maintain high levels of anxiety" (MacIntyre, 1998, p. 32). In other words, by underestimating their competence and ability, and by expecting to fail, anxious learners actually maintain their high anxiety, triggering avoidance of learning and communication activities that would actually facilitate language learning. MacItyre (1998) also points out that the combination of high language anxiety and low self-assessed proficiency creates learners with low levels of linguistic self-confidence, which results in the reduction of motivation for learning and communicating in the foreign language.

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) suggest that another way in which learners may react to language anxiety is to start overstudying. Concerns over their performance may make them attempt to compensate for their errors by studying even more, which eventually results in frustration because their effort does not lead to improvement in grades. On the other hand, it is also possible for anxious learners to start avoiding studying and language classes in an attempt to alleviate their anxiety.

Regarding the effects of language anxiety on language learners, it is also important to mention MacIntyre's (1998, as cited in Zheng, 2008, p. 5) list of the five aspects mostly affected by this phenomenon. Firstly, when it comes to academic success, language anxiety is one of the best predictors of language proficiency (Gardner, Smythe, Clement & Gilksman, 1976; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994b; Young, 1986, as cited in MacIntyre, 1998, p. 34). It undoubtedly

has a detrimental influence on foreign language learning and performance, and can predict failure in the language class (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1989, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 76). Secondly, in terms of social effects, anxious learners avoid interpersonal communication more often than the relaxed ones (Young, 1998b). The social aspect also includes problematic interactions with teachers, a competitive classroom atmosphere, tension among ethnic groups, and other social factors which may produce language anxiety (MacIntyre, 1998). Cognitively, anxiety can act as an affective filter, preventing the input from entering the cognitive processing system. That effect of language anxiety can occur at any time during the language acquisition process and it can impact both accuracy and speed of learning (MacIntyre, 1998). The next aspect is related to the effect of language anxiety on the quality of communication output. In that regard, many anxious learners experience problems with the retrieval of information in the form of "freezing-up" moments. Finally, when it comes to the personal aspect, some learners experience language learning as a traumatic process, which may severely influence their self-esteem, self-confidence, willingness to take risks, and other essential factors in learning to communicate in a new language (Young, 1998b).

In order to accentuate all the explained effects of language anxiety, it is also necessary to describe the characteristics of learners with high levels of language anxiety. Piechurska-Kuciel claims that such students are "mostly female, very expressive, and declaring significant vulnerability to negative emotions" (2008, p. 228). She adds that their educational features involve "low internal (self-assessment) and external (foreign language final grades) evaluation of their foreign language skills" and that they "get easily distracted by worry and intrusive thoughts, which compete with the cognitive task in progress, limiting processing resources of working memory" (2008, p. 229). In such students, a decline in accuracy or performance may be observed and they often complain of studying hard, but with no positive effects. In addition to the common factors of language anxiety, Piechurska-Kuciel also emphasizes the importance of "gender, age, symptoms of developmental dyslexia and depression, as well as levels of general anxiety (communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety, manifest anxiety, and social anxiety), all interacting within the learner" (2008, p. 235). Some of these features may be "genetic (vulnerability to anxiety), constitutional (gender or developmental dyslexia) or developmental (age), and acquired (depression)" (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 235). There are also social factors, such as the place of residence or economic strain, which may influence the level of language anxiety, as well as the learners' foreign

experience, i.e. visits to other countries. Another group of factors which must not be ignored are cultural ones, such as "cultural and religious beliefs and values, attitudes and ideologies" (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 236). To sum up, all of the enumerated factors clearly depict language anxiety as a result of the complex interaction among many personal, interpersonal, and sociocultural factors within learners of various characteristics and backgrounds.

All things considered, it is a fact that language acquisition is characterized by differential success, a part of which may be explained by language anxiety and its effects (Horwitz, 2001, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 185). Given the well-documented and researched potential severity of language anxiety on language learning, it is evident that a more thorough study and understanding of the phenomenon and the uniqueness of the foreign language learning process is necessary in order to ensure a better chance of foreign language success – the ultimate goal of both language professionals and learners.

3. The Study

3.1. Aim, Hypotheses and Previous Research

The aim of this study was to investigate language anxiety levels in undergraduate and graduate English language majors at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb. Such a goal was chosen in order to demonstrate that, despite their high motivation and proficiency, university-level foreign language majors were not free of language anxiety. More specifically, the purpose of this research was to establish a relationship between the participants' language anxiety and the independent variables of gender, length of study and self-perception of competence. Another aim of the study was to attempt to investigate language anxiety in correlation with the students' grades and their feelings of security when using the English language in the Contemporary English Language courses, as well as other English language and literature courses.

In order to investigate the stated aims and design a suitable questionnaire, six hypotheses were formed and tested. The first hypothesis is related to the role of gender in the development of language anxiety: (H1) *females experience higher levels of language anxiety than males.* Such a claim was corroborated by various studies (Abu-Rabia, 2004, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 126; Faber, 2012; Piechurska-Kuciel, p. 158; Sultan, 2012), all of which

suggest that the issue of gender in relation to language anxiety is crucial to the understanding of why female participants experience significantly higher levels of language anxiety compared to males.

