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**Gender and Age impact
on English Language
Learning Anxiety:**

an exploration among Middle
School, High School and
University students

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Abstract

The present research is an attempt to investigate the causes and effects of English Language Anxiety from Middle School, High School and University Italian students' perspective.

Specifically, it pursues to discover the impact that gender and age differences may have on English Language Anxiety within a classroom environment.

The data were gathered through questionnaires dispensed to Middle School, High School and University students, both males and females who are currently studying English as a Foreign Language in Italy.

Considered to be a complex phenomenon and a relevant affective variable, the field of Foreign Language Anxiety has always been investigated by many scientists.

Recapitulating, Anxiety is strictly correlated with English-learning achievement.

The most relevant results of this study show that, firstly, English Language Anxiety has a greater impact on female students than on their male counterparts.

Secondly, the age factor leads to differences regarding useful strategies to diminish anxiety.

Finally, regardless of age and gender, the respondents agreed on indicating speaking activities as the most anxiety-arousing in the whole process of English Learning.

In conclusion, this study generated educational and didactic implications, which include suggestions of what teachers can do to diminish the debilitating effects of English Language Anxiety.

Introduction

Foreign Language Learning Anxiety has been identified by researchers as one of the factors influencing the validity of learning.

Indeed, considered to be an important affective variable, anxiety, as stated by Dordinejad and Ahmadabad (2014), affects one's level of achievement in Foreign Language learning.

Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) defined it as the fear or discomfort that occurs in a learner when using a Foreign Language.

Foreign Language Anxiety can be a challenging task for many language learners which may lead to various possible issues.

The extent and intensity with which these emotions are experienced changes from one individual to another, but there are some common points.

Since Foreign Language Learning is a lifelong commitment (Horwitz, 1996) the main objective of future and present Languages teachers should be that of finding efficient teaching methods to make sure that Language Learning will not be considered as anxiety-provoking anymore.

The most conventional way to divide students is into two sexes, males and females, and by age.

Therefore, it is reasonable to ask whether English Language Anxiety presents considerable sex differences and whether differences in anxiety levels and anxiety-provoking factors vary across age groups.

Since Horwitz and Young (1991) estimate that half of students who are learning languages encountered debilitating levels of negative language anxiety, it is interesting to investigate the situation among Italian students, both males and females, who are currently studying English in Middle Schools, High Schools and Universities.

In the following chapter, a theoretical framework regarding Foreign Language Anxiety will be provided, together with a brief insight into the major studies on this topic.

The second chapter will be dedicated to explaining my research, in particular, the objectives, the participants and the methods adopted. Besides, the questionnaire created will be presented.

The third chapter will be devoted to explaining how the data have been collected and analysed, while in the subsequent chapter results and findings will be presented, together with some immediate considerations.

Chapter 5 will be dedicated to the discussion about the results obtained and, as a conclusion, some pedagogical implications have been suggested.

1. Literature Review

«Language learning is an emotionally and psychologically dynamic process that is influenced by a myriad of ever-changing variables and emotional “vibes” that produce moment-by-moment fluctuations in learners’ adaptation» (Gregersen et al., 2014).

Studying a Foreign Language at school is a subject area that had and still has considerable interest between scholars across the globe.

Furthermore, the growing recognition encountered by various language educators on the debilitating effects of language anxiety has induced a remarkable rise in the number of researches concerning this situation.

Surveys in that field revealed that there are many variables to take into consideration when speaking about learning a Foreign Language, being emotions the major body of research.

Anxiety, as a predominant affective factor, has been investigated by a good deal of scholars since the 1970s.

In particular, Language Learning context gives the impression of being notably disposed to anxiety arousal.

Campbell and Ortiz (1991) affirm that the level of anxiety in language classrooms is “alarming”.

According to Worde (1998) «more than half of foreign language learners experience some kinds of anxiety in their learning».

1.1 Previous studies concerning Foreign Language Anxiety

A substantial amount of preceding research has established that affective variables, including anxiety, attitudes and motivation, deeply and significantly influence language achievement.

There is evidence that learners have familiarity with a notable amount of foreign language anxiety during their FL lessons. As a matter of fact, in an investigation by

Horwitz et al. (1986) 38% of subjects signed the item *“I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes”*.

This indicates that language learning courses can be more anxiety arousing than are other classes.

Gardner (1985), the pioneer in studying affective variables in FL learning, contemplated the idea that the kind of anxiety peculiar to foreign language learning is related to foreign language achievement. Therefore, he established the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB)¹ to calculate affective factors that are considered meaningful in Foreign Language learning like motivation, attitude and anxiety.

A large body of scholars from the field of Language Education and Psychology have explored the effects of anxiety on Language Education (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989; Skehan, 1989; Young, 1991) and their findings proved that certain forms of anxiety exist that obstruct the learning of a Foreign Language.

Indeed, Foreign Language Anxiety can negatively impact on students' performance, liking and, above all, learning potential.

Not surprisingly, FLA has been described as one of the strongest predictors of success or failure in FL learning (MacIntyre, 1999)

1.2 Instruments and measures of Foreign Language Anxiety

With the evolution of quite a number of well-grounded and effective instruments and measures of foreign language anxiety in the last 30 years, such as the French Class Anxiety Scale (Gardner, 1985), the French Use Anxiety Scale (Gardner, Smythe & Clement, 1979), the Input, Processing and Output Anxiety Scales (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994), the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (Saito, Horwitz & Garza, 1999), the Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (Kim, 2000), the Second Language Writing

¹ The Attitude Motivation Test Battery was created by Gardner to quantitatively measure the four main factors and relative sub-units and predict L2 performance of the learning. Participants are requested to rate a set of statements on a scale ranging from 1 to 7 and on a 6-level Likert Scale. The four variables measured are: integrativeness, attitude toward learning situation, motivation and language anxiety.

Anxiety Scale (Cheng, 2004) and the most commonly used scale for assessing FLA, the FLCAS (Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986), academics have found a reasonable negative correlation between language anxiety and various degrees of language achievement. (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Gardner, Smythe & Lalonde, 1984; Horwitz et al. 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991c; Mettler, 1987; Phillips, 1992; Trylong, 1987; Young, 1986).

1.2.1 FLCAS

Due to its international academic influence and outstanding contribution to the field of Language Education, the FLCAS will be shortly presented in the upcoming section.

The *FLCAS* (Horwitz et al., 1986) is a 33-item self-report measure scored on a five-point Likert Scale, ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”, that assesses the degree to which learners feel anxious during language classes.

Based on the situation-specific theory of Foreign Language Anxiety proposed by Horwitz, et al. (1986), the FLCAS was developed to capture the peculiar essence of Foreign Language Anxiety in a classroom setting and to provide researchers with a standard measure.

The FLCAS is built on an analysis of potential sources of anxiety in a language classroom, that were hypothesized to include three related types of performance anxieties: communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation.

It seems necessary to mention that the set of 33 questions, which has been translated into many languages, was developed and used in various countries all over the world to elicit answers without limiting or inhibiting the respondents.

Moreover, the FLCAS has been conscientiously validated for internal reliability, test-retest reliability and construct validity (Horwitz et al., 1986).

1.2.2 Luo's four-dimensional source model

Luo's (2012) four-dimensional source model is another important conceptualisation in which the researcher agreed with Horwitz, et al. that foreign language is a situation-specific construct.

She proposed a four-dimensional source model of FLA that suggests that some extent of foreign language anxiety is deep-rooted in the classroom setting, the characteristics of the language student, the target language and the foreign language learning mechanism.



Figure 1. The Four-dimensional Source Model of Foreign Language Anxiety

1.2.3 Qualitative Research, Quantitative Research and Mixed Method

Proceeding, the debilitating nature of Language Anxiety has been observed via qualitative together with quantitative research, even if researches on FLA mostly used quantitative methods, that proved to be reliable.

To clarify, in *qualitative research*, also called *interpretative research* or *ethnographic research*, there is more interest not in quantifying changes, but in capturing and interpreting the process to see what is happening with an insider view, that is from the eyes of the participants.

It is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, motivations and opinions and to identify the typical, not to generalise.

Qualitative data collection is made over time and it is flexible, allowing the researcher to change things while going, and there is no control over variables.

Qualitative data collection methods vary using unstructured or semi-structured techniques and conversational communication, such as group discussions, interviews and participation/systematic process observation.

To examine the data, considering that the researcher obtained soft data, that is language, by keeping a sort of diary about the case, it is advisable to recur to a process called *Content Analysis* that can transform data (words) into numbers by reducing them into categories, after having interpreted the answers.

Otherwise, *quantitative research*, also known as *psychometric research*, is used to quantify something by way of creating numerical data or data that can be converted into usable statistics, the so-called “hard” quantifiable data.

Quantitative research is used to find out the effects of something, controlling the variables.

When using this type of research, sampling is very important because the main aim is to generalize results from a larger sample population.

Typical quantitative data collection methods are much more structured than the previous ones and the types of questions asked are closed-ended questions. They include experiments, various forms of surveys and questionnaires.

People working in the field of Language Education typically tend to use a *mixed method*, such as the *Quan-Qual* approach designed by Dornyei.

This is because FLA, as a complex human phenomenon, needs an in-depth understanding. Therefore, the investigation should not be confined to either quantitative or qualitative methods, but it needs to be explored in a holistic perspective. Another example which captures this mixture is the classic *action research*, that is a research tradition with a political agenda developed within the social sciences: to emancipate and empower schools and teachers, trying to make them become researchers.

It has its characteristics: a mixture of psychometric (descriptive) and ethnographic methods and it is manageable for non-professional researchers.

Action research is research *on* action and research *in* action, that is to say, that the teacher, being a researcher, does some research while teaching. This substantially helps to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Action research is associated with the ethnographic paradigm because the researcher carries on an experiment and applies it to a particular case, without generalising. However, at the same time, the researcher does a bit of quantification.

1.3 Negative and positive emotions

It is relevant to say that the literature intensely has focused on negative emotion, while positive Foreign Language emotion have been left in dim light.

In support of this statement, Arnold and Brown (1999) underlined that «much more attention is given to the question of negative emotions».

Dewaele, Jean-Marc & Macintyre, Peter (2014) reflected on whether a focal point on anxiety's negative effects is considering only half of the question.

It is reasonable to think that studying emotion giving meticulous attention to positive emotion will provide a new and different understanding of the case interested. This is the reason why attraction and curiosity towards positive emotions has been increasing in recent years.

The stimulus for a more specific consideration of the part of positive emotion in second and foreign language acquisition has been promoted by progress in positive psychology (Peterson, 2006; Lake, 2013).

Positive emotion can help dissolve the recurrent effects of negative emotional influence, pushing to stimulate resiliency against difficulties.

In addition, positive emotions (such as enjoyment) produce the willingness to play and explore the language, bringing to the opportunity to learn efficiently, making progress toward a goal.

Clearly, in Foreign Language learning context, students' active involvement is fundamental for them to be successful.

In support of this thesis, students who feel anxious in their learning tend not to engage in situations which they consider anxiety-provoking (Pappamihiel, 2002).

To summarize, examining both positive and negative emotions in the same research is a recommended operation and that is what Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) did.

1.4 Preceding studies on gender and age influence in FL learning

Previous researches also focused on the possibility that gender and age interact and influence the effects and intensity of Foreign Language Anxiety.

Gardner (1985) outlined various researches that reveal more positive attitudes regarding foreign language learning among girls instead of boys and he declares that attitudinal differences might play an important role in acquired sex differences in accomplishment.

Roughly speaking, languages are commonly seen and perceived as a “female thing”, being females generally thought to be more adept in language learning than males. Just think about the proportion of males and females in linguistic High Schools or Language courses at University.

Zhao Na, in her *A Study of High School Students' English Learning Anxiety* (2007) surveyed the level of English Learning Anxiety of both males and females attending High School and the results of the comparison showed that during High School males experience more anxiety than females in English classrooms.

Moreover, according to Worrall and Tsarna (1987), the way teachers explain topics and the types of exercises and activities proposed seem to follow a model that is more favourable for girls than for boys in the language classroom.

Furthermore, again Worrall and Tsarna noticed that despite of the teacher gender, English and French professors expressed having higher expectations of females than of males, offering girls more scholastic guidance than boys and giving females further career stimulation and support than males.

It is also important to take into consideration the effects and influence that gender and age interaction can have on Foreign Language Anxiety because of discrepancies in boys' and girls' different developmental course during puberty.

Leslie A. Donovan and Peter D. MacIntyre (2004) investigated *Age and Sex Differences in Willingness to Communicate, Communication Apprehension and Self-Perceived Competence*.

They examined employing three age grouping of participants selected from Junior High, High School and University students who were asked to fill in three scales, all being self-report instruments developed by McCroskey and associates.

Results by Leslie A. Donovan and Peter D. MacIntyre (2004) showed that among High School students, no significant sex differences in communication apprehension are noticed, while, in the University group, females at University level are higher in communication apprehension, which is associated with anxiety, than their male counterparts.

Similarly, *"Do Girls Have All the Fun? Anxiety and Enjoyment in the Foreign Language Classroom"* (Dewaele, Jean-Marc & MacIntyre, Peter & Boudreau, Carmen & Dewaele, Livia, 2016) focuses on gender differences in FL enjoyment and Foreign Language Anxiety among male and female students.

They too used items rated on a Likert scale, expressing different aspects of Foreign Language Education and an open question.

Results revealed that female participants encountered significantly more Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety. Girls worried more than their male peers dealing with their mistakes and were less self-reliant in using the Foreign Language.

Again Ardi Marwan, in his *Investigating Students' Foreign Language Anxiety* (2007) questioned, among other things, if there are any differences in factors arousing Foreign Language Anxiety between male and female learners.

A questionnaire scaling factors contributing to FL anxiety was adopted to collect data.

The findings about gender differences are in accordance with the results of the previously mentioned studies: male students were more confident than female students in their Foreign Language learning.

What is new is that male learners reported being more afraid of failing the English class than their female counterparts were. Therefore, they inserted this as a source of FL anxiety.

Talking exclusively about age, it is appropriate to say that many language learners believe that younger students are better at learning foreign languages than their older counterparts (Horwitz, 1988).

This belief seems to be suitable as some research demonstrated that younger people tend to be able to speak a foreign language with less (or without) accent and have better abilities in noticing and managing technicalities of the language as phonology and morphology (Lieberman, 1984; Newport, 1986).

In greater depth, surveys on age and test anxiety have commonly noted that there truly is a positive relationship between age and test anxiety, since older language students are more anxious when taking a test (Crook, 1979).

Testimony to this, Onwuegbuzie, et al. (1999) confirmed that age is a significant predictor of Foreign Language Anxiety, reporting that older learners presented a higher level of anxiety.

1.4.1 Differences in Language Anxiety coping strategies between males and females

Since language learning situations are prone to anxiety arousal, it is possible to find other differences between genders in the way males and females cope with anxiety and the various strategies they adopt.

A research organized by Kondo and Ling (2004) explored the strategies used by Foreign Language students in dealing with their language anxiety and it represents a solid theoretical basis.

They collected information from students learning English by delivering a questionnaire which asked for the specific strategies the learners used on way to cope with their Foreign Language Anxiety.