When it comes to the correlation of language anxiety and length of study, it is important to note that within this research, the variable of length of study was investigated in two ways, resulting in two different hypotheses. The first of the two proposes that (H2) *the students with shorter language exposure experience higher levels of language anxiety than the students with longer language exposure.* The topic of language exposure in such a context was investigated by several researchers, such as Ewa Piechurska-Kuciel (2008), whose study fully corroborated the claim that longer language exposure had a positive effect on the level of language anxiety and shorter language exposure resulted in its elevated levels. In conclusion, Piechurska-Kuciel's study found that language anxiety may be reduced after longer visits to countries where the target language was spoken. Along similar lines, Kitano (2001) reports that the experience of going abroad is correlated with lower anxiety levels and Price (1991) states that many students themselves believe that they would need to live in the country of the target language in order to learn it. Due to the fact that the more proficient students at higher educational levels frequently feel stressed because they believe that their knowledge of the language they are majors in should be impeccable, the next hypothesis regarding the relationship between language anxiety and length of study supposes that (H3) *the level of language anxiety increases linearly as a function of year of study*. In that regard, many researchers (Gregsen and Horwitz, 2002; Kitano, 2001; Onwuegbuzie, 2001, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 191) imply the same, stating that advanced students are especially sensitive to language anxiety. Along similar lines, Marcos-Llinas and Garau (2009) suggest that advanced learners experience higher levels of anxiety than beginning and intermediate learners, which is also corroborated by Onwuegbuzie's, Bailey's and Daley's (1997) report that freshmen and sophomores experience the lowest levels of anxiety. Results of several other studies (Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999; Pappamihiel, 2001; Saito & Samimy, 1996, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 134) also indicate that, in spite of their high proficiency, advanced learners are threatened with high language anxiety levels. Other studies which could be related to the linkage between high levels of language anxiety and highly proficient language users include those dealing with the occurrence of language anxiety in nonnative pre-service teachers. Kalkanli's research aligns itself with these findings and posits that "pre-service teachers are just as susceptible to foreign

language anxiety as are inexperienced language learners" (2014, p. 1). Moreover, Machida (2011) reports that 77.4 percent of teachers are anxious about their own English proficiency and 90.2 percent are anxious about teaching English specifically. We believe that such results are a reflection of the more advanced language users' high expectations of their linguistic abilities. These elevated expectations are responsible for a more critical awareness of their own errors and imperfections, an attribute that provokes heightened levels of language anxiety.

The relationship between language anxiety and self-perception of competence was examined by the following hypothesis: (H4) *the students with higher levels of language anxiety assess their competences as lower in all the four skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking), with the correlation between negative self-assessment of speaking and elevated language anxiety being the strongest.* Within the context of this hypothesis, various researchers have concluded that negative self-assessment of competence is directly linked to high language anxiety. For instance, Liu and Jackson (2008) claim that the students' level of language anxiety correlates with their self-rated English proficiency. Similarly, Sultan (2012) states that the students with low perceived competence experience more feelings of anxiety as compared to those with high perceived competence. In relation to the self-perception of pronunciation competence, Szyszka confirms the negative relationship between language anxiety and the self-perception of learners' abilities to pronounce words in a foreign language, stating that "the students who experience higher levels of language anxiety perceive their pronunciation competence as worse than those whose anxiety is lower" (2011, p. 293).

In addition, many other researchers (Gregersen, 2006; Kitano, 2001; MacIntyre et al., 1997, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 104; MacIntyre & Noels, 1994, as cited in MacIntyre, 1998, p. 32; Sultan, 2012; Szyszka, 2011) point out that the students who assign a low value to their competence suffer from increased language anxiety and conclude that the relationship between language anxiety and self-perception of linguistic abilities is a negative one. They also argue that anxious students tend to underestimate their competence, which occasionally results in cases such as the one described by Foss and Reitzel, who state that "one of the best students in class wrote that she thought she was at the low level of the class" (1991, p. 131). The described case of the anxious student points to the fact that high levels of language anxiety may be found among very proficient and successful language learners, emphasizing that not even language majors are free of the effects of language anxiety.

Furthermore, a part of the hypothesis regarding the self-perception of proficiency refers to the link between the skill of speaking and language anxiety. As far as speaking and language anxiety are concerned, several studies (Ekström, 2013; Liu, 2006; MacIntyre, 1995, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 95) have confirmed that language learners report more anxiety when speaking the target language in contrast to other types of communication. In line with these findings, Price states that the students' "greatest source of anxiety was having to speak the target language in front of their peers" (1991, p. 105).

The two final hypotheses are somewhat interrelated because they both concern, according to most English majors at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb, the most difficult courses – Contemporary English Language. The first of the final two hypotheses states that (H5) *the students with higher grades in the Contemporary English Language courses experience lower levels of language anxiety.* This hypothesis relates language anxiety levels to achievement, a topic which was examined by various researchers. Ekström (2013), for instance, states that the majority of students with high performance and course grades experience low levels of language anxiety. Along similar lines, Dewaele (2007) argues that language anxiety and achievement are negatively related, concluding that the participants with high language anxiety levels obtain significantly lower grades. Furthermore, several additional studies (Ganschow et al., 1994; MacIntyre et al., 1997, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 87; Gardner, 1991; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2006, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, p. 207) have also come to the conclusion that language anxiety is negatively connected with actual and perceived achievement, and other studies (Aida, 1994, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 87; Horwitz, 1986; Young, 1986, as cited in MacIntyre, 1998, p. 34) have reported that a negative relationship exists between the level of language anxiety and objective assessment, such as final grades. We believe that, in many cases, including those concerning the Contemporary English Language courses, such results stem from the perception of task difficulty. In that regard, Price (1991) states that the difficulty of the language class constitutes an additional source of anxiety for many students. Panayiotou and Vrana add that "difficult tasks induce anxiety, demand greater attention, and are connected with expectations of failure, causing performance drawbacks" (2004, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 91). Moreover, Piechurska-Kuciel explains that "foreign language learners with high levels of language anxiety are convinced that foreign language tasks are too difficult and their foreign language abilities are insufficient" (2008, p. 213). Therefore, since perceivably difficult tasks induce anxiety, its

negative effects compete with cognitive tasks, which consequently may result in lowered performance and achievement.

The stated findings can also be related to the final hypothesis: (H6) *the students who feel less secure when using the English language in the Contemporary English Language courses, as well as in other English language and literature courses, feel more anxious than others.* Such feelings of insecurity can presumably be attributed to both language anxiety and task difficulty, which will be further discussed in the following chapters.

3.2. Method

3.2.1. Participants

The sample comprised 258 randomly selected undergraduate and graduate English majors at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb. To be more precise, among the participants, 49 were enrolled in the first, 71 in the second, and 61 in the third year of the undergraduate program. Furthermore, 36 participants were first-year, and 41 participants were second-year graduate English majors. As presented in Table 1, 55 participants were male and 203 were female students.

Table 1: Participants

		Year of study					**Total**
		Undergraduates			Graduates		
		1	2	3	1	2	
Gender	Male	11	15	13	7	9	55
	Female	38	56	48	29	32	203
Total		49	71	61	36	41	258

3.2.2. Instrument

The instrument for eliciting data was an adjusted version of a questionnaire developed by Puškar (2009). The questionnaire consisted of three parts, the first of which required the

participants to provide some basic data, such as age, gender, and year of study, as well as information about their average grades in the Contemporary English Language courses and other English language and literature courses. The participants were also asked to self-assess their competences in the four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, in addition to an assessment of their feelings of security when using the English language in the stated courses.

The second part of the questionnaire included Puškar's (2009) translation of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986). The FLCAS was the first anxiety measure intended to treat language anxiety as a distinct phenomenon which is specific to the language learning context (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008). Its author, E. K. Horwitz, defines it as "a self-report measure which assesses the degree of anxiety, as evidenced by negative performance expectancies and social comparisons, psycho-physiological symptoms, and avoidance behaviors" (1986, as cited in Puškar, 2009, pp. 16-17). The FLCAS consists of 33 items requiring the participants to respond to statements such as *I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class* or *In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know*. These 33 items are reflective of the three mentioned performance anxieties – communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety, and the participants are required to choose an appropriate answer on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from *I strongly agree* to *I strongly disagree* (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1991). In accordance with Horwitz's definition of the FLCAS, its statements test negative performance expectancies (*I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language* class), social comparisons (*I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do*), psycho-physiological symptoms (*I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class*) and avoidance behaviors (*During language class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course*) (Puškar, 2009). The FLCAS was proven to be a reliable and valid instrument with high internal consistency and moderate construct validity. Additionally, Horwitz states that the instrument also "demonstrated internal reliability and test-retest reliability with the Cronbach's alpha of .93, and an eight-week test-retest coefficient of .83" (1986, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, pp. 98-99).

It should be pointed out that, in this study, an adjusted version of Puškar's (2009) translation of the FLCAS was used in order to suit the requirements of this particular research. When translating the FLCAS, Puškar (2009) himself adjusted the instrument so it would

explicitly refer to the language the participants in his study were majoring in, a version of the FLCAS which was also used in this research. Furthermore, some of the statements in the questionnaire were additionally changed in order to address the stated aims of this study. For instance, the original statement 23. *I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do* was altered into *I feel the pressure that, as an English major, my knowledge of the language should be better*. Another example is the alteration of statement 32. *I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the English language* into *I feel under pressure and embarrassed when I have to use English outside the faculty and in front of people who know I am an English major*.

The third part of Puškar's (2009) questionnaire was also slightly altered in order to eliminate questions which were not necessary for the purpose of this study. It consisted of questions related to the age at which the participants started learning English and other languages, as well as questions about their relationship and motivation for studying their major in the past and present.

3.2.3. Procedure

In order to find the participants for the research, professors teaching obligatory courses were contacted and asked whether the students attending their courses could fill in the questionnaire during the first 15 minutes of class. The questionnaires were distributed to the students and it was pointed out that their participation was voluntary and anonymous. Nevertheless, a considerable number of undergraduate students expressed concern regarding the possibility that their professors might read their answers and discover their identities. We tried to reassure them that such a scenario was not possible; however, a certain number of the worried students stated that they would not entirely reveal their opinions regarding their major and change in motivation in the present.

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were conducted on the collected data. The quantitative analysis was carried out using the *SPSS* software.

3.3. Results

This section outlines the results of the study conducted for the purpose of investigating the levels of language anxiety among English undergraduate and graduate majors at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb.