The study identified several strategies which have been grouped under five categories of general strategies, particularly:

- 1) preparation,
- 2) relaxation,
- 3) positive thinking,
- 4) peer seeking,
- 5) resignation. (Kondo & Ling, 2004)

Pappamihiel (2002) conducted a similar study where one of the crucial questions was about the most frequently used strategies adopted by language learners when dealing with their language anxiety.

Sadly, the research proclaimed that avoidance is the most regularly used strategy.

On the other hand, another strategy adopted by learners, as noted by Pappamihiel (2002) is making friends with peers which English level is higher and who are less anxious than they are or not anxious at all.

Ardi Marwan (2007), together with other subjects, wanted to find out if there are any differences in strategies adopted to handle Foreign Language Anxiety between boys and girls.

The research involved university students who were asked to complete a questionnaire scaling anxiety coping strategies.

Quoting Marwan (2007) «the comparison of anxiety coping strategies used by male and female students indicates that the number of female learners who employ strategies such as preparation, relaxation, positive thinking and peer seeking was greater than the number of male learners». (*Investigating Students' Foreign Language Anxiety*, Ardi Marwan, 2007)

Contrary to Pappamihel (2002) who discovered that avoidance was one of the most used strategies by foreign language students when they felt anxious, in Ardi Marwan's research the resignation strategy was hardly ever chosen by learners participating in this survey.

As previously discussed (chapter 1, section 1.3) students' active engagement with the language studied is something fundamental in the process of language acquisition and improvement and a greater part of students involved in Marwan's survey was evidently aware of that.

This was also Vygotsky's opinion, that claimed that learning happens with the assistance of other people.

Precisely, a central aspect of Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory is *the Zone of Proximal Development*. Quoting Vygotsky (1962), this is «a range of tasks that are too difficult for an individual to master alone, but can be mastered with the assistance or guidance of adults or more-skilled peers (Vygotsky, 1962) ».

The findings also expose distinctions between strategies used by male and female students, which is what interests us more.

Briefly, there was a larger number of female learners using strategies such as positive thinking, relaxation and peer seeking than male learners. This could be because of attitudinal characteristics or because, as shown in other studies, girls tend to be more anxious while learning a Foreign Language than their male counterparts.

1.4.1.1 Foreign Language teaching strategies

Seizing the time of incitement towards Foreign Language Anxiety coping strategies, also many FL teaching strategies have been discussed because, without any doubt, teachers play a very significant role in incrementing or mitigating Foreign Language Learners' Anxiety.

Horwitz, in 1990, proposed an approach made up of three strategies, considered to be the most effective practice, inclusive of systematic desensitization, that is acquiring how

to relax when in a disquiet situation, cognitive modification, in other words, the practice of changing students' own emotional opinion and regulating their self-evaluation, and skills training.

Scientists verified strategies of various types and the countermeasures to Foreign Language Anxiety have mainly concentrated on three approaches: cognitive, affective and behavioural (Hembree, 1988; Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004).

As already mentioned above, the cognitive approach focuses on changing students' mental estimate. This method is recommended for teaching learners more realistic self-evaluation (Mejias, Applebaum, Applebaum & Trotter, 1991).

One method that highly stimulates students in that particular way is the cooperative learning technique, that usually helps to lower the level of anxiety.

The affective approach, which includes procedures like relaxation (Ratanasiripong, Sverduk, Hayashino & Prince, 2010), meditation (Oxford, 2015) and support groups (Foss & Reitzel, 1991) puts all efforts toward reducing the adversity of Foreign Language learning experience.

The third approach is the behavioural one, which in simple terms is skill training.

It assumes that students experience Foreign Language Anxiety because of poor language competence.

Various methods and techniques are applied, e.g. computerized pronunciation practice (Shams, 2005) and teaching speaking in a virtual environment (Grant, Huang & Pasfield-Neofitou, 2014).

Continuing with the theme of useful strategies that teachers can adopt during classes on way to reduce FLA, it seems relevant to report Hashemi and Abbasi's (2013) recommendations for teachers that can be helpful to reduce students' Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety:

«1) Scan for the signs of anxiety by students and apply quick strategies to help them overcome the destructive feelings.

- 2) Create a student-friendly and learning-supportive environment in the class.
- 3) Create friendship and cooperation among students.
- 4) Put more emphasis on formative assessment and constructive feedback rather than summative assessment.²
- 5) A communicative approach should be adopted so that students get more chances to practice their speaking skills.
- 6) Encourage students not to be afraid of making mistakes.
- 7) Do not correct the student's every mistake.
- 8) Make students feel successful and satisfied when using a foreign language.
- 9) Choose activities and tasks that do not cause instant frustration.
- 10) Initiate discussion about how the students feel, for instance, when giving presentations and help them overcome their worries.
- 11) Search for more training courses on general psychology including language anxiety and learning differences. »

(Hashemi M., & Abbasi M., 2013, *The role of the teacher in alleviating anxiety in language classes. International Journal of Applied and Basic Sciences*, 4, 640-646.)

Hashemi and Abbasi's work is accurate and well-founded. They mostly focused on the idea of transforming the classroom environment in a more relaxing place, where students are real friends and not only colleagues and where they feel free to make mistakes.

This recalls the *Constructivist Theory of Learning* by Vygotsky that highlights the crucial role of social and cultural interactions in the learning process, stating that knowledge is co-constructed and individuals learn from one another.

Point number one of Hashemi and Abbasi's recommendations implies that the teacher knows a lot about his/her students' preferences, such as which approach causes them to be more anxious in class » and which one helps them to feel more relaxed.

² Formative assessment evaluates how someone is learning during the course; the goal is to monitor students' learning and to provide helpful feedback. Summative assessment evaluates students' achievement after the course completion by assigning grades.

The professor, as a leader, a tutor, a guide and a director of the classroom environment should be able to catch “anxiety warnings” in every learner and to adopt the right strategies to include all the students of the classroom.

Inclusion makes the learner feel as a part of the learning community and, consequently, understood and safe.

It is also important to take into consideration the fact that a classroom is a highly heterogenic environment, therefore every learner has a personal preferred learning style and a different cognitive attitude and intelligence.

Within a class, it is common to find someone who has kinaesthetic intelligence, another who has auditory intelligence and many others who have the visive one. The didactic consequence is intuitive: in order to make learners feel as much free from anxiety as possible, didactic materials and activities should be various, on way to not penalize any kind of intelligence.

As suggested in the *Universal Design for Learning* (UDL), the professor should offer students various means of representation, expression and involvement.

To give an example, Cooperative Learning represents what encompasses all what have been said so far: Firstly, the *Constructivist Theory of Learning* by Vygotsky, because in Cooperative Learning students work together in small groups and they need to cooperate to reach a common learning goal, having the opportunity to learn from each other; secondly, Cooperative Learning offers every student the possibility to express in the way he/she prefers, and it makes everybody feel as a member of a team.

Feeling part of a team is another point that proved to be effective in helping students perceive less learning anxiety by creating a supportive learning environment.

Continuing focusing on the role of teachers, it seems relevant to quote Tanveer, that claims «Teachers providing incomprehensible explanations, over-correcting students, demonstrating visible favouritism, being authoritarian, and embarrassing and humiliating students create a stressful environment in class and thus contribute strongly to increasing anxiety. » (Tanveer, 2007)

It is fundamental that teachers notice every signal of anxiety coming from their students and that they have a quick and effective response to these feelings. As a proof of that, learners are grateful for patient, caring and understanding teachers, as well as for smiling and friendly ones.

Price (1991) pointed out that learners demand for their teachers' support, stimulation and patience with their mistakes, without the professor being extremely demanding.

The most important thing is that students do not perceive every correction as a failure. For that reason, the techniques of error correction should be highly empathic.

As Young (1990) explained, learners report having less Foreign Language Anxiety when teachers' way of correcting mistakes is not hard.

Therefore, constructive feedback on errors is what is truly recommended to make students aware of their weak points, giving suggestions regarding how to work on them to ameliorate their skills and general FL competence.

What really seems effective is to take time to clearly explain to Foreign Language learners that errors are an unavoidable part of FL learning and that their own interlanguage is constantly developing because Language Learning is a dynamic process.

1.4.1.2 Foreign Language Learning strategies

Another really helpful thing language learners could do is to try to find their own personal preferred strategies to reduce or beat anxiety during nerve-racking situations.

Hauck & Hurd (2005) gathered some strategies which can be useful for students to handle Foreign Language Anxiety:

«1) Use positive self-talk (e.g. I can do it; It doesn't matter if I make mistakes; others make mistakes).

2) Actively encourage myself to take risks in language learning, such as guessing meanings or trying to speak, even though I might make some mistakes.

3) Imagine that when I am speaking in front of others, it is just a friendly informal chat.

4) Tell myself when I speak that it won't take long.

5) Give myself a reward or treat when I do well.

6) Be aware of physical signs of stress that might affect my language learning.

- 7) Write down my feelings in a day or notebook.
- 8) Share my worries with other students.
- 9) Let my tutor know that I am anxious.
- 10) Use relaxation techniques, e.g. deep breathing, consciously speaking more slowly, etc.»

(Hauck M., & Hurd S., 2005. Exploring the link between language anxiety and learner self-management in open language learning contexts. *European Journal of Open, Distance and E-learning.*)³

The most used model of language learning strategies is the *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning* (Oxford, 1990) in which language learning strategies have been branched in six categories given below:

- 1- memory (information storing and retrieval)
- 2- cognitive (manipulation or transformation of the FL)
- 3- metacognitive (concerning learners' cognition)
- 4- compensation (compensation or production despite limitations in knowledge of the FL)
- 5- affective (control of feelings and attitudes)
- 6- social (concerning communication with others)

Likewise, Kondo & Ying-Ling (2004) divided strategies that students use when dealing with FLA into five categories:

- 1- preparation (e.g. studying hard every day, starting to use the Foreign Language, concentrating in class, doing all the homework)
- 2- relaxation (e.g. taking deep breaths, doodling, drinking water, meditation)
- 3- positive thinking (e.g. thinking of something nice, imagining to perform in a good way in FL, finding the enjoyable side of the FL)
- 4- peer seeking (e.g. asking other learners for advice, seeking for a non-anxious friend, talking with near friends)

³ http://www.eurodl.org/materials/contrib/2005/Mirjam_Hauck.pdf.

5- resignation (e.g. accepting the situation, giving up on studying the FL)

Furthermore, in order to make students feel more at ease while studying a foreign language, teachers should stimulate learners' motivation. In particular, the best kind of motivation is the one that comes from within the student.

Even more specifically, what teachers shall provoke is pleasure in foreign language learning.

If a student attends, for example, an English class because he/she likes the English Language or because he/she finds English classes enjoyable, full of food for thoughts, or just because the teacher is charismatic and enthusiastic, as a response, the learner will be pleased to be learning and Foreign Language Anxiety will not be present or, at most, will manifest in a weaker form.

Motivation based on pleasure is the keystone of the learning process that will be deep-seated, involving the entire student's personality.

What could be more motivating to learners than to be autonomous while learning just by using various strategies of learning?

What teachers can do is to provide students with some "secrets" that will help them learn in a better and easier way.

In other words, teachers can teach their learners how to learn.

In order to make students experience the pleasure of learning, the focus point is a well done comprehensible input, that has to be pleasant, relevant, something new and suitable.

Once again, the responsibility is all in the hands of teachers, who are agents for change, in charge of choosing contents, materials, ways of representation, and so on.

1.5 Sources of Foreign Language Learning Anxiety

Because of its predominance and negative effects on Foreign Language learning, it is imperative to investigate what are the sources of Foreign Language Anxiety in order to empower teachers in helping their students which are suffering from it.

Plenty of studies on this topic proclaim that Language Learning Anxiety can be attributed to many elements.

Getting started, Young (1991) classified six associated potential sources from three aspects: the learner, the teacher and the instructional practice.

He declared that Language Anxiety is caused by:

- 1) personal and interpersonal anxiety
- 2) learners' beliefs about language learning
- 3) instructors' beliefs about language teaching
- 4) instructor-learner interactions
- 5) classroom procedures
- 6) language testing

In addition, students in the context of FL learning may experience anxiety because of communication apprehension (e.g., complication in understanding what the teacher explains or difficulty in expressing one's own reasoning), fear of negative evaluation, fear of making mistakes, poor language skills, competitiveness among learners (Bailey, 1983) and a general feeling of anxiety related to the classroom context (e.g., test anxiety).

Focusing on non-comprehension, it is opportune to say that the inability to comprehend may be caused by the teacher speaking much too fast or refusing to repeat. This still brings us back to the importance of the role of teachers.

As has already been mentioned, Luo (2012) suggested a four-dimensional source model of Foreign Language Anxiety. Concisely, she assumed that FLA originates from four major sources: the classroom environment, learner characteristics, the foreign language learning process itself and the target language.

1.5.1 Affective Filter

When it comes to Foreign Language Learning Anxiety, a lot has been said about the so-called Affective Filter.

According to Stephen Krashen, one impediment that displays during language acquisition process is the Affective Filter, influenced by negative emotional variables that can hinder and obstruct language learning.

This hypothetical filter subconsciously blocks the input that does not reach the language acquisition section of the human brain and, as a consequence, acquisition fails or happens to a lesser extent.

Affective Filter can be induced by various variables including Anxiety.

Taking into consideration what has just been said, it is indispensable to create a positive, relaxed, stimulating and welcoming classroom environment in which students can feel comfortable and learn with pleasure.

Also, as just said before, in order to produce language, students need to know and feel that they are free to make mistakes and take risks.

Every teacher has the possibility to create a positive emotional environment that can make a substantial difference for students confronting anxiety.

One first small step, especially for High School teachers, can be the act of starting to call students by name rather than surname. It is a little change that really makes much of a difference because learners feel the professor closer to them, willing to build a relationship with the class.

Looking at the teacher as someone in whom they can trust and who has a sense of humour encourages students to dare, significantly lowering the level of anxiety.

1.5.2 The Causes of Foreign Language Learning Anxiety

Firstly, it seems appropriate to clarify that a cause is something that produces an effect. In a situation recognized as frightening, like language learning could be for many students, we need to take into consideration the fact that some causes may seem beyond one's ability to deal with them.

When it comes to Foreign Language Learning, students' self-expression is almost always limited and this is profoundly psychologically unsettling.

Not being able to authentically present oneself in accordance with one's self-image can anchor a learner into the cycle of negative self-evaluation, being the self and language connected.

If that is the case, there is a good chance that a disparity between the "true self" and the "limited self" will be established.

In other words, what students frequently complain about is not being able "to show their true colours".

In particular, since language impediment makes language learners being often silent, adolescent boys and girls are afraid of being viewed and considered not particularly intelligent or bright. For example, if a girl feels like she has a lot to say about a certain topic but she is not sure about how to pronounce determined words, there is a higher probability that, to save herself from embarrassment, she will stay silent.

In support of what has been just said, Bilá (2013) mentioned that the majority of foreign language learners report having intense speaking anxiety and point out their defective speaking abilities as the greatest barrier in Foreign Language communication.

Moreover, Language Learning Anxiety can be emanated from the teacher's behaviour and his/her negative evaluation and corrective feedback.

The professor, however, is not the only person who arouses anxiety, also peers can lead other students toward an anxiety state by negatively judging their colleagues. Insecure, introvert and shy adolescents experience fear of being laughed at by other students.