The reliability of the slightly altered Puškar's (2009) translation of the FLCAS turned out to be high, with Cronbach's alpha of .933. With possible scores on the FLCAS ranging from one to five, the following criteria for measuring language anxiety were established:

Less than 2.5 – low language anxiety
2.5-4 – moderate language anxiety
More than 4 – high language anxiety

Findings of the statistical analysis of quantitative data suggested that, in general, English majors at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences primarily exhibited moderate levels of language anxiety, with the mean score of 2.6959, which is actually moderate bordering on low language anxiety, 2.5 being the dividing line. Furthermore, as it can be seen in Table 2, the lowest score was 1.18 and the highest 4.48. The alarming finding was that the participant scoring the highest on the FLCAS (a 30-year-old, second-year graduate female student) reported high achievement results in the form of excellent average grades in the English language and literature courses, as well as very good average grades in the Contemporary English Language courses, confirming that even high-achieving students may experience extremely high levels of language anxiety.

Table 2: English majors' language anxiety scores on the FLCAS

Number of participants	**Minimum**	**Maximum**	**Mean**	**Standard deviation**
258	1.18	4.48	2.6959	.66617

In terms of the first hypothesis, (H1) *females experience higher levels of language anxiety than males*, a t-test was computed to see if there were significant differences in language anxiety levels between female and male participants. The results of the t-test ($t = -4.570$, $p < .001$) indicated that the female participants displayed a significantly higher level of language anxiety than the male ones, the mean score for the former being 2.7903, and for the latter 2.3412 (see Table 3).

Table 3: Gender differences in language anxiety

Gender	Number of participants	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error mean
Female	203	2.7903	.63294	.04442
Male	55	2.3412.	.67406	.09173

The second hypothesis, (H2) *the students with shorter language exposure experience higher levels of language anxiety than the students with longer language exposure*, was fully corroborated, with the results indicating that the participants who had studied English longer exhibited significantly lower levels of language anxiety in comparison to those who had studied it for a shorter period of time ($r = .295$, $p < .001$).

On the other hand, the other hypothesis related to the length of study, (H3) *the level of language anxiety increases linearly as a function of year of study*, was not confirmed. As presented in Table 4, a significant correlation between the participants' level of language anxiety and year of study was not found.

Table 4: Correlations of language anxiety and length of study

	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Language exposure	.295**	.000
Year of study	-.086	.168

As for the next hypothesis, (H4) *the students with higher levels of language anxiety assess their competences as lower in all the four skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking), with the correlation between negative self-assessment of speaking and elevated language*

anxiety being the strongest, the results supported its confirmation. Table 5 shows that the more anxious students assessed their competences as lower in all the four skills, the coefficient with speaking being the highest ($r = -.464$, $p < .001$).

Table 5: Correlations of language anxiety and self-assessment of the four skills

	Pearson Correlation	**Sig. (2-tailed)**
Reading	-.156*	.012
Writing	-.389**	.000
Listening	-.313**	.000
Speaking	-.464**	.000

Our next hypothesis, (H5) *the students with higher grades in the Contemporary English Language courses experience lower levels of language anxiety*, was also corroborated. According to the results, language anxiety was found to significantly correlate with the average grade in the Contemporary English Language courses ($r = -.230$, $p < .001$). As it can be seen in Table 6, in comparison to that result, language anxiety did not seem to correlate significantly with the average grade in other English language and literature courses ($r = -.081$, $p = .195$).

Table 6: Correlations of language anxiety and average grades

	Pearson Correlation	**Sig. (2-tailed)**
CEL grade	-.230**	.000
Other grade	-.081	.195

Finally, the last hypothesis, (H6) *the students who feel less secure when using the English language in the Contemporary English Language courses, as well as in other English language and literature courses, feel more anxious than others*, was also confirmed. The obtained results demonstrated that a significant correlation between language anxiety and feelings of insecurity when using English in the Contemporary English Language courses existed, with the Pearson correlation summing up to -.615. Due to the fact that this coefficient was the highest, it seems that linguistic insecurity while attending the Contemporary English Language courses has a significant role in the development of language anxiety among English

majors. Moreover, as shown in Table 7, a lower but highly significant correlation between language anxiety and feelings of insecurity during other English language and literature courses was also proven ($r = -.580$, $p < .001$). In addition, it was confirmed that students who reported that they had felt more secure before they became English majors experienced higher levels of language anxiety ($r = -.330$, $p < .001$).

Table 7: Correlations of language anxiety and feelings of insecurity

	Pearson Correlation	**Sig. (2-tailed)**
CEL insecurity	-.615**	.000
Other insecurity	-.580**	.000
Change in security	-.330**	.000

3.4. Discussion

The study confirmed most of our hypotheses. Firstly, it provided evidence that female students indeed experienced higher levels of language anxiety than male students. Reasons for that are manifold. For instance, Bacon and Finnemann (1992, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 84) enumerate gender-related differences in social behavior, cognitive activity, and verbal ability. Halpern (2000, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 84), on the other hand, mentions that there are significant differences in learning abilities of females and males. In that sense, females "generally do better than males on achievement, verbal ability, proficiency, and vocabulary memorization" (Nyikos, 1990, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 84). Additionally, they tend to have more positive attitudes and higher motivation for learning foreign languages than males (Spolsky, 1989, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 84). Apart from that, several authors suggest that women actually learn foreign languages differently than men. As an example, Ehrman and Oxford (1990, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 84), as well as Nyikos (1990, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 84), state that females use more learning strategies, and they employ them more effectively. Nevertheless, despite the enumerated advantages of women in comparison to men when it comes to language acquisition, they tend to be more fearful and less able to reduce stress levels. This fact may result in the

perception of language learning as very stressful, leading to elevated levels of language anxiety (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008).

Furthermore, Maccoby (1998, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 84) states that these gender differences stem from two basic sources: biological and genetic, and sociocultural. Within this context, it is important to emphasize that, currently, the differences in gender roles are viewed more as a product of socialization than a determinant of nature. According to the gender socialization theory, females and males are taught to deal with stress differently. On the one hand, it is considered socially acceptable for females to express their feelings. On the other, males are discouraged from showing their emotions because that is perceived as a feminine trait (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008).

However, there are other sociocultural reasons related to gender differences in language anxiety which must be taken into consideration. Piechurska-Kuciel (2008) states that modern languages are traditionally seen as female subjects, which puts girls in an awkward position for several reasons. Teachers tend to have greater expectations of female students, encouraging and advising them more than boys because they are more likely to have positive attitudes and higher motivation for language learning. However, this perceivably beneficial learning environment for girls may result in negative effects because they feel under pressure due to the teachers' higher expectations. In addition, in order to sustain the boys' interest in the lesson and control their potentially disruptive behavior, teachers tend to interact with them more often than with girls and ask them more challenging questions. Due to the increased attention given to male students, girls are often deprived of opportunities for communication and skill development in the foreign language, which may result in the growth of language anxiety and other negative emotions. In other words, as a consequence of the ambiguous clues from teachers, who expect girls to succeed but refuse to give them attention, girls may feel threatened and develop high language anxiety levels.

Moreover, female students' fear of making mistakes makes them avoid participation in the lesson on many occasions, which further deteriorates their well-being in the foreign language class. Male students, on the other hand, do not seem to feel burdened with the consequences of making errors, and are more confident about orally communicating. Such a difference in confidence is also evident in the fact that boys, due to socialization reasons, perceive testing situations as challenging, to which they react enthusiastically, while girls

perceive them as threatening, to which they react with fear and worry (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008).

It may be concluded that female students are generally in a very unrewarding position, torn between their potential to efficiently master the foreign language and the sociocultural and biological reasons that cause language anxiety and other debilitating factors which influence the success of language acquisition.

In terms of the length of studying English, as expected, it was proven that the participants who had learned English longer displayed significantly lower levels of language anxiety than those who had studied it for a shorter period of time. Contrary to this finding, the hypothesis regarding the year of study was not confirmed – the results showed that the level of language anxiety did not increase as a function of year of study. It was actually proven that both undergraduate and graduate English majors exhibited similar levels of language anxiety, which suggests that language anxiety levels are balanced throughout university-level education. Such a finding was quite surprising, especially since the qualitative analysis of data showed that first- and second-year undergraduate students expressed severe feelings of anxiety in their answers related to the relationship and motivation for studying English in the past and present. A considerable number of them reported that being an English major demotivated them from further studying the language because of the difficulty of certain courses and the attitudes of some professors. Most of them also stated that they had felt more secure when using the English language before they became English majors. That is why, after the qualitative analysis of the data was conducted, we believed that the results would turn out to be the opposite of our hypothesis, confirming that language anxiety actually decreased as a function of year of study. However, the results showed that the levels of language anxiety were stable throughout university-level education.

To paint a clearer picture of the undergraduate students' descriptions of their feelings related to studying English, the following quotation of a 19-year-old first-year female student is worth noting:

> I used to love English. Now I feel as if I were married to a guy who smokes two packs of cigarettes a day, drinks six liters of beer in front of the TV, and thinks it is syntactically correct to join the negation and the verb. But, for some reason, I am still with him. Motivation? It was positive before. Now? Minus Kelvin degrees.

When it comes to the correlation of language anxiety and self-perception of proficiency, the results of the study supported the assumption that students with higher levels of language anxiety assessed their competences as lower in all the four skills. Such a finding was not a surprise, given the similar results of several previous studies. For instance, Sultan (2012) claims that judgments and perceptions of students about their own competences, learning abilities and skills affect their performances, academic roles and proficiencies, which can particularly be related to the language learning context. He even states that, among the factors influencing second language acquisition, individual differences in perceived competences are of paramount importance. In that sense, Ormrod defines perceived competence as "one's belief that he/she has the skills and qualifications to do things well" or that he or she possesses "the requisite qualities in a specific situation to achieve specific tasks" (2006, as cited in Sultan, 2012, p. 226). That means that the perception of competence of foreign language students can be defined as their belief in their capability to learn a foreign language (Sultan, 2012). Therefore, it is logical that the negative perception of competence may result in the lack of self-confidence and elevated negative emotions, such as language anxiety, which consequently further affect the students' performance. As confirmed by this study, not even language majors can circumvent such issues.