It goes without saying that lack of preparation is one of the main reasons for Language Learning Anxiety.

1.5.3 The Factors of Foreign Language Learning Anxiety

In order to entirely understand the process of Foreign Language Learning, it is now appropriate to focus on what are the most typical factors that stimulate Foreign Language Anxiety.

The ultimate objective is the reduction of those factors on way to establish a more relaxing environment which, as a consequence, will lead to better performances and a higher level in the FL studied.

Olivares-Cuhat (2010) in her study called *Relative importance of Learning Variables on L2 Performance* divided factors in the following categories:

- 1) Cognitive factors (e.g., language aptitude, learning styles)
- 2) Affective factors (e.g., attitudes, motivation, learning anxiety)
- 3) Metacognitive factors (e.g., use of language learning strategies)
- 4) Demographic factors

The fact that some students are more outstanding at achieving a Foreign Language than others even if the environment of their learning process is identical, has led to the hypothesis that individual characteristics mean a lot in successful foreign language acquisition.

Indeed, extra-lingual factors are believed to influence Foreign Language Anxiety more strongly than the lingual ones.

According to Králová (2009), researchers have explored the relationship between language learning and various lingual and extra-lingual variables, being the first related to the language system and the latter connected to the language learning process.

Furthermore, within the extra-lingual factors, static and dynamic variables can be distinguished. The static factors include permanent characteristics (e.g., nationality, gender, native language) while the dynamic ones (such as motivation and language proficiency) can transform over the years.

Going deeper into detail, Králová (2009) stated that lingual factors can be subdivided into two other categories: intra-lingual and inter-lingual.

Intra-lingual factors derive from the foreign language system itself, while the inter-lingual ones are the consequence of the relation between two language systems, the native language and a foreign language.

Continuing talking about the contact of two language systems, it seems right to assume that the typological gap between languages contributes to increasing Foreign Language Anxiety. For instance, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese and Russian are not only far-off from English grammatically speaking, but also they have a completely different alphabet and writing method.

Additionally, Sparks, Ganschow & Javorsky (2000) stated that learners with inadequate native language competence are naturally more inclined to feel anxious in a foreign language.

Coming back to the extra-lingual variables, it is important to reiterate that it is believed that they affect Foreign Language Anxiety in a deeper way than the lingual factors do. Indeed, scientists had to recognize that personal characteristics like self-esteem, shyness, anxiety, extroversion and so on may define the ultimate success in becoming proficient in a foreign language.

Various inquiries that attempted to establish the learning-related variables of Foreign Language Anxiety generally perceived the categories of personal variables, made of intra-personal and inter-personal, and impersonal variables as determinants. (e.g., Bailey, 1983; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Králová, 2009;)

Talking about personal variables, the intra-personal sources of Foreign Language Anxiety are a consequence of the students' personal characteristics, their beliefs and attitudes within FL Learning, while inter-personal variables are connected to the different interactions throughout the learning process, such as student-teacher interactions or learner-learner ones.

Frequently considered in previous studies, background variables include gender, target language proficiency level, year in school, ethnic background and the experience of visiting countries where the target language is spoken.

Equally regularly discusses variables that have been recognized as predictors of FLA are quantitative learner variables, which take into account age, motivation, foreign language aptitude, self-perceived foreign language ability, competitiveness and perfectionism.

Renée von Würde in her *Students' Perspectives on Foreign Language Anxiety* (2003) investigates which factors do students believe contribute to anxiety and found out that speaking activities and negative classroom experiences have been frequently cited among various sources for their anxiety.

1.6 What is Foreign Language Anxiety?

Anxiety has been a subject of significant interest in Language Education context and one of the most well documented psychological phenomena since it represents a dominant obstacle to Foreign Language learning and achievement that students need to overcome.

Accordingly, Foreign Language Anxiety can negatively impact on the learning process and the effects can be reasonably insidious, enough to compromise the learning potential of the students affected.

Chastain (1988) describes anxiety as a state of uneasiness and apprehension or fear generated by the anticipation of something threatening. This definition, however, refers to general anxiety.

Numerous investigations, defending the distinction between Language Anxiety and other types of anxiety, indicated that the kind of anxiety encountered in the process of learning a Foreign Language is a specific and unique type of anxiety, purely related to the acquisition of a Foreign Language (Gardner, 1985; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989).

Indeed, citing MacIntyre and Gardner, it can be defined as «the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening and learning» (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994).

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), as suggested by Young (1991) is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon.

Horwitz et al. (1986) occurred with the definition of Language Learning Anxiety as a combination of different incapacitating psychological along with behavioural factors that accompany language learning situations affected by the singular process which is intrinsic in language learning.

In conformity with this definition, they outlined three components of Foreign Language Anxiety.

The first one, communication apprehension, comes when a student intends to express an idea but has an undeveloped second-language vocabulary with which to convey it. In short, it is the incompetence in expressing oneself (as previously examined in chapter 1, section 1.5.2) as well as the inability to comprehend another person. The combination of these two failures conducts to frustration and apprehension.

The second component is fear of negative evaluation. More specifically, when learners are unsure of themselves in a Foreign Language, one of their fears is to being unable of making the appropriate social impression. This, being immediately related to the first component, brings us back again to section 1.5.2.

The third component is test anxiety, in other words, apprehension over academic evaluation that, together with the above mentioned components form an integral part

of Foreign Language Anxiety and have a damaging effect on second language use and acquisition.

And since, as just seen above, Language Anxiety derive mainly from social and communicative aspects of language learning, it can be considered as part of the social anxieties. (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989)

To clarify, social anxiety is represented by «feelings of tension and discomfort, negative self-evaluations and a tendency to withdraw in the presence of others» (Schwarzer, 1986).

Even more in particular, the definition that Horwitz et al. (1986) gave of Language Anxiety is «a distinctive complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process» (p.128).

Foreign Language Anxiety has always been linked to various learner variables and its effects can be quite subtle.

In order to be more scientifically accurate, FLA can interrupt the optimal activity of the prefrontal lobe of the brain, which affects memory and consequently diminish learning efficiency (Arnold & Brown, 1999).

Moreover, anxiety is an adaptive reaction which mobilizes the organism and assists it protect, attack or avoid an anxiety stimulus.

When anxiety is restricted just to a specific situation, such in this case (English Learning), the term “specific anxiety” is used.

Therefore, as just mentioned earlier, Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1986) proposed a construct of Foreign Language Anxiety as a situation-specific anxiety.

Foreign Language Anxiety can be considered both as a stable characteristic trait and as a temporary state induced by many variables.

Additionally, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) described that anxiety can obstruct language acquisition at every stage of the learning process: input, processing and output.

1.7 Various types of Anxiety

Anxiety, in a general sense, is a kind of troubled feeling in the mind. It is a subjective feeling of apprehension, tension, nervousness and worry resulting from an arousal of the automatic nervous system (Horwitz, 1986).

Generally speaking, anxiety can be divided into three types: trait anxiety, state anxiety and situation-specific anxiety.

Scientifically, it is appropriate to say that anxiety is an emotional state, therefore, it is generated through the arousal of the limbic system, the primitive, subcortical “chassis” of the cerebrum, which plays a significant, though indirect, role in many kinds of human enterprises, involving communication (Lamendella, 1977).

1.7.1 Trait Anxiety

Trait Anxiety may be defined as an individual tendency of becoming anxious or nervous in any situation (Spielberger, 1983), regardless of the situation he/she is exposed to.

Therefore, that kind of anxiety is part of a person’s character and, consequently, a person with high trait anxiety would be extremely inclined to become afraid in several different situations while someone with low trait anxiety is emotionally stable, usually a relaxed person.

Trait Anxiety has been shown to damage cognitive functioning, to disturb memory, to cause avoidance conduct and various other effects (Eysenck, 1979).

1.7.2 State Anxiety

State Anxiety is apprehension encountered at a particular moment in time as a temporary response to some outside stimulus, for instance, before taking an exam (Spielberger, 1983), hence it is not permanent.

As a result, a person who is subject to experience anxiety in general (e.g., someone who has high levels of Trait Anxiety) demonstrate higher elevations of State Anxiety in nerve-racking situations.

State Anxiety has an effect on emotions, cognition and behaviour.

Its effect on emotions results in a more sensitive automatic nervous system.

With regard to its effect on cognition, when someone experience this kind of anxiety he/she is more sensitive to what other people are thinking of him/her (Carver & Scheier, 1986).

In terms of behaviour, people with State Anxiety judge their own behaviour, contemplating real or imagined failures and frequently plan ways to leave the situation. In addition, the behavioural effects comprise physical manifestations of anxiety such as sweaty palms and accelerated heartbeat.

The positive thing about this type of anxiety is that, being not permanent, it diminishes over time as the student gets used to the specific stimulus.

For that reason, even though State Anxiety can damage language learning process, it is not as injurious as Trait Anxiety.

1.7.3 Situation specific Anxiety

When anxiety is limited to a specific context or situation only, such as using or learning a Foreign Language, we use the term Situation Specific Anxiety.

This kind of anxiety refers to the likelihood of becoming nervous or afraid in a certain type of situation.

From a theoretical perspective, Language Anxiety is a form of situation-specific anxiety that does not appear to present a strong relation to other types of anxiety.

One crucial thing to consider is that when a learner experiences repeated episodes of State Anxiety within the language context, it consolidates into a Situation-specific Anxiety, like English Class anxiety, for instance.

This kind of anxiety is preserved and enhanced by the repetition of unsatisfactory performances leading to anxiety that established English Class anxiety.

1.8 Effects of Foreign Language Anxiety on Language Education

Taking into account that there is substantial personal variation in the physiological reactions of individuals under different states of emotional arousal, it is possible to identify common reactions even in an extremely heterogeneous environment such as a classroom.

The existence of Learning Anxiety can have a negative impact on students' learning process and their performances. It can interfere with the acquisition, retention and production of new language.

Kondo and Ling (2004) proclaimed that students who feel anxious may have complications such as reduced word production and problems in understanding spoken instructions.

MacIntyre (1998) lists five major effects of anxiety on Foreign Language learning and performance.

Firstly, high levels of Language Anxiety are related to low levels of academic achievement in Foreign Language learning.

The second effect is the social effect. Students with high anxiety level do not have the intent to take part in interpersonal communication with others.

The third effect is that anxiety can happen at any stage of the language acquisition process. Therefore, anxiety can prevent certain information from entering a student's cognitive processing system.

Fourth, anxiety can affect the quality of communication output, since the retrieval of information may be obstructed in an anxiety state.

Final point, language learning experience could, in some situations, become a traumatic experience and disrupt students' self-esteem or self-confidence as learners.

With reference to point number one, it is appropriate to say that different studies investigated the relation between Language Anxiety and language course grades. Horwitz (1986), Young (1986), Aida (1994) and Gardner (1994) have all demonstrated a

negative correlation between Language Anxiety and grades in a wide range of language courses.

MacIntyre (1999) recognized a supplementary academic effect of Language Anxiety, that is “over-studying”. This is a frequent response when a student acknowledges that he/she is not executing well because of anxiety arousal.

In accordance with Horwitz, et al. (1986) anxious learners may over-study in order to avoid, quoting, «being less competent than other students» (p.130). Last minute over-studying to compensate gaps is one of the effect generated by Foreign Language Anxiety that could be both positive or negative.

In relation to the second point of MacIntyre’s list, it is maybe obvious but important to report that a major social effect of FLA is that anxious learners do not communicate as often as more serene students do (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

Since anxious learners are inclined to be taciturn, their classmates and teachers may institute a negative impression of them which, in exchange, could have a negative impact on their social relationships in the classroom environment and outside.

This, unfortunately, connects with point number five of MacIntyre’s list, which is when a learner starts to consider Language Class as a traumatic experience.

Personal effects are described by Macintyre (1999) as «the most troublesome effects of Language Anxiety» and the literature on FLA comprehends countless statements that reflect the feelings of unhappy anxious FL learners.

One of the most alarming declarations was the following statement captured by Price (1991) during an interview «I’d rather be in prison camp that speak a foreign language» (p.104).

Consequences of Foreign Language Anxiety can also have an impact on attitude and motivation towards Language Learning. By any chance, it can be assumed that anxiety influences learners’ feelings about language learning.

Regarding point number three, it is adequate to recall the fact that the arousal of anxiety can impair cognitive performance at any stage. In short, anxiety rousing is connected with self-related cognition: for example, self-critical thoughts and rumination over

failure compete for cognitive resources with normal cognitive demands. Since, as Eysenck (1979) indicated, the capacity to process information is confined, anxiety-related cognition commonly impedes performance.

As a consequence, if anxiety disturbs the cognitive process at one stage, as a response, the information is not transmitted to the following stage.

Concerning the input stage, it is opportune to recall Krashen's notorious concept of Affective Filter (already mentioned in section 1.5.1) that, in a nutshell, claims that anxiety acts like a filter, precluding some information from gaining access into the cognitive processing system.

During the processing stage, anxiety may affect both the rapidity and precision of learning. Given that anxiety operates as a distraction, learners may not be capable to learn different words, phrases or grammar.

With regard to the output stage, anxiety arousal could affect the quality of communication in a Foreign Language. Consequences such as "freezing-up" while taking an important test have been commonly reported by many people. This occurs because anxiety acts as an interference to the retrieval of information.

Continuing, problems noticed by Horwitz et al. include insufficient retrieval of items from memory under anxious circumstances, such as a conversation with a professor, that connects with point number four of the effect listed by MacIntyre, including a general fear of making mistakes that conducts the learner to silence instead of contribution.

It is easy to notice that communication apprehension is always mentioned as operating in Foreign Language context.

That is because learners are aware of the fact that, both as speakers or listeners, full comprehension of foreign language messages is extremely difficult. As a consequence, this kind of frustration caused by an "aborted" communication, may be almost always present.

Language learning, as a cognitive activity that confide in encoding, storage and retrieval processes, could be inhibited by FLA that may cause a divided attention situation (MacIntyre, 1995).

As Eysenck (1979) explained, anxious individuals divide their attention between task-related cognition and self-related or emotion-related cognition, which makes the performance less valuable.

Taking into consideration the classroom environment, another noteworthy aspect is the already mentioned fear of negative evaluation.

It is appropriate to clarify that the term evaluation refers to both the academic and personal evaluation made of learners in virtue of their performance and foreign language competence.

Some learners may have a mental block caused by high levels of anxiety and, consequently, they may be absorbed in meditating over a miserable performance more than they should.

After that, this kind of conduct results in avoidance behaviours such as missing a class or delaying homework, that are fairly common manifestations of anxiety.

When it comes to physical manifestations, some of the most typical symptoms of Foreign Language Anxiety include shaking, sweating, elevated heart rate, tears, freezing and stomach-ache, as any other types of anxiety.

In a research operated by Hashemi & Abbasi (2013) the participants illustrated their manifestations of Foreign Language Anxiety such as headaches, tension, blushing, abnormal verbal behaviour, such as too fast or too slow speed of speech, playing with hair, touching objects, etc.

On the other hand, it is imperative to talk about the positive side of anxiety, hardly ever mentioned in literature.

Rather than always being treated as a negative thing, anxiety can also be viewed as a good thing.