However, it is important to note that self-perceptions of competence need not be accurate. As in the case of the previously mentioned student who thought she was at the low level of the class when, in fact, she was one of the best students, errors in self-assessment do occur. In that sense, Clement, MacIntyre and Noels assert that "work in the field of social cognition has suggested that affective factors may systematically bias the self-assessment of language proficiency" (1997, p. 265). In that regard, they mention that students who, for example, drop out of language classes are not necessarily less proficient or successful in language acquisition than their peers who decided to continue with the course; however, in most cases, the levels of their language anxiety are much higher. AlFallay further adds that "in the case of high-anxiety students, peer-assessment is more accurate than self-assessment" (2004, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 106).

The problem is that perceptions of competence determine the amount of effort devoted to pursuing a goal, which means that the students who perceive their linguistic competences as low undermine their own potential success in acquiring a foreign language by giving up or

avoiding tasks which facilitate learning. Consequently, the levels of language anxiety start increasing, thus creating a vicious cycle of expecting failure, avoiding communication and sustaining high levels of language anxiety. Such occurrences are particularly problematic when it comes to language majors who are supposed to advance in language learning much more than typical language students, especially because their future profession depends on the knowledge of the language they are avoiding communication in because of the high levels of language anxiety caused by potentially inaccurate self-perceptions of competences. Similarly to typical language learners, highly anxious language majors, who underestimate their linguistic abilities and self-evaluate themselves poorly, may also be discouraged from further developing their language skills and making an effort in learning the language which is supposed to be the basis of their future career.

As previously mentioned, behavior characterized by the avoidance of tasks especially refers to oral communication, which brings us to the second part of the hypothesis related to the self-perception of competences. The results of the study showed that the correlation between the negative self-perception of the skill of speaking and language anxiety was the strongest ($r = -.464$, $p < .001$). This finding corresponds to Low's (1982, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 88) claim that receptive skills tend to be rated higher than productive ones, especially since the correlation between language anxiety and the skill of reading turned out to be significant but much lower than that of other skills ($r = -.156$, $p = .012$). Ekström (2013) also argues that students experience higher levels of language anxiety when speaking the target language, asserting that 35 percent of the total anxiety may be attributed to that particular activity. This is problematic because, as MacIntyre et al. (1997, as cited in Szyszka, 2011, p. 295) state, feelings of anxiety make the learners more reluctant to speak, and this lack of communication prevents them from reassessing their competence. Due to such circumstances, learners actually refuse to accept evidence of their growing proficiency, which might reduce language anxiety levels. It may be that this never-ending cycle is the basis of unsuccessful language attainment in many cases.

It may be concluded that the role of self-perception of competences must not be overlooked or ignored in language learning because it has the power to both facilitate and hinder the optimal development of one's abilities and knowledge. Learners attribute their success and failure to their competences, which certainly emphasizes the importance of that factor and the necessity for its further investigation.

Exploring the hypothesis concerning the relationship between language anxiety and achievement led to the conclusive finding that the students with lower grades in the Contemporary English Language courses experienced significantly higher levels of language anxiety. As previously mentioned, various studies (Dewaele, 2007; Ekström, 2013; Ganschow et al., 1994; MacIntyre et al., 1997, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 87; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2006; Onwuegbuzie, 2001, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 207) obtained similar results, asserting that language anxiety was negatively connected with actual and perceived language achievement.

However, since the results of this study corroborated that language anxiety was negatively correlated only with the grades obtained in the Contemporary English Language courses and not with the grades obtained in other English language and literature courses, we assume that such findings are related to the issue of task difficulty. Due to the fact that most English majors perceive the Contemporary English Language courses as the most difficult subjects, and "difficult tasks induce anxiety, demand greater attention, and are connected with expectations of failure, causing performance drawbacks" (Panayiotou and Vrana, 2004, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008, p. 91), it is logical that the results proved that a connection between lower grades and higher language anxiety in relation to those courses existed.

Moreover, Piechurska-Kuciel (2008) points out that high-anxiety learners relate their failure in the foreign language class to the high degree of task difficulty. Since English majors perceive the Contemporary English Language courses as extremely difficult, that results in elevated language anxiety levels, which potentially leads to interferences in the students' ability to take in, process, and produce the language in which they are majoring. Many students complain that they work harder for the Contemporary English Language classes than for other courses, but they do not manage to do as well. That might be because they divide their mental resources and focus on their perceived inadequacies, consequently burdening the cognitive abilities necessary for conducting the tasks they perceive as difficult, all of which maintains language anxiety at a very high level. Such a cycle may be the reason why their language anxiety levels remain high, and their achievement related to those courses remains quite low.

Perceptions of task difficulty may also be the reason why our final hypothesis was confirmed. The results of the study corroborated that students who felt less secure when using the English language in the Contemporary English Language courses, as well as in other English language and literature courses, felt more anxious than others. Just as in the case of

lower achievement scores, feelings of security seem to be highly dependent on language anxiety levels. In other words, we assume that feelings of insecurity when using English during the stated classes can be attributed to both language anxiety and perceptions of task difficulty.

In conclusion, our findings stress the need to further investigate the correlations between language anxiety and achievement, feelings of security, and task difficulty, especially within the context of university-level education, with the aim of uncovering the methods which would hopefully alleviate language majors' stress levels, thus enabling them to fully develop and use their abilities and capacities.

4. Conclusion

This study has proven that the complex phenomenon of language anxiety is worth exploring, even within the context of university-level education. The obtained results have confirmed that language anxiety indeed affects even the highly motivated and proficient foreign language majors, substantiating the fact that even they require strategies and techniques for alleviating such negative emotions.

In short, the study corroborated most of our hypotheses relevant for the language majors in question. First of all, in accordance with the gender socialization theory, the results of the study confirmed that female students were more anxiety-ridden than male ones. Furthermore, the first hypothesis related to the length of study was also affirmed, proving that students with longer language exposure experienced significantly lower levels of language anxiety than those with shorter language exposure. Opposite to that, the other hypothesis regarding the length of study was not supported by the results, suggesting that language anxiety levels were balanced throughout university-level education. In other words, it seems that both undergraduate and graduate English majors experience similar levels of that undesirable emotion. Moreover, the findings also corroborated that students with higher levels of language anxiety assessed their competences as lower in all the four skills, with the correlation between higher levels of language anxiety and negative self-evaluation of the skill of speaking being the strongest. Additionally, we also found that a negative relationship between language anxiety and achievement existed; however, only within the context of grades in the Contemporary English Language courses. When it comes to the correlation of language anxiety and grades in other English language and literature courses, such a negative relationship was not proven. Due to

such results, we have come to the conclusion that elevated levels of language anxiety in relation to low grades in the Contemporary English Language courses might have to do with the perception of task difficulty. Since most English majors perceive the Contemporary English Language courses as most difficult, we assume that such an attitude significantly contributes to the increase in language anxiety, consequently affecting both performance and achievement in the stated courses. The perception of task difficulty might also partly serve as an explanation as to why our final hypothesis was corroborated. It was proven that feelings of insecurity while attending both Contemporary English Language and other English language and literature courses were related to high language anxiety levels.

In conclusion, just as the results of various other studies stress the need for a more thorough general investigation of language anxiety, our findings suggest that it is necessary to explore language anxiety in foreign language majors, who have also been proven to be under the influence of this complex phenomenon. It would be useful if future research offered insight into language anxiety issues of other foreign language majors, as well as if it explored potential anxiety-alleviating teaching methods and techniques targeted specifically at foreign language majors, so that they could realize their full potentials and achieve maximal success both in studying and their future career.

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Sažetak

Ovaj se rad bavi strahom od jezika, kompleksnom pojavom koja se javlja isključivo u kontekstu učenja stranih jezika, a posljednjih je nekoliko desetljeća postala predmetom brojnih istraživanja. Točnije, rad se bavi strahom od jezika koji pogađa populaciju studenata preddiplomskog i diplomskog studija anglistike na Filozofskom fakultetu Sveučilišta u Zagrebu. Kvantitativna i kvalitativna analiza rezultata predstavljenih u radu dovele su do brojnih zanimljivih zaključaka, pritom dokazavši da je strah od jezika studenata filologije tema koju valja istražiti, osobito jer rezultati istraživanja dokazuju da strah od jezika sudionika značajno korelira s nezavisnim varijablama spola, duljine učenja jezika, akademskog postignuća i vlastitom percepijom kompetencije.

Ključne riječi: *strah od jezika, studenti filologije, spol, vlastita percepcija kompetencije, akademsko postignuće, duljina učenja jezika*

Appendix – the Questionnaire

UPITNIK

Molim Vas da ispunite ovaj upitnik koji je sastavni dio istraživanja usvajanja jezika u sklopu mog diplomskog rada.

Hvala Vam unaprijed na uloženome trudu i vremenu!

Ivana Maturanec
Odsjek za anglistiku
Filozofski fakultet u Zagrebu

Molim Vas da popunite sljedeće podatke o sebi:

Dob:

Spol: M / Ž

Godina studija: Preddiplomski – 1 2 3
Diplomski – 1 2
– smjer:

Koja je prosječna ocjena koju imate iz jezičnih vježbi (CEL 1, 2 , 3)? 1 2 3 4 5

Koja Vam je prosječna ocjena iz drugih anglističkih kolegija? 1 2 3 4 5

Kako biste ocijenili vlastitu kompetenciju u engleskom jeziku u sljedećim područjima:

Čitanje: 1 2 3 4 5
Pisanje: 1 2 3 4 5
Slušanje: 1 2 3 4 5
Govor: 1 2 3 4 5

Procijenite koliko se sigurno osjećate kad koristite engleski jezik na nastavi jezičnih vježbi (CEL 1, 2, 3): 1 2 3 4 5

Procijenite koliko se sigurno osjećate kad koristite engleski jezik na nastavi drugih anglističkih kolegija: 1 2 3 4 5

Procijenite kako se mijenjao Vaš osjećaj sigurnosti u upotrebi engleskog na nastavi:

1. ranije sam se osjećao/osjećala sigurnije
2. osjećam se jednako sigurno kao i prije
3. sada se osjećam sigurnije nego prije

1. **Odredite koliko Vas dobro opisuju sljedeće tvrdnje. Zaokružite odgovarajući broj prema ovoj legendi:**

1 = uopće se ne odnosi na mene
2 = uglavnom se ne odnosi na mene
3 = katkad se odnosi na mene, a katkad ne
4 = uglavnom se odnosi na mene
5 = potpuno se odnosi na mene

Molim studente viših godina koji su već položili sve jezične vježbe (CELL 1, 2, 3) da se pokušaju prisjetiti kako su se osjećali za vrijeme trajanja istih te da sukladno tome odgovore na tvrdnje koje se na njih odnose. Ostale se tvrdnje odnose na sve anglističke kolegije. Hvala!