The so-called Facilitating Anxiety, opposite to Debilitating Anxiety, can help students being more active in their study and prepared when it is their turn to face challenges. In other words, anxious learners need to compensate their anxiety by increased effort and, quoting Eysenck (1979) «the extent to which anxiety either facilitates or impairs performance is determined by the extent to which high-anxiety subjects compensate for reduced processing effectiveness by enhanced effort» (Eysenck, M. W., 1979, *Anxiety, learning and memory: A reconceptualization. Journal of Research in Personality*).

After all, some anxiety may literally improve learners' performances, even if, according to Beeman, Martin & Meyers (1972) this kind of positive anxiety is considered to develop in later stages of the learning process.

2. The research

Given that English is now the Language of worldwide communication, it has been fixed as a compulsory subject in every Middle School and High School in the world. Therefore, there is an always-increasing number of people who are learning English as a Foreign Language and, consequently, the necessity to discover what are the factors that may negatively influence the students' learning process and cause a negative kind of anxiety is more and more imperative.

As just seen before, (chapter1, section 1.4) prior research suggests the possibility that age and sex interact to affect Foreign Language Anxiety.

Bearing in mind the fact that the majority of student experience debilitating effects caused by Foreign Language Learning Anxiety, an understanding of the differences concerning anxiety arousing factors between males and females and Middle School, High School and University students will help both teachers and learners.

Concisely, the purpose of this exploratory study is to examine the correlation of English Language Anxiety to demographic variables such as gender and age.

2.1 Research objectives

The present study aims at investigating the issue of English Language Learning Anxiety from Middle School, High School and University students' perspective and males and females' perspective.

More particularly, the research examines gender and age differences in English Language Anxiety within the classroom context, with particular attention to causes and effects, as expressed by English learners, and the strategies adopted to diminish anxiety. The goal of this research is to discover the differences that age and gender can make on English Learning Anxiety.

2.2 Research questions

- 1) Are there any differences between males and females in the way they experience English Language Anxiety? What are the factors contributing to English Language Anxiety from female or male students' perspective?
- 2) What are the factors contributing to English Language Anxiety from Middle School, High School and University students' perspective? Are there any differences in preferred strategies to diminish English Language Anxiety?

The ultimate aim is to examine the correlations among all the variables mentioned.

2.3 Participants

The study involved a total of 355 students of Middle School, High School and University, both males and females.

Participants are currently learning English as a Foreign Language in Italy.

Considering gender, the great majority of the sample (n= 245, 69%) was female; approximately one-third of the participants were male (n= 110, 31%).

Similar distribution, with a majority of female respondents, is characteristic of language questionnaires (Wilson & Dewaele, 2010).

The age of the participants ranged from 11 to 31. They were divided in three groups considering age: Middle School students (from age 11 to age 13), High School students (from age 14 to age 19), University students (from age 20 to age 31).

More precisely, the sample comprised 128 Middle School students (divided as follows: 37 students attending the first year, 52 students attending the second year and 39 students attending the third year) which represented the 36% of the sample, 124 High School students (of which 15 students attending the first year, 14 students attending the second year, 29 students attending the third year, 31 students attending the fourth

year and 35 students attending the fifth year) which represented the 35% of the participants and 103 University students (divided in 19 students attending the first year, 14 students attending the second year, 25 students attending the third year, 20 students attending the fourth year and 25 students attending the last year) representing the 29% of the respondents.

2.4 Research methods and data collection procedures

As for the research design of the study, a quantitative approach was chosen. According to Creswell (2005), survey design is one of the research procedures employed to report trends in a community of individuals. In the linguistic context of this research, the inclinations described are those associated with learners' English Language Anxiety. This method has been selected to provide an insight into the phenomenon of Language Learning Anxiety from English learners' perspective.

The data required for the study were collected through a multiple-choice and Likert scale questionnaire, in order to obtain the required information to answer the research questions.

The questionnaire has been created in Italian, it required approximately 15 minutes to be completed and consisted of different parts: the first section was intended to collect demographic information of the participants, such as their age, gender, mother tongue, etc.

The second section asks specific questions such as a learner's studying habit, his/her grade, self-confidence and motivation.

The third part consisted of multiple-choice questions regarding English Language Anxiety. Participants were asked to indicate their response on a 4-point Likert scale where 1 was "Mai" (Never), 2 was "Raramente" (Hardly ever), 3 was "Spesso" (Often) and 4 was "Sempre" (Always).

Another section asked the respondent some questions about strategies to diminish English Language Anxiety. Also, the data were gathered through Yes/No questions and short open-ended questions.

One important thing to take into consideration is the fact that this questionnaire examines both English Language Classroom Anxiety and English Language Enjoyment.

The first version of the questionnaire was pilot-tested with six respondents. This procedure led to the elimination of some questions that seemed unnecessary and the rewording of others.

The final version of the questionnaire was administered to Middle School students in paper form, while for High School students and University students the questionnaire was posted online using Google Form.

Free and informed permission was achieved from all participants. Students in Middle School were tested with permission of parents, teachers and school administrators.

In accordance with the directives of the school administration and Middle School teachers' wishes, questionnaires were completed in the students' regular classrooms, while, as already said, High School students and University students autonomously filled in their questionnaires online.

2.4.1 Questionnaire

In the following section, the questionnaire will be reported and described.

Firstly, it is appropriate to clarify that the survey has been delivered among learners studying in Italy, therefore, the language chosen for this work is Italian.

In addition, taking into consideration the fact that some learners may experience a certain form of language anxiety, Italian Language has been chosen in order to not interfere with students' compilation of the questionnaire.

The heading of the survey kindly asked students to fill in the questionnaire concerning

causes and effects of English Learning Anxiety in the most honest way possible, being the questionnaire anonymous. The description also informed students that their answers will only be used for statistical purposes with respect of privacy norms.

Below the questionnaire:

Informazioni demografiche:

- 1) Et : _____
- 2) Sesso: M F
- 3) Classe / Anno di corso: _____
- 4) Lingua madre: _____
- 5) Nazionalit : _____
- 6) A che et  hai iniziato a studiare inglese? _____
- 7) Sei mai stato/a in un Paese di lingua inglese?
 S  Quale/i?

 No
- 8) Che lavoro fa tua madre? _____
- 9) Che lavoro fa tuo padre? _____
- 10) I tuoi genitori conoscono la lingua inglese?
 No
 Solo uno dei due
 S , tutti e due.

Motivazione

- 11) Perch  studi inglese? (Indica le al massimo 3 risposte, quelle per te pi  rilevanti)
 obbligo scolastico (perch    tra le materie obbligatorie a scuola)
 futuro lavoro (utile nel mondo del lavoro o necessario per il lavoro che vorrei fare)
 capire testi di canzoni in inglese e interviste a cantanti/gruppi musicali
 capire serie di televisive/film in inglese e interviste ad attori/registi
 capire interviste a personaggi del mondo dello sport
 per viaggiare
 altro: _____
- 12) Usi la lingua fuori dal contesto scolastico? (Indica al massimo 2 risposte, quelle per te pi  rilevanti)
 No
 Guardo serie televisive/film in inglese
 Ascolto canzoni in inglese

- Parlo/scrivo ad amici stranieri
- Guardo video su YouTube in inglese
- Altro: _____

13) Quale voto hai in inglese di media? _____

14) Sei orgoglioso/a del tuo livello di conoscenza generale della lingua inglese?

- Sì
- No

15) Sei sicuro/a di te nell'uso generale della lingua inglese?

- Sì
- No

16) Quante ore studi al giorno mediamente? (Una sola risposta consentita)

- Nessuna
- Circa 1 ora
- Circa 2 ore
- Circa 3 ore
- Circa 4 ore
- Più di 4 ore

Ansia

17) Provi una qualsiasi forma di ansia nei confronti della lingua inglese?

- Sì
- No

18) Quando provi ansia rispetto alla lingua inglese? (Massimo due risposte)

- Mai
- Durante lezione/ora di inglese a scuola/università
- Solo durante compito in classe/esame
- Solo quando sono poco preparato/a
- Sempre (ogni volta che sento o vedo la lingua inglese)

19) È il contesto che mi crea ansia (classe, scuola/università) non la lingua inglese di per sé.

- Sì
- No

20) Quale abilità ti provoca più ansia?

Mettili in ordine, scrivendo un numero da 1 (più ansia) a 4 (meno ansia) accanto a ciascuna abilità:

- Leggere _____
- Scrivere _____
- Parlare _____
- Ascoltare _____

21) Provo ansia ad intervenire spontaneamente durante la lezione: (una sola risposta consentita)

- Sì, sempre, ma mi faccio coraggio e intervengo lo stesso
- Sì, sempre, infatti non intervengo mai spontaneamente
- Sì, solo se non sono sicuro/a di quello che sto per dire
- No, mai, intervengo senza preoccupazioni

- 22) Sono più in ansia durante la lezione di inglese che nelle ore delle altre materie.
- Sì
 - No
- 23) Nel parlare all'interno del contesto scolastico/universitario, provi più ansia a parlare con: (una sola risposta)
- Mio/a compagno/a madrelingua inglese
 - Mio/a compagno/a non madrelingua inglese
 - Insegnante di inglese madrelingua inglese
 - Insegnante di inglese non madrelingua inglese
- 24) Effetti dell'ansia: in questa lista ci sono effetti che l'ansia verso la lingua inglese può provocare negli studenti.
 Facendo riferimento alla tua situazione, indica la risposta appropriata usando una scala di numeri da 1 a 4.
 1 = MAI
 2 = QUASI MAI (raramente)
 3 = SPESSO
 4 = SEMPRE

		MAI	QUASI MAI	SPESSO	SEMPRE
		1	2	3	4
24.1	Quando si tratta di scrivere in inglese sono bloccato/a dall'ansia per la lingua e quindi non ho idee				
24.2	A causa dell'ansia sono meno fluido e corretto nel parlare (balbetto, faccio più errori di grammatica, dimentico parole, ecc...)				
24.3	Non imparo niente di nuovo perché sono preso/a dall'ansia e non ascolto la spiegazione serenamente				
24.4	Quando si tratta di inglese, provo frustrazione generale / nervosismo				
24.5	Quando si tratta di inglese, mi sento senza speranza				
24.6	A causa dell'ansia non mi sento sicuro/a di me in inglese, anche quando sono preparato/a				
24.7	Provo ansia motivante che stimola la competizione con compagni (voglio fare meglio degli altri)				
24.8	Provo ansia motivante e positiva che mi stimola a migliorarmi (competizione con me stesso/a)				
24.9	L'ansia mi porta a perdere la concentrazione (penso ad altro, faccio altro)				
24.10	L'ansia mi porta ad odiare l'insegnante di inglese				
24.11	A causa dell'ansia ho una sudorazione eccessiva				
24.12	Tremo per via dell'ansia				

24.13	Provo ansia demotivante (<u>non sono motivato a studiare inglese</u> visto che l'ansia fa abbassare i miei voti)				
24.14	L'ansia mi fa sbagliare di più e quindi <u>fa scendere la mia autostima</u>				
24.15	A causa dell'ansia non riesco a mostrare il mio massimo potenziale				
24.16	L'ansia provoca battito cardiaco accelerato				
24.17	L'ansia provoca preoccupazione di essere interpellato dall'insegnante				
24.18	Evito di andare lezione perché mi crea troppa ansia				
24.19	Ansia anticipatoria: anche quando ho capito l'argomento attuale, sono già in ansia di non capire il successivo				
24.20	Ansia anticipatoria: ancora prima che inizi la lezione di inglese sono già in ansia				
24.21	Ho l'ansia di non essere capito/a quando parlo/scrivo in inglese (ansia di non riuscire a <u>comunicare</u>)				
24.22	Ansia verso l'inglese mi provoca attacchi di panico				
24.23	L'ansia verso l'inglese mi fa piangere quando sbaglio e vengo corretto/a dall'insegnante				
24.24	L'ansia mi fa dimenticare anche quello che so				
24.25	L'ansia verso la lingua inglese mi provoca nausea/senso di vomito				
24.26	L'ansia verso la lingua inglese mi provoca mal di testa				
24.27	A causa dell'ansia, più studio e più mi si confondono le idee				
24.28	A causa dell'ansia non riesco a dormire la sera prima della lezione di inglese				
24.29	A causa dell'ansia non riesco a dormire la sera prima della verifica/interrogazione/esame di inglese				
24.30	Ho ansia di rimanere indietro col programma/spiegazioni/compiti di inglese				
24.31	Sento di avere troppe cose da imparare riguardo all'inglese				
24.32	Non faccio i compiti/non studio per non dover pensare all'inglese (<u>evitare</u>)				
24.33	Rimando i compiti/lo studio dell'inglese all'ultimo momento (<u>procrastinare</u>)				
24.34	A causa dell'ansia verso l'inglese, la mia mente diventa vuota, come un black-out				
24.35	Quando so che devo parlare in inglese mi manca la salivazione				
24.36	La notte prima di un esame/verifica/interrogazione di inglese ho incubi di sbagliare tutto				

24.37	L'ansia mi fa preoccupare più del dovuto (ingigantisco/peggiro la situazione)				
24.38	A causa dell'ansia non riesco bene a respirare (ho il fiato corto)				

Rispondi alle seguenti domande solo con un SÌ (VERO) oppure con un NO (FALSO)

		SÌ	NO
25	Ansia verso la lingua inglese è causata dalla figura dell'insegnante?		
26	Ansia verso la lingua inglese è causata dalle metodologie di insegnamento?		
27	Ansia verso la lingua inglese è causata dalle modalità di verifica?		
28	Ansia verso la lingua inglese è causata dalla paura di non superare un esame/prendere un brutto voto?		
29	Ansia verso la lingua inglese è causata dalla preoccupazione per le conseguenze che ci saranno se prendo un brutto voto/non passo esame?		
30	Ansia verso la lingua inglese è causata dalla mia scarsa preparazione?		
31	Ansia verso la lingua inglese è causata dalla paura di sbagliare?		
32	Ansia verso la lingua inglese è causata dal gruppo classe/compagni di corso?		
33	Ansia verso la lingua inglese è causata dalla paura di fare una figuraccia?		

34) Quanto tempo prima di un esame/compito/interrogazione di inglese inizi ad avere ansia? (Una sola risposta)

- Non provo ansia
- Circa un'ora prima
- Qualche ora prima
- Circa un giorno prima
- Qualche giorno prima
- Una settimana prima
- Due settimane prima
- Un mese prima
- Più di un mese prima

35) Come vedi la lingua inglese riguardo un futuro contesto lavorativo? (Una sola risposta)

- La userò molto
- La userò il giusto
- La userò poco
- Non la userò
- Sarà utile per trovare lavoro
- Non sarà utile per trovare lavoro

36) Strategie attuabili in classe per diminuire ansia: cosa pensi che possa far diminuire il tuo livello di ansia? Scegli una sola tra le 4 risposte, quella che ritieni più importante ed efficace.