1. Uvijek se osjećam potpuno sigurnim/sigurnom u sebe kad govorim na anglističkim kolegijima.	1 2 3 4 5
2. Ne zabrinjavaju me pogreške koje radim na satu.	1 2 3 4 5
3. Uhvati me strah kad vidim da će me profesor/ica prozvati.	1 2 3 4 5
4. Osjećam se nelagodno kad ne razumijem što profesor/ica govori.	1 2 3 4 5
5. Ne bi mi smetalo da imamo/smo imali više sati jezičnih vježbi.	1 2 3 4 5
6. Tijekom sata često razmišljam o stvarima koje nemaju veze s kolegijem.	1 2 3 4 5
7. Često mislim da drugi u grupi znaju engleski bolje od mene.	1 2 3 4 5
8. Kad imamo ispit/kolokvij iz anglističkih kolegija, obično sam opušten/a.	1 2 3 4 5
9. Uhvati me panika kad na satu moram govoriti bez pripreme.	1 2 3 4 5

10. Osjećam nesigurnost pri uporabi engleskog jezika.	1 2 3 4 5
11. Ne znam zašto se neki toliko uzrujavaju oko jezičnih vježbi.	1 2 3 4 5
12. Na satu znam biti toliko nervozan/nervozna da zaboravim i ono što znam.	1 2 3 4 5
13. Neugodno mi je javljati se na satu.	1 2 3 4 5
14. Da moram na engleskom razgovarati s izvornim govornikom, ne bih bio/bila nervozan/nervozna.	1 2 3 4 5
15. Stalno me strah da će me profesor prozvati na satu (da nešto pročitam, odgovorim na pitanje i sl.).	1 2 3 4 5
16. Čak i kad se dobro pripremim, strah me na satu koji zahtijeva interakciju na engleskom jeziku.	1 2 3 4 5
17. Često mi se ne ide na satove koji zahtijevaju interakciju.	1 2 3 4 5
18. Pri korištenju engleskog jezika često razmišljam hoću li pogriješiti.	1 2 3 4 5
19. Strah me kad moram duže govoriti na engleskom jeziku.	1 2 3 4 5
20. Osjećam fizičke simptome poput lupanja srca kad me na satu profesor/ica treba prozvati.	1 2 3 4 5
21. Što više učim za jezične vježbe, to sam zbunjeniji/zbunjenija.	1 2 3 4 5
22. Pri usmenom ispitivanju na engleskom jeziku zbog straha se ne mogu koncentrirati na sadržaj.	1 2 3 4 5
	1 2 3 4 5

23. Osjećam pritisak da bih, kao student engleskog jezika, trebao/trebala imati bolje znanje.	
24. Neugodno mi je govoriti engleski pred drugima u grupi.	1 2 3 4 5
25. Toliko brzo prolazimo gradivo iz jezičnih vježbi da me strah da ću zaostati.	1 2 3 4 5
26. Na satu jezičnih vježbi nervozniji/nervoznija sam nego na drugim kolegijima.	1 2 3 4 5
27. Kad govorim na satu, osjećam se nervozno i zbunjeno.	1 2 3 4 5
28. Prije sata jezičnih vježbi osjećam se opušteno i sigurno u sebe.	1 2 3 4 5
29. Iako znam kako se nešto pravilno kaže, na satu se zbunim.	1 2 3 4 5
30. Osjećam se nelagodno kada me netko izvan studija pita nešto vezano uz engleski jezik, a ne znam odgovor.	1 2 3 4 5
31. Bojim se da će mi se drugi u grupi smijati kad progovorim na engleskom jeziku.	1 2 3 4 5
32. Pod pritiskom sam i osjećam se nelagodno kada izvan studija moram koristiti engleski jezik pred osobama koje znaju da sam student istog.	1 2 3 4 5
33. Nervozan/Nervozna sam kad me profesor/ica pita, a nisam se pripremio/pripremila.	1 2 3 4 5

2. Molim Vas da odgovorite na sljedeća pitanja:

Jeste li se Vi ili Vaši roditelji školovali ili boravili na engleskom govornom području? U kolikoj je mjeri to utjecalo na odabir Vaše studijske grupe?

_____

_____

Od koje dobi učite engleski jezik? _____

Jeste li učili još koji strani jezik osim engleskoga? DA NE

Ako je Vaš odgovor potvrdan, molim napišite koji i procijenite svoje znanje tog jezika:

_____ jezik osnovno srednje napredno

_____ jezik osnovno srednje napredno

_____ jezik osnovno srednje napredno

Od koje do koje dobi ste učili te jezike? _____

_____

Jeste li zadovoljni znanjem stečenim u tim jezicima? Molim Vas obrazložite:

_____

_____

_____

Imate li namjeru učiti još koji strani jezik? Navedite koji i obrazložite:

_____

_____

3. Molim obrazložite:

Možete li usporediti svoj odnos prema engleskom jeziku sada i prije studija?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Kakva je sada Vaša motivacija za učenje tog jezika, a kakva je ona bila prije samog studija?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Hvala na strpljenju! ☺