- Più lavori di gruppo/coppia in classe
- Attività/esercizi da svolgere in classe senza che il voto faccia media

- Relazione più amichevole dell'insegnante con gli studenti
- Ambiente più rilassato, di supporto e stimolante

37) Strategie attuabili personalmente per diminuire ansia: cosa pensi che possa far diminuire il tuo livello di ansia? Scegli massimo 6 risposte, quelle che ritieni migliori per te:

- A. Studiare inglese tutti i giorni
- B. Studiare tantissimo il giorno prima della lezione di inglese/compito di inglese
- C. Tecniche di respirazione per calmarmi prima e durante la lezione di inglese
- D. Pensare che la lingua inglese non è importante
- E. Pensare che anche gli altri stanno imparando, non solo io
- F. Pensare che è normale fare errori
- G. Pensare che il voto non determina chi sono come persona
- H. Pensare ad altre cose (sport, amici, cibo, ecc...) invece che alla lezione di inglese
- I. Accettare di essere una persona ansiosa
- J. L'unica soluzione è non andare a lezione
- K. Trovare qualche compagno ansioso come me (mi sento compreso)
- L. Trovare qualche compagno per niente ansioso che mi dia coraggio
- M. Immaginare di essere in classe da solo (senza insegnante e compagni)
- N. Trovare il lato positivo nello studio della lingua inglese

38) Utilizzi strategie personali per diminuire l'ansia?

- No
- Sì, alcune tra quelle scritte nella domanda precedente. Quali? Scrivi le lettere

○ Sì, _____ altre _____ strategie _____ non _____ elencate. _____ Quali?

39) Facendo riferimento alla tua situazione, indica la risposta appropriata usando una scala di numeri da 1 a 4.

- 1 = MAI
- 2 = QUASI MAI (raramente)
- 3 = SPESSO
- 4 = SEMPRE

Durante la lezione di inglese:

		MAI	QUASI MAI	SPESSO	SEMPRE
		1	2	3	4
39.1	Mi diverto				
39.2	Sento che l'insegnante ha fiducia in me e nelle mie potenzialità				
39.3	Sono concentrato/a ad ottenere un bel risultato per fare contenti i miei genitori				
39.4	Imparo cose utili ed interessanti				

39.5	I miei compagni sono carini con me, c'è un bel clima di amicizia/collaborazione				
39.6	L'insegnante dimostra di tenere a noi studenti ed al nostro apprendimento				
39.7	Mi piace ascoltare l'insegnante che parla inglese perché mi piace il suono della lingua				
39.8	Mi piace imparare cose nuove				
39.9	Mi piace svolgere attività di gruppo				
39.10	Mi piace lavorare da solo/a				
39.11	Vorrei non essere in classe, non vedo l'ora di che sia finita				
39.12	Temo il giudizio dei miei compagni				
39.13	Temo il giudizio dell'insegnante				
39.14	Mi impegno per dare una buona impressione di me				
39.15	Parlo in inglese anche con i miei compagni				
39.16	Cerco un'occasione per mettermi in evidenza				

The first question (age), together with the second one (gender), have been asked because age and sex are the independent variables on which the whole investigation is founded.

The sixth question has been asked to examine whether those who start studying English at a younger age have a more relaxed approach to the English Language than those who commence later.

Question number seven is relevant to determine if some experience in an English Speaking country can help the students experience less English Language Anxiety while learning English in a classroom context.

Questions number eight and nine have been asked to discover if parents' occupation has an impact on their children's level of English Language Anxiety.

Information regarding students' motivation (question number 11) has been requested because motivation is an important factor during the Language Learning process and, therefore, it can be very influential concerning anxiety levels.

This last question is related to question number 12, that considers the possibility that students who put English into practice even outside the academic context, experience less debilitating anxiety effects than learners who never use the Foreign Language out of school.

Questions 13, 14, 15 and 16 are related to students' habits and self-perception that may influence their anxiety level.

All the other subsequent questions concern anxiety, its causes and effects.

2.5 Assumptions

The first supposition regards the connection between the age factor and Foreign Language Learning, since it is generally believed that early starters experience less anxiety than those who approached the Foreign Language in older age.

The second assumption is that being languages generally more appreciated by girls than boys, female students will show more interest, enjoyment and sense of adequacy during English classes.

The third and final assumption is that, since females are generally considered to be more susceptible to critics and insecure, as a consequence, debilitating anxiety will have a greater impact on them.

3. Data analysis

In order to properly analyse the data collected through the distribution of 335 questionnaires and to obtain several tables with accurate percentages, it has been necessary to use calculation programs such as Google Form and IBM spss (Statistical Product and Service Solutions).

3.1 Google Form

As already said before, unlike High School and University students, Middle School participants filled in their questionnaires in paper form.

Therefore, to obtain complete charts comprehending all the 355 participants of different age, it has been indispensable to manually insert each Middle School student's survey in Google Form, one by one.

After having done that, the totality of data has been automatically grouped by Google Form.

Considering all the data that have been entered, the system systematically created and furnished several useful pie charts and bar charts, which revealed some initial general results to get an approximate idea of the research's trend.

Besides, before starting to use IBM system, an Excel sheet containing all the data from the 355 questionnaires has been created.

3.2 *IBM spss (Statistical Product and Service Solutions)*

Considering the objectives of this study and the previously mentioned research questions, *IBM spss (Statistical Product and Service Solutions) version 20* was employed to deeply analyse the data.

First of all, the previously mentioned Excel sheet containing all the data collected have been uploaded into the system.

IBM spss calculation program proved to be extremely useful and appropriate since it allows to establish one independent variable (such as gender or age) and to observe its impact on a determined dependent variable (such as anxiety generated by teaching methods).

Among the numerous possible options to see the outcomes generated by the intersection, tables showing results through percentages have been chosen, being clear and of immediate understanding.

Having the opportunity to create personalized tables, permitted to test all the possible intersection of variables and to present the most relevant ones in the following chapter regarding results presentation.

3.3 Different types of variables

Before moving on to the analysis of the data, it seems appropriate to clarify that there are different types of variables: nominal variables, ordinal variables, cardinal variables, dependent variables and independent variables.

Nominal variables are exhaustive and mutually exclusive. They are variables with values which have no numerical value, such as gender or occupation.

Ordinal variables, instead, are those with values whose disposition is significant, but on which no math operations can be calculated.

A clear example could be represented by the gap between one option of the questionnaire's Likert scale and another, of which we do not know the distance (e.g. the distance between answer number two "hardly ever" and number three "often").

Cardinal variables are those whose values are ordered and indicate a progression. The distance from one answer to another is well known, such as the age of the participants.

Since in the following chapter regarding results and findings the terms dependent variable and independent variable are frequently and predominantly used, it seems appropriate to clarify the distinction between the two.

Dependent variables are those which are tested and measured and are dependent on the independent variable. Indeed, changing the independent variable, the effect is observed on the dependent one.

Independent variables, instead, are those which are not changed by other variables and are those which are controlled in a scientific experiment to test the effects on the dependent one.

Independent and dependent variables could be considered in terms of cause and effect.

Specifically, the independent variables included in this analysis were: age, gender (specifically year of study at school or University) and the age in which one began to study English.

4. Results and findings

Students data were gathered and analysed quantitatively in order to answer the research questions previously posed in this study (Chapter 2, section 2.2) and to see to which extent anxiety has pervasive effects on English Language learners, taking into consideration age and gender differences.

Age differences were examined using three age cohorts of participants drawn from Middle School, High School and University students.

Therefore, question number three (Class/Year course) has been used as the independent variable, instead of question one (Age), which resulted too dispersive when dealing with tables and percentages.

4.1 Confidence while using the English Language

As a general starting, it seems necessary to investigate students' confidence in using the English Language.

Therefore, question number fifteen "Do you feel confident when you use the English Language?" is what we are going to deeply analyse.

It received a total of 57,5% of negative answers, having the majority of the respondents indicated "No" as their response.

Figure 2 immediately signals that the greater number of students forming the sample of this research are insecure of themselves and their competence when using the English Language.

15) Sei sicuro/a di te nell'uso generale della lingua inglese?

355 risposte

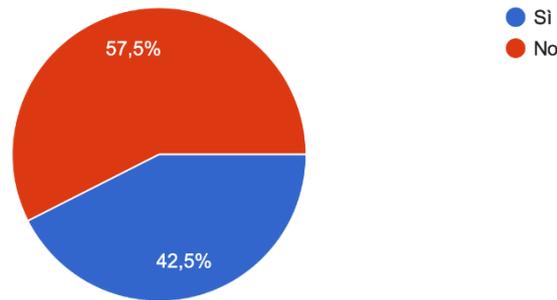


Figure 2: Confidence in using English (All participants)

It is now interesting to analyse this same question taking into consideration gender differences.

If it is true that, as already mentioned, languages are “a female thing”, results will show percentages where females declare to be confident in a higher percentage compared to males.

Therefore, the nominal variable of sex has been established as the independent variable, while question number fifteen was the dependent variable on which to see the effects of the interaction between gender and confidence in using the English Language.

		15) Sei sicuro/a di te nell'uso generale della lingua inglese?	
		No	Sì
		% casi riga	% casi riga
2) Sesso	F	59,6%	40,4%
	M	52,7%	47,3%

Figure 3: Gender and self-confidence interaction.

Looking at figure number 3, it must be said that the just made assumption turned out to be wrong.

Indeed, it is easy to see that 59,6% of female participants admitted to feel insecure while using English.

This is the same response that male participants gave, which answered that they do not feel confident in using English in a percentage of 52,7.

According to this table, both males and females are insecure of themselves while using English, but it is important to notice that the percentage of girls who answered “No” is higher than that of boys who gave the same response.

This is the first distinction that occurs between female and male learners, having in mind the third of the previously mentioned assumptions (Chapter 2, section 2.5): debilitating anxiety has a greater impact on girls.

What about the relation between age differences and confidence in using the English Language?

The following table will show the percentages obtained taking into consideration the relationship between this same question about English Language confidence (number fifteen), that is once again our dependent variable, and age differences.

The independent variable, therefore, becomes question number three (Class/Year course).

Here is the table:

		15) Sei sicuro/a di te nell'uso generale della lingua inglese?	
		No	Sì
		% casi riga	% casi riga
3) Classe/Anno di corso	1° anno di università	42,1%	57,9%
	1° superiore	40,0%	60,0%
	1ª media	46,2%	53,8%
	2° anno di università	50,0%	50,0%
	2° superiore	42,9%	57,1%
	2ª media	67,3%	32,7%
	3° anno di università	68,0%	32,0%
	3° superiore	69,0%	31,0%
	3ª media	64,9%	35,1%
	4° anno di università	50,0%	50,0%
	4° superiore	54,8%	45,2%
	5° anno di università	56,0%	44,0%
	5° superiore	62,9%	37,1%

Figure 4: Interaction between year course and confidence in using the English Language.

The percentages reported in figure 4 follow a certain curious trend that leads to the subsequent specific considerations.

The majority of respondents currently attending the first year of Middle School (53,8%) declares to feel confident while using English, result that is totally reversed in the

responses of students attending the second and third year of Middle School. Indeed, respectively 67,3% and 64,9% consider themselves as not confident in their use of the English Language.

A question arises: is that because during the first year of Middle School the topics covered are easier than those treated in the following years? Or maybe because, as frequently happens, first-year teachers' aim is that of ensuring that all students are at the same level and, because of that, they are focused on revising already covered topics most of the time?

An identical situation recurs with High School students' declarations, where 60% of students currently attending the first year of High School describe themselves as confident when using English. Then, the percentage of High School students that indicate to feel confident with their English falls, so much that only the 37,1% of fifth-year students declare confidence.

Having said that, the just mentioned considerations regarding Middle School situation can be repeated for what concerns High School.

In support of table number 3 and to confirm the third supposition (chapter 2, section 2.5) saying that females are more affected by anxiety than males, the nominal variable of gender has been inserted as the independent variable in relation to inquiry number 24.6 of the questionnaire ("Even when I am prepared, as a result of anxiety I do not feel confident regarding the English Language") that has been fixed as the dependent variable.

Here are the results:

		24.6) A causa dell'ansia non mi sento sicuro/a di me in inglese, anche quando sono preparato/a			
		1	2	3	4
		% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga
2) Sesso	F	22,9%	24,9%	38,8%	13,5%
	M	32,7%	30,9%	27,3%	9,1%

Figure 5

As demonstrated by figure 5, a percentage of 38,8 of female students has chosen answer number 3 “often”, which added up with the 13,5% of female participants who indicated answer number 4 “always”, reaches a total of 52,3% of girls (the majority) who declare to experience English Language Anxiety even if they are well prepared.

Conversely, the majority of male students opted for answer number one “never” and answer number two “hardly ever”, reaching a total of 63,6% of negative answers.

It can be concluded that, regardless of their best preparation, girls are intensely injured by anxiety, in contrast with their male counterparts who are more confident when aware of their adequate preparation.

4.2 Anxiety towards the English Language

As a natural consequence to the ascertainment of the fact that 57% of the participants declared to not feel confident while using English (Figure 2), it is appropriate now to verify how many respondents declared to experience a certain form of English Language Anxiety.

When asked “Do you experience any form of anxiety towards the English Language?” the majority of the learners, specifically 63,1% of the respondents, answered “Sì” (Yes), as can be seen in figure 5.

17) Provi una qualsiasi forma di ansia nei confronti della lingua inglese?

355 risposte

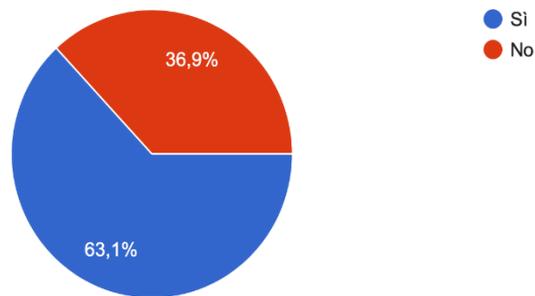


Figure 6: Anxiety towards the English Language (All participants).

The number of students who report that they feel anxious while learning English is surprising and alarming. Only approximately one-third of the respondent stated to be immune to English Language Anxiety.

Considering the first set of research questions, it appears opportune to repeat the same question, taking into account the gender variable.

In the following table, with regard to gender differences, the nominal variable of sex has been established as independent variable, whereas questions number seventeen has been used as dependent variable on way to see the effect of gender on English Language Anxiety.

Here are the results:

		17) Provi una qualsiasi forma di ansia nei confronti della lingua inglese?	
		No	Sì
		% casi riga	% casi riga
2) Sesso	F	34,7%	65,3%
	M	41,8%	58,2%

Figure 7: Correlation between gender and Anxiety towards the English Language.

By looking at the table, both males and females declared to experience a kind of anxiety towards the English Language and, in support of previous arguments regarding the disclosure of females being less confident in using the English Language (figure 3), here, as a confirmation, we can clearly see that the percentage of female students who indicate to be anxious with regard to English (65,3%) is slightly higher than those of males (58,2%).

Repeatedly, assumption number three is confirmed.

Considering the second set of research questions, the same question “Do you experience any form of anxiety towards the English Language?” has been proposed again, this time, however, related to age differences.

In the following table, indeed, the variable of class/course year is established as the independent one, while question number 17 is once again the dependent one.

Here are the results:

			17) Provi una qualsiasi forma di ansia nei confronti della lingua inglese?	
			No	Sì
			% casi riga	% casi riga
3) Classe/Anno corso	1° anno università	di	52,6%	47,4%
	1° superiore		53,3%	46,7%
	1ª media		35,9%	64,1%
	2° anno università	di	35,7%	64,3%
	2° superiore		50,0%	50,0%
	2ª media		13,5%	86,5%
	3° anno università	di	36,0%	64,0%
	3° superiore		34,5%	65,5%
	3ª media		35,1%	64,9%
	4° anno università	di	45,0%	55,0%
	4° superiore		45,2%	54,8%
	5° anno università	di	44,0%	56,0%
	5° superiore		42,9%	57,1%

Figure 8

Looking at the table, it is clear to see that for what age differences are concerned, no significant percentages have been found. Only students currently attending the second year of Middle school reported a noteworthy and alarming percentage of 86,5% of students who declared to experience a certain type of English Language Anxiety.

Considering these first results, it is adequate to say that the participants of this survey, declaring in a percentage of 63,1% to experience some form of anxiety related to English, represent an accurate and ideal sample for this investigation regarding English Language Anxiety.

4.3 Anxiety to spontaneously intervene during the lesson

In addition to what has already been said, the difference between males and females can also be seen in the following table.

Here the nominal variable of gender has been established as the independent variable, while query number 21 (“I am anxious to intervene spontaneously during the lesson”) has been used as the dependent variable on which to observe the effects.

Here are the results:

		21) Provo ansia ad intervenire spontaneamente durante la lezione: (una sola risposta consentita)			
		No, mai, intervengo senza preoccupazioni	Sì, sempre, infatti non intervengo mai spontaneamente	Sì, sempre, ma mi faccio coraggio e intervengo lo stesso	Sì, solo se non sono sicuro/a di quello che sto per dire
		% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga
2) Sesso	F	16,3%	36,3%	11,4%	35,9%
	M	37,3%	22,7%	7,3%	32,7%

Figure 9

A relevant finding which is good to be highlighted is that 37,3% of male participants declared they were never anxious to intervene spontaneously and always did so without hesitations (answer number one), very different datum from that reported by female participants.

Indeed, among 245 female respondents, only 16,3% of them indicated this same response as their favourite choice. The majority of girls (36,3%), instead, chose statement number two (“I am always anxious; I never intervene spontaneously”) as their main representation.

These two choices are at opposite poles: “I always intervene spontaneously” versus “I never intervene spontaneously”. Neither males nor females indicated answers number three and four as their favourites, which are considered to be less decisive and “in the middle”.

Therefore, considering that, another clear distinction between male and female students can be presented.

4.4 Anxiety impedes learners to show their maximum potential

As already mentioned before, anxiety, in its debilitating effects, may impede learners to show their true maximum potential. This can lead to a vicious circle of frustrations and even more pronounced anxiety.

This is exactly the case of students taking part in this survey, as shown in the following table reporting the perception of all the participants:

24.15) A causa dell'ansia non riesco a mostrare il mio massimo potenziale

355 risposte

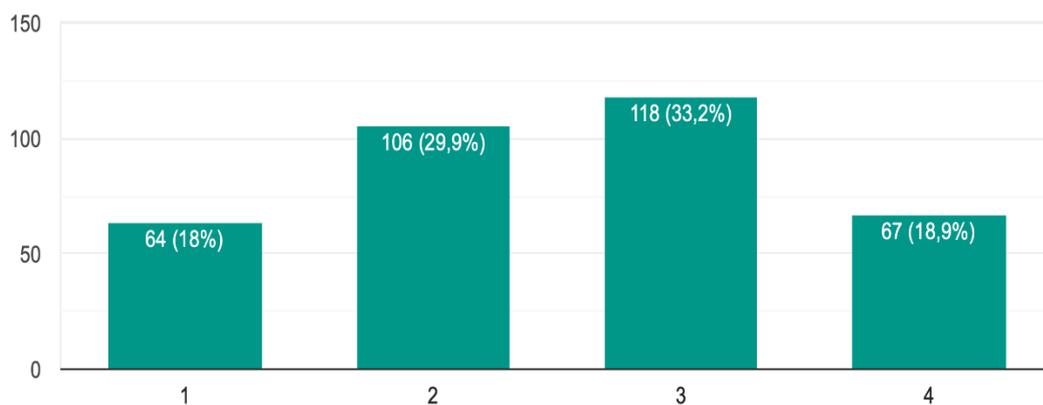


Figure 10

Query number 24.15 asked students how often they found themselves in the following situation: “Due to anxiety I cannot show my maximum potential”.

By looking at answers which the majority of the participants indicated as their preferred, it is clear that the just mentioned situation is a problem that frequently occurs among English learners.

Indeed, aggregating 33,2% of students who answered “Often” to 18,9% of those who answered “always”, the result is 52,1% of students who declared that “due to anxiety they cannot show their maximum English Language potential”.

Concerning differences among male and female students regarding this same statement number 24.15, substantial disagreement has been found.

Indeed, by putting the nominal variable of gender to work as independent variable and statement number 24.15 as the dependent variable, the following interesting results are shown:

		24.15) A causa dell’ansia non riesco a mostrare il mio massimo potenziale			
		1	2	3	4
		% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga
2) Sesso	F	16,7%	28,6%	35,1%	19,6%
	M	20,0%	32,7%	30,0%	17,3%

Figure 11

As highlighted in figure 11, the majority of girls (35,1%) often have difficulties in showing their maximum potential with regards to the English Language, which added up to 19,6% of those who declared to find themselves always obstructed by anxiety, makes a total of 54,7% of female students who declare to not being able to show their maximum potential, due to English Language Anxiety.

On the contrary, male students indicated “hardly ever” as their favourite choice, with a percentage of 32,7%.

Once again, girls are affected by negative highly debilitating English Language Anxiety, more than boys are. This perfectly reconnects with all the preceding tables and, furthermore, adds accuracy in considering assumption number three as totally confirmed.

4.5 English Language Anxiety is caused by students' fear of making mistakes

What was shocking and alarming was the percentage of students who, when answering question number 36 "Is anxiety towards the English Language caused by fear of making mistakes?", picked out "Yes" as their response, as evident in the following pie-chart:

31) Ansia verso la lingua inglese è causata dalla paura di sbagliare?

355 risposte

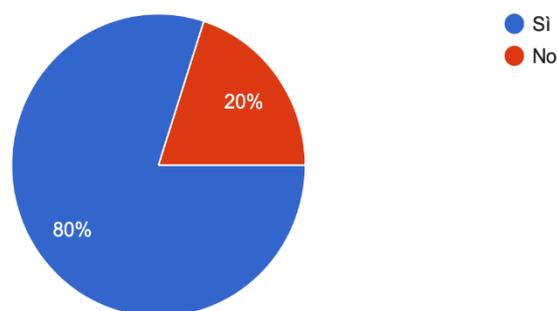


Figure 12

Looking at the pie-chart in figure 12, the results are unmistakable: the clear majority of students (precisely 80%) is affected by the fear of making mistakes.

For what age and gender differences are concerned, no significant impact has been made on this question.

Here are the two tables showing the results:

		31) Ansia verso la lingua inglese è causata dalla paura di sbagliare?	
		No	Sì
		% casi riga	% casi riga
2) Sesso	F	15,9%	84,1%
	M	29,1%	70,9%

Figure 13

By establishing gender as the independent variable and question “Is anxiety towards the English Language caused by fear of making mistakes?” as the dependent one, it is possible to see that males and females agree with each other in saying that they are frightened by mistakes.

More in detail, once again girls’ percentage is higher than that of boys.

The following table reports the percentages obtained by establishing class/Year course as the independent variable and once again question number 31 as the dependent one.

			31) Ansia verso la lingua inglese è causata dalla paura di sbagliare?	
			No	Sì
			% casi riga	% casi riga
3) Classe/Anno corso	1° anno università	di	42,1%	57,9%
	1° superiore		6,7%	93,3%
	1ª media		12,8%	87,2%
	2° anno università	di	14,3%	85,7%
	2° superiore		35,7%	64,3%
	2ª media		15,4%	84,6%
	3° anno università	di	4,0%	96,0%
	3° superiore		31,0%	69,0%
	3ª media		27,0%	73,0%
	4° anno università	di	30,0%	70,0%
	4° superiore		22,6%	77,4%
	5° anno università	di	24,0%	76,0%
	5° superiore		8,6%	91,4%

Figure 14

As clearly visible in figure 14, percentages of the column on the right, indicating that anxiety is caused by the fear of making mistakes, are exaggeratedly higher than the percentages reported in the column on the left.

This results will be taken into consideration in the following chapter, when presenting some suggestions to develop an always better teaching methodology.

Considering the last three tables, it can be safely said that fear of making mistakes is something that all English Language learners have in common, regardless of gender and age.

4.6 English Language Anxiety is caused by students' fear of looking bad in front of others

A similar inquiry to that just discussed, is question number 33 "Is anxiety towards English caused by fear of making a fool of yourself/looking ridiculous?"

Here are the responses that have been collected:

33) Ansia verso la lingua inglese è causata dalla paura di fare una figuraccia?

355 risposte

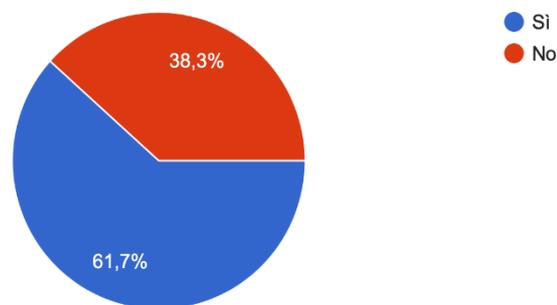


Figure 15

Looking at the pie-chart, it is easy to see that a total of 61,7% of the respondents declared to be afraid of being ridiculous while using the English Language in front of others.

Considering gender differences impacting on question number 33 (figure 16), we can distinctly see that there are some discrepancies among responses gave by males and females.

Indeed, by establishing the nominal variable of sex as the independent variable and question "Is anxiety towards English caused by the fear of looking bad in front of others?" as the dependent one, the results are as follows:

		33) Ansia verso la lingua inglese è causata dalla paura di fare una figuraccia?	
		No	Sì
		% casi riga	% casi riga
2) Sesso	F	31,4%	68,6%
	M	53,6%	46,4%

Figure 16

Once again, girls' percentages report a higher level of fear of being considered ridiculous, having 68,6% of them answered "yes", in contrast with boys who, in this specific situation, reflected the existence of a higher level self-confidence and indifference towards what others may think.

Taking into consideration this same question in relation with age differences, less distinctive and significant percentages have been found.

Here are the results:

			33) Ansia verso la lingua inglese è causata dalla paura di fare una figuraccia?	
			No	Sì
			% casi riga	% casi riga
3) Classe/Anno corso	1° anno università	di	42,1%	57,9%
	1° superiore		40,0%	60,0%
	1ª media		48,7%	51,3%
	2° anno università	di	35,7%	64,3%
	2° superiore		57,1%	42,9%
	2ª media		51,9%	48,1%
	3° anno università	di	4,0%	96,0%
	3° superiore		31,0%	69,0%
	3ª media		51,4%	48,6%
	4° anno università	di	25,0%	75,0%
	4° superiore		38,7%	61,3%
	5° anno università	di	24,0%	76,0%
	5° superiore		31,4%	68,6%

Figure 17

Looking at figure 17, after having established class/year course as the independent variable and question number 33 as the dependent variable, one observation that can be made is that, inexplicably, 96% of students currently attending the third year of University declared that anxiety is caused by their fear of looking ridiculous in front of others.

Considering all the other percentages, it is safe to say that the majority of the participants chose answer “Yes” as their response, regardless of the class/year course they are attending.

4.7 English Language Anxiety is triggered by the context

Examining factors contributing to English Language Anxiety, context has always been indicated as extremely relevant during English Language Learning process.

As can be seen in figure 18, also in this questionnaire, context has been mentioned by the majority of students (60,3% of the total) as one of the causes of their English Language Anxiety.

19) È il contesto che mi crea ansia (classe, scuola/università) non la lingua inglese di per sé.

355 risposte

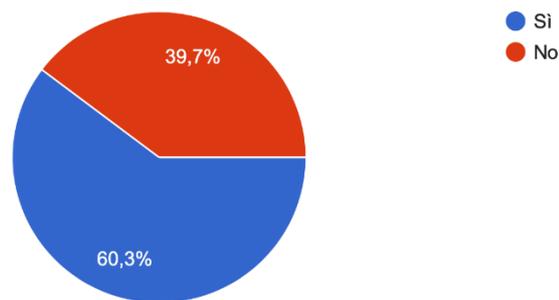


Figure 18: Anxiety is triggered by the context

Establishing gender as the independent variable and statement number 19 as the dependent variable, the following percentages have been originated:

		19) È il contesto che mi crea ansia (classe, scuola/università) non la lingua inglese di per sé.	
		No	Si
		% casi riga	% casi riga
2) Sesso	F	42,0%	58,0%
	M	40,9%	59,1%

Figure 19

As evident in figure 19, it has been discovered that, regardless of gender, the majority of learners agree on saying that context can lead to an amplification of anxiety.

Indeed, both from males and females' perspective, context is something on which to work, in order to diminish the level of English Language Anxiety.

On the contrary, for what age differences are concerned, significant variations have been found.

Indeed, by determining class/year course as the independent variable in action and question number nineteen as the affected dependent variable, it is possible to see the differences caused by the age of the respondents.

Here are the results:

		19) È il contesto che mi crea ansia (classe, scuola/università) non la lingua inglese di per sé.		
		No	Sì	
		% casi riga	% casi riga	
3) Classe/Anno corso	1° anno università	di	52,6%	47,4%
	1° superiore		46,7%	53,3%
	1ª media		46,2%	53,8%
	2° anno università	di	50,0%	50,0%
	2° superiore		35,7%	64,3%
	2ª media		21,2%	78,8%
	3° anno università	di	56,0%	44,0%
	3° superiore		34,5%	65,5%
	3ª media		54,1%	45,9%
	4° anno università	di	65,0%	35,0%
	4° superiore		29,0%	71,0%
	5° anno università	di	56,0%	44,0%
5° superiore		28,6%	71,4%	

Figure 20: context's perception variations with regard to age

Age differences had a huge and precise impact on the respondents' perception of the context.

Indeed, analysis of the data revealed that during Middle School and High School, the majority of learners agree with the assertion "it is the context that causes me anxiety, not the English Language by itself".

As evident in percentages reported in figure 20, the most significant finding of this table is that the majority of High School students, regardless of the class they are attending, harmonise in saying that the context is co-responsible, together with other factors, of their anxiety towards the English Language and unavoidable related debilitating effects. Looking at High School students' perception, it is safe to say that from the first year to the fifth year, High School context is considered as highly anxiety-provoking.

Completely different is the perception of University students, whose most chosen answer is "no", as highlighted in the table.

It is legitimate to think that this diversity between Middle/High School and University students results from the fact that University is usually a student's personal choice not imposed by others, while High School falls within compulsory education.

Therefore, the immersion in the specific context of University is a conscious individual will, while High School and Middle School contexts are something that every learner must face, albeit against his/her will.

4.8 Speaking as the most Anxiety-provoking skill

Among the 355 respondents, the majority chose speaking as the most anxiety-arousing of English learning skills.

As can be seen from the bar chart below, the blue bar indicates answer number 1 (the most anxiety-provoking skill), while the green bar signals answer number 4 (the least anxiety-provoking skill).

Here are the results:

20) Quale abilità ti provoca più ansia? Mettile in ordine (1=più ansia, 4=meno ansia)

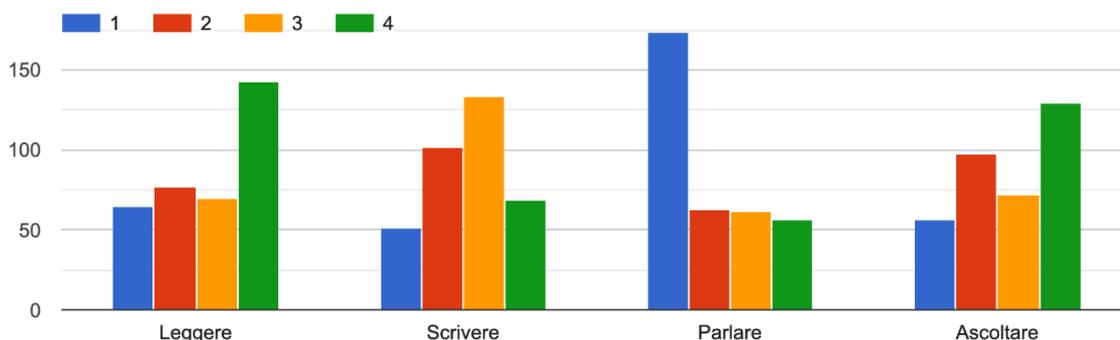


Figure 21

The table above shows that the majority of students (174 of 355 respondents) indicated speaking as the most anxiety-provoking skill, as visible by comparing all the blue bars. For what concerns the least anxiety-provoking skill, reading has been chosen by the majority of the respondents.

In order to answer the first set of this study's research questions, is it appropriate to verify if there are any differences in the skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening) that may provoke anxiety between male and female students.

To do this, the nominal variable of gender has been established as the independent variable and question number 20 as the dependent one.

The subsequent percentages have been achieved:

	20) Quale abilità ti provoca più ansia? Mettile in ordine (1=più ansia, 4=meno ansia) [Leggere]				20) Quale abilità ti provoca più ansia? Mettile in ordine (1=più ansia, 4=meno ansia) [Scrivere]				20) Quale abilità ti provoca più ansia? Mettile in ordine (1=più ansia, 4=meno ansia) [Parlare]				20) Quale abilità ti provoca più ansia? Mettile in ordine (1=più ansia, 4=meno ansia) [Ascoltare]			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
	casi rig a	casi riga	casi rig a	casi riga	casi riga	cas i rig a	cas i rig a	cas i rig a	casi riga	casi riga	casi riga	casi riga	casi riga	cas i rig a	cas i rig a	
2) Sesso	F 20, 4%	22, 9%	17, 6%	39, 2%	13, 9%	27, 3%	38, 0%	20, 8%	43, 7%	18, 8%	19, 6%	18, 0%	18, 4%	26, 9%	18, 4%	36, 3%
	M 13, 6%	19, 1%	24, 5%	42, 7%	15, 5%	31, 8%	36, 4%	16, 4%	60, 9%	15, 5%	12, 7%	10, 9%	10, 0%	29, 1%	24, 5%	36, 4%

Figure 22: Speaking as the most anxiety-provoking skill

As noticeable from the percentages in figure 22, speaking has been indicated as the most anxiety-provoking skill from both male (60,9%) and female students (43,7%).

In the same way, reading has been indicated as the least anxiety-provoking skill by both male (42,7%) and female respondents (39,2%).

By establishing class/year course as the independent variable and this same question number 20 as the dependent variable, an important discovery is worth to be mentioned. Starting from the first year of Middle School to the last year of University, the majority of students agree in electing speaking as the most anxiety-arousing skill.

Therefore, it might safely be said that, not surprisingly, speaking is the most anxiety-arousing skill for all students, regardless of both their gender and age.

4.9 Teachers as the ones with whom the students have the most anxiety to speak

Since speaking is perceived as the most anxiety-stimulating skill by the majority of English Language learners, it is interesting to discover with whom, within the school context, students are more afraid to talk.

The following pie-chart highlights the respondents' feelings:

23) Nel parlare all'interno del contesto scolastico/universitario, provi più ansia a parlare con: (una sola risposta)

355 risposte

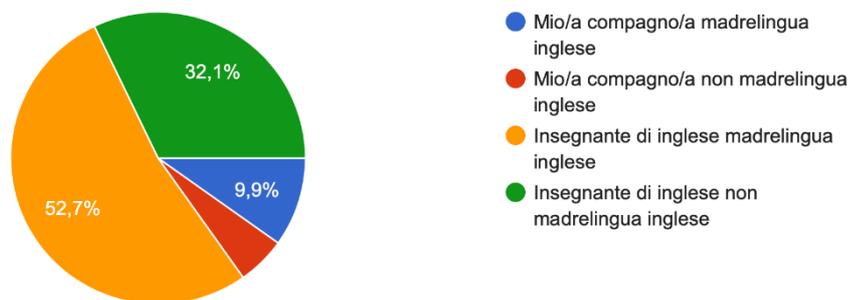


Figure 23

Looking at the pie-chart, it is evident that both native English-speaker and non-native English-speaker teachers have been indicated as those who scare students the most, being English mother tongue teachers, with a percentage of 52,7%, the most frequently chosen by learners.

This finding will be again taken into account in the following chapter, when discussing some methods to diminish students' fear of speaking.

More precisely, in table number 24, gender has been established as the independent variable and the query "In speaking within the school/University context, do you experience more anxiety talking with..." has been fixed as the dependent variable, in order to see the differences among females and males.

Here are the results:

		23) Nel parlare all'interno del contesto scolastico/universitario, provi più ansia a parlare con: (una sola risposta)			
		Insegnante di inglese madrelingua inglese	Insegnante di inglese non madrelingua inglese	Mio/a compagno/a madrelingua inglese	Mio/a compagno/a non madrelingua inglese
		% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga
2) Sesso	F	57,6%	26,5%	10,2%	5,7%
	M	41,8%	44,5%	9,1%	4,5%

Figure 24

Analysing the percentages, we can see that the majority of female respondents indicate the native English speaker teacher as the most anxiety-provoking person with whom they talk, while male participants opted for the non-native English speaker teacher. Anyway, both boys and girls agree in implicitly declaring that talking with peers (both native or non-native speakers) is way less anxiety-provoking than talking with teachers. This finding will be useful in the following chapter.

Having established class/year course as the independent variable and the same dependent variable, similar results have been obtained:

		23) Nel parlare all'interno del contesto scolastico/universitario, provi più ansia a parlare con: (una sola risposta)			
		Insegnante di inglese madrelingua inglese	Insegnante di inglese non madrelingua inglese	Mio/a compagno/a madrelingua inglese	Mio/a compagno/a non madrelingua inglese
		% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga
3) Classe/Anno di corso	1° anno di università	57,9%	26,3%	10,5%	5,3%
	1° superiore	66,7%	26,7%	6,7%	0,0%
	1ª media	56,4%	30,8%	7,7%	5,1%
	2° anno di università	71,4%	7,1%	7,1%	14,3%
	2° superiore	64,3%	21,4%	14,3%	0,0%
	2ª media	32,7%	59,6%	5,8%	1,9%
	3° anno di università	64,0%	16,0%	8,0%	12,0%
	3° superiore	55,2%	27,6%	6,9%	10,3%
	3ª media	56,8%	27,0%	10,8%	5,4%
	4° anno di università	60,0%	25,0%	15,0%	0,0%
	4° superiore	45,2%	35,5%	9,7%	9,7%
	5° anno di università	48,0%	24,0%	24,0%	4,0%
	5° superiore	48,6%	40,0%	8,6%	2,9%

Figure 25

As evident in the percentages of figure 25, the majority of students, regardless of their age, indicated native English speaker teachers as those who provoke more English Language Anxiety.

As a consequence, those who declare that talking with peers is anxiety-provoking are just a few students.

This perfectly reconnects with the preceding tables, in highlighting that talking with teachers is considered far more anxiety-arousing than talking with other students.

In addition to this, when asked “Is English Language Anxiety caused by your classmates/peers?” participants declared in a very high percentage of 84,2 that their colleagues are not the cause of their English Language Anxiety.

32) Ansia verso la lingua inglese è causata dal gruppo classe/compagni di corso?

355 risposte

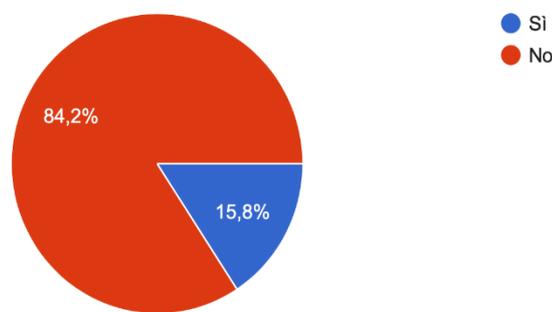


Figure 26

4.10 Early-starters are less influenced by English Language Anxiety

For what concerns the age factor, the first assumption of this study (Chapter 2, section 2.5) was that early starters experience less English Language Anxiety than those who approached English in older age.

This is the reason why, in the following table question number six (“At what age did you start studying English?”) has been established as the independent variable and statement number 24.4 (“When it comes to English, I feel frustrated and nervous”) is the dependent variable on which to see the impact of students’ starting-age on nervousness related to the English Language.

Here are the results:

		24.4) Quando si tratta di inglese, provo frustrazione generale / nervosismo			
		1	2	3	4
		% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga
6) A che età hai iniziato a studiare inglese?	1	0,0%	100,0%	0,0%	0,0%
	2	0,0%	100,0%	0,0%	0,0%
	3	56,2%	31,2%	12,5%	0,0%
	4	71,4%	19,0%	9,5%	0,0%
	5	57,1%	28,6%	12,2%	2,0%
	6	53,5%	26,2%	14,0%	6,4%
	7	50,0%	19,4%	25,0%	5,6%
	8	45,2%	35,5%	9,7%	9,7%
	9	28,6%	0,0%	57,1%	14,3%
	10	14,3%	28,6%	28,6%	28,6%
	11	71,4%	28,6%	0,0%	0,0%
	12	50,0%	0,0%	50,0%	0,0%
	13	0,0%	100,0%	0,0%	0,0%
	14	0,0%	50,0%	0,0%	50,0%
	20	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	100,0%
21	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	100,0%	

Figure 27

The percentages clearly indicate that, not surprisingly, early starters generally feel less nervous and frustrated compared to those who started studying English at an older age. By scrupulously looking at column number four (representing the answer “I always feel nervous and frustrated when using English”) it may be noticed that the percentage increases together with the respondents’ starting age.

4.11 Avoidance strategies

Talking about strategies to diminish English Language Anxiety, some noteworthy percentages have been found.

Firstly, when it comes to statement number 24.18 “I avoid going to class because it causes too much anxiety”, students who indicate answer number three “Often” and answer number four “Always” are only respectively 4,8% and 1,4% of all students examined.

Easy-to-read percentages are reported in the following bar chart:

24.18) Evito di andare a lezione perché mi crea troppa ansia

355 risposte

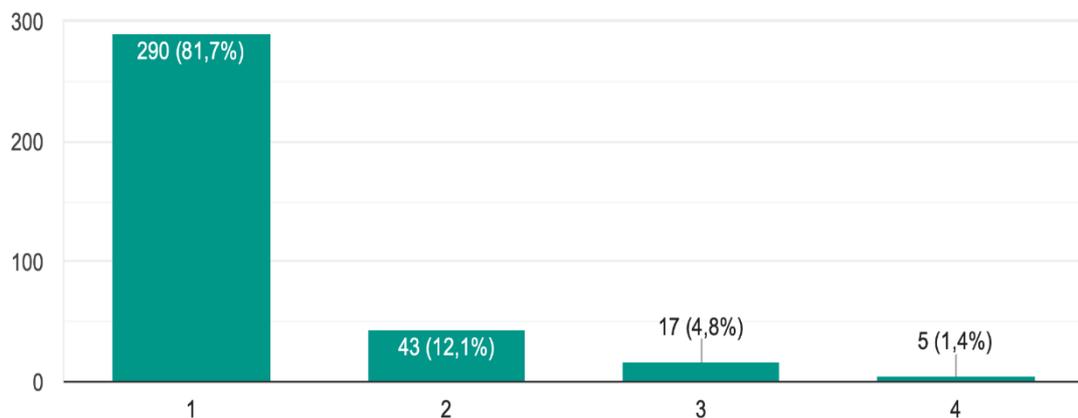


Figure 28

As can be easily seen in figure 28, just a few participants declared to avoid going to the English class because it causes them anxiety.

This is a more than positive finding that reveals that students have clearly understood the importance of going to classes and facing their anxieties.

Taking into consideration gender and age differences, it is now interesting to see whether the participants who declared to often/always skip the English lesson are equally distributed or not.

Firstly, by indicating class/year course as the independent variable and statement number 24.18 “I avoid going to class because it causes me too much anxiety” as the dependent variable, an interesting finding has come to light.

Here are the results:

		24.18) Evito di andare a lezione perché mi crea troppa ansia			
		1	2	3	4
		% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga
3) Classe/Anno di corso	1° anno di università	89,5%	5,3%	0,0%	5,3%
	1° superiore	93,3%	6,7%	0,0%	0,0%
	1ª media	79,5%	20,5%	0,0%	0,0%
	2° anno di università	92,9%	7,1%	0,0%	0,0%
	2° superiore	92,9%	7,1%	0,0%	0,0%
	2ª media	86,5%	9,6%	3,8%	0,0%
	3° anno di università	60,0%	12,0%	24,0%	4,0%
	3° superiore	86,2%	3,4%	10,3%	0,0%
	3ª media	70,3%	24,3%	2,7%	2,7%
	4° anno di università	85,0%	10,0%	5,0%	0,0%
	4° superiore	83,9%	3,2%	6,5%	6,5%
	5° anno di università	76,0%	20,0%	4,0%	0,0%
	5° superiore	82,9%	14,3%	2,9%	0,0%

Figure 29

As highlighted in figure 29, the most relevant percentage can be found in the third column. A total of 24% of the respondents currently attending the third year of University declared to often skip the English class because too anxiety-provoking.

To make matters worse, 4% of the just mentioned students admitted to always skip the English class to avoid anxiety.

For what gender differences are concerned, no significant percentages have been found regarding this same strategy.

Here are the results:

		24.18) Evito di andare a lezione perché mi crea troppa ansia			
		1	2	3	4
		% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga
2) Sesso	F	80,4%	12,7%	5,3%	1,6%
	M	84,5%	10,9%	3,6%	0,9%

Figure 30

By establishing the nominal variable of sex as the independent variable and the same strategy “I avoid going to class because it causes me too much anxiety” as the dependent one, it is easy to see that males and females reported very similar percentages.

Results reported in these last three figures show that, fortunately, avoidance strategies are barely ever put into practice by the students participating in this research.

Regardless of the age and gender of the respondents, the majority of learners chose answer number one “never” and number two “hardly ever” as their favourites.

As previously discussed (Chapter 1, section 1.3) learners’ active engagement with the language studied, in this case English, is something that really helps improving language competence and, as a consequence, it may facilitate the decrease of English Language Anxiety.

Continuing talking about this topic, another avoidance strategy that learners may use is not doing homework/not studying to bypass having to think about the English Language.

Fortunately, the participants of this research declared, in majority, to never or hardly ever do that, as reported in the following bar chart:

24.32) Non faccio i compiti/non studio per non dover pensare all'inglese (evitare)

355 risposte

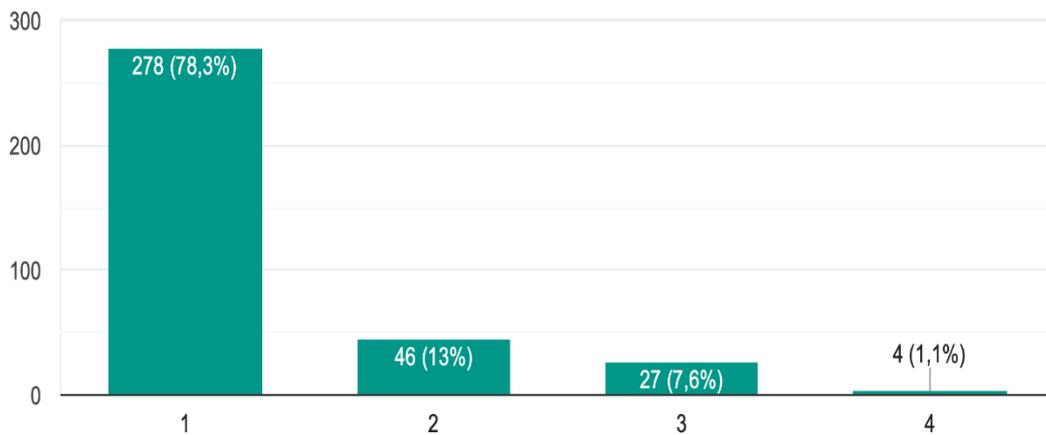


Figure 31

In further detail, by establishing class/year course as the independent variable and statement number 24.32 (“I do not do my homework/I do not study to avoid having to think about the English Language”) as the dependent one, it is possible to see the percentages per class/year course.

Here the table:

		24.32) Non faccio i compiti/non studio per non dover pensare all'inglese (evitare)			
		1	2	3	4
		% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga
3) Classe/Anno di corso	1° anno di università	84,2%	10,5%	0,0%	5,3%
	1° superiore	86,7%	13,3%	0,0%	0,0%
	1ª media	71,8%	23,1%	5,1%	0,0%
	2° anno di università	100,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%
	2° superiore	85,7%	14,3%	0,0%	0,0%
	2ª media	69,2%	17,3%	13,5%	0,0%
	3° anno di università	88,0%	8,0%	4,0%	0,0%
	3° superiore	79,3%	10,3%	10,3%	0,0%
	3ª media	45,9%	24,3%	27,0%	2,7%
	4° anno di università	85,0%	5,0%	10,0%	0,0%
	4° superiore	90,3%	6,5%	0,0%	3,2%
	5° anno di università	84,0%	12,0%	4,0%	0,0%
5° superiore	88,6%	5,7%	2,9%	2,9%	

Figure 32

This table confirms the preceding one, stating that, regardless of age and class attended, students taking part in this research are not used to adopt avoidance strategies to diminish their feeling of anxiety.

4.12 Students' suggestions: classroom-practicable strategies to diminish the level of perceived English Language anxiety.

Moving from negative to positive strategies, the participants have been asked about classroom-practicable strategies they consider useful to diminish their English Language Anxiety.

When asked question 36 "Among the strategies that can be used in the classroom environment, which one do you think can help diminish your level of anxiety?" students gave precise responses.

Considering all the 355 responses, students seem more or less equally divided between the four options, with a slight majority of learners who chose one of the alternatives, as the following pie-chart shows:

36) Tra le strategie attuabili IN CLASSE, cosa pensi che possa far diminuire il tuo livello di ansia? Scegli una sola t...a che ritieni più importante ed efficace.

355 risposte

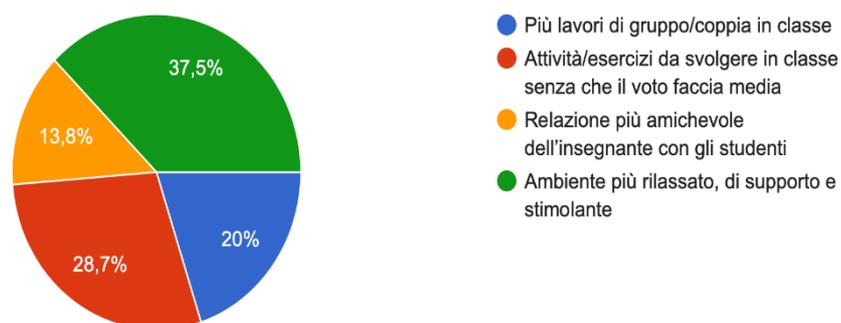


Figure 33

Question number 36 turned out to be of considerable interest and, above all, essential to answer the second set of the previously mentioned research questions.

Indeed, taking into consideration age differences, very interesting and significant findings have been made by establishing class/year course as the independent variable and the just mentioned question number 36 as the dependent one.

In the following table it is easy to see how students' answers change together with their age.

Here is the table with percentages:

		36) Tra le strategie attuabili IN CLASSE, cosa pensi che possa far diminuire il tuo livello di ansia? Scegli una sola tra le 4 risposte, quella che ritieni più importante ed efficace.			
		Ambiente più rilassato, di supporto e stimolante	Attività/esercizi da svolgere in classe senza che il voto faccia media	Più lavori di gruppo/coppia in classe	Relazione più amichevole dell'insegnante con gli studenti
		% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga
3) Classe/Anno di corso	1° anno di università	52,6%	21,1%	21,1%	5,3%
	1° superiore	20,0%	53,3%	6,7%	20,0%
	1ª media	5,1%	33,3%	43,6%	17,9%
	2° anno di università	57,1%	35,7%	7,1%	0,0%
	2° superiore	28,6%	35,7%	14,3%	21,4%
	2ª media	26,9%	23,1%	32,7%	17,3%
	3° anno di università	52,0%	32,0%	16,0%	0,0%
	3° superiore	44,8%	17,2%	13,8%	24,1%
	3ª media	21,6%	29,7%	32,4%	16,2%
	4° anno di università	50,0%	20,0%	30,0%	0,0%
	4° superiore	38,7%	35,5%	9,7%	16,1%
	5° anno di università	48,0%	32,0%	16,0%	4,0%
	5° superiore	51,4%	22,9%	11,4%	14,3%

Figure 34: Interaction between class/year course and favourite strategies to diminish anxiety within the classroom context.

As highlighted in figure 34, University students all agree in indicating “a more relaxed, supportive and stimulating classroom environment” (first column) as their preferred classroom-practicable strategy to diminish the level of English Language Anxiety.

Besides, almost none, among the participants currently attending University indicated “a friendlier relationship between teacher and students” as a valid strategy to diminish their English Language Anxiety.

Continuing to analyse figure 34, High School students currently attending the third, fourth and fifth year agree with University students in indicating answer number one as their favourite, while younger High School students, those currently attending first and second year, selected option number two (no-score activities/exercises to be carried out in the classroom) as a valid strategy to adopt to decrease the level of English Language Anxiety.

Another meaningful finding made by analysing figure 34 is that, like University students, participants currently attending Middle School all agree with indicating the same option that, in this case, is answer number three: more group/couple activities to be carried out in the classroom, emphasizing how important peers are during the teenage years.

Summing up, table 34 clearly highlights that, for what concern strategies judged as useful to diminish the level of English Language Anxiety, substantial differences have been found concerning students’ age.

The following table, created by establishing class/year course as the independent variable and statement number 39.9 “I like to do group activities” as the dependent variable, is in support of the just mentioned finding: Middle School students suggest to carry out more group/couple activities during the lessons, considered by them as useful to diminish their English Language Anxiety.

Here are the results:

		39.9) Mi piace svolgere attività di gruppo			
		1	2	3	4
		% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga
3) Classe/Anno di corso	1° anno di università	10,5%	21,1%	47,4%	21,1%
	1° superiore	6,7%	20,0%	46,7%	26,7%
	1ª media	5,1%	12,8%	28,2%	53,8%
	2° anno di università	42,9%	35,7%	0,0%	21,4%
	2° superiore	14,3%	21,4%	42,9%	21,4%
	2ª media	3,8%	7,7%	32,7%	55,8%
	3° anno di università	24,0%	40,0%	24,0%	12,0%
	3° superiore	17,2%	31,0%	34,5%	17,2%
	3ª media	0,0%	27,0%	40,5%	32,4%
	4° anno di università	30,0%	35,0%	25,0%	10,0%
	4° superiore	29,0%	29,0%	16,1%	25,8%
	5° anno di università	20,0%	20,0%	36,0%	24,0%
	5° superiore	28,6%	37,1%	20,0%	14,3%

Figure 35

As highlighted in the table, Middle School students particularly like doing in class group/couple activities. This is the reason why they indicated that specific strategy as the best option.

Indeed, the third and fourth column, respectively representing answers “I often like doing couple/group activities in class” and “I always like doing couple/group activities in class”, report really high percentages.

Continuing to analyse question number 36 “Among the strategies that can be used in the classroom environment, which one do you think can help diminish your level of anxiety?”, it is now appropriate to focus on the respondents’ answers taking into consideration their gender.

By establishing the nominal variable of sex as the independent variable and question number 36 as the dependent one, the following percentages have been achieved:

		36) Tra le strategie attuabili IN CLASSE, cosa pensi che possa far diminuire il tuo livello di ansia? Scegli una sola tra le 4 risposte, quella che ritieni più importante ed efficace.			
		Ambiente più rilassato, di supporto e stimolante	Attività/esercizi da svolgere in classe senza che il voto faccia media	Più lavori di gruppo/coppia in classe	Relazione più amichevole dell’insegnante con gli studenti
		% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga
2) Sesso	F	39,6%	28,6%	20,8%	11,0%
	M	27,3%	29,1%	25,5%	18,2%

Figure 36

By looking at the table, it is easy to see that the majority of female respondents indicated “a more relaxed, supportive and stimulating classroom environment” as the strategy that, according to them, could help in diminishing their English Language Anxiety.

In contrast, a large number of male participants declared that “no-score activities/exercises to be carried out in the classroom” could help them in perceiving less English Language Anxiety.

4.13 Students’ perspective on evaluation methods

Evaluation methods, such as oral tests, written tests and exams in general, have been always considered among anxiety-arousing factors.

Therefore, one of the query of the questionnaire was “Is English Language Anxiety connected to evaluation methods?” (question number 27).

As a response, 46,5% of students answered “yes”.

Even if that percentage does not represent the majority of respondents, it is anyway disturbing and something to quickly ameliorate.

In order to discover more specificities within the percentage of students who feel that their anxiety is caused by evaluation methods, class/year course has been established as the independent variable and question number 27 as the dependent one.

Here are the findings:

		27) Ansia verso la lingua inglese è causata dalle modalità di verifica?	
		No	Sì
		% casi riga	% casi riga
3) Classe/Anno di corso	di 1° anno di università	78,9%	21,1%
	1° superiore	60,0%	40,0%
	1ª media	41,0%	59,0%
	2° anno di università	78,6%	21,4%
	2° superiore	50,0%	50,0%
	2ª media	42,3%	57,7%
	3° anno di università	36,0%	64,0%
	3° superiore	58,6%	41,4%
	3ª media	40,5%	59,5%
	4° anno di università	65,0%	35,0%
	4° superiore	54,8%	45,2%
	5° anno di università	68,0%	32,0%
	5° superiore	54,3%	45,7%

Figure 37

Figure 37 shows the relationship between age (class/year course) and anxiety caused by assessment methods.

As highlighted in the table, the majority of students currently attending Middle School agree in saying that evaluation methods do cause them anxiety towards the English Language.

Totally different is High School and University students' perception. Indeed, the majority of older respondents declared that assessment methods are not responsible for their English Language Anxiety.

Is that because older students are more used to taking tests and doing exams?

More in-depth considerations will be reported in the following chapter.

To continue with the detailed analysis of evaluation methods as a source of English Language Anxiety, it is now appropriate to examine the percentage of students who consider assessment methods as anxiety-provoking, with respect to gender differences. This will also permit us to respond to the first set of research questions, those concerning differences between males and females in their experience with English Language Anxiety (See Chapter 2, section 2.2).

Therefore, the nominal variable of sex has been established as the independent variable, while the same question number 27 has been established as the dependent one.

Here are the results:

		27) Ansia verso la lingua inglese è causata dalle modalità di verifica?	
		No	Sì
		% casi riga	% casi riga
2) Sesso	F	57,6%	42,4%
	M	41,8%	58,2%

Figure 38

As visible from the table, the majority of male respondents (58,2%) declared that their anxiety towards the English Language is caused by evaluation methods.

On the contrary, the majority of female students (57,6%) reported that assessment methods do not generally operate in provoking them English Language Anxiety.

This substantial difference between male and female participants' answers will be better discussed in the following chapter.

4.14 Students' perspective on teaching techniques

After having talked about evaluation methods being potentially anxiety-arousing, it is legitimate to carry on the same kind of investigation concerning English teaching techniques.

Regarding the idea that "languages are a female thing" (Chapter 1, section 1.4), there is the impression that teachers tend to use methods that are more suitable for female students than for males.

To further investigate this reflection, sex has been established as the independent variable of the following table and question number 26 ("Is anxiety towards the English Language caused by teaching methods?") as the dependent one.

Here are the results obtained:

		26) Ansia verso la lingua inglese è causata dalle metodologie di insegnamento?	
		No	Sì
		% casi riga	% casi riga
2) Sesso	F	61,6%	38,4%
	M	44,5%	55,5%

Figure 39

By looking at figure 39 it must be said that, unfortunately, 55,5% of male respondents admitted that teaching methods are anxiety-arousing, while, on the contrary, the majority of female students (61,6%) considered teaching methods as appropriate and non-arousing anxiety.

4.15 English class Enjoyment: differences between males and females

In support of the previously shown tables, it is reasonable to ask whether English class enjoyment displays significant sex differences.

Indeed, by establishing gender as the independent variable and statement number 39.1 (“I have fun during English lessons”) as the dependent one, it will be easy to see the effects of gender on English class enjoyment.

Here are the results:

		39.1) Mi diverto			
		1	2	3	4
		% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga
2) Sesso	F	11,8%	32,7%	42,9%	12,7%
	M	19,1%	37,3%	28,2%	15,5%

Figure 40: Interaction between gender and English lesson enjoyment

As visible in table 40, 42,9% of female students said that they often enjoy English lessons, opposed to 37,3% of male students who declared to rarely enjoy the English class.

This datum perfectly connects with the previously made hypothesis that English classes are build up in a way that is more favourable for girls than they are for boys.

We will come back on this topic in the following chapter.

4.16 Anxiety towards being asked by the English teacher

Concerning the already mentioned great importance that teachers have through the whole English Language Learning process, the percentages obtained with query number 24.17 “Anxiety causes fear of being asked by the teacher” are not reassuring, since the English teacher is perceived by most of the respondents as an anxiety-arousing figure. Here are the results:

24.17) L'ansia provoca preoccupazione di essere interpellato dall'insegnante

355 risposte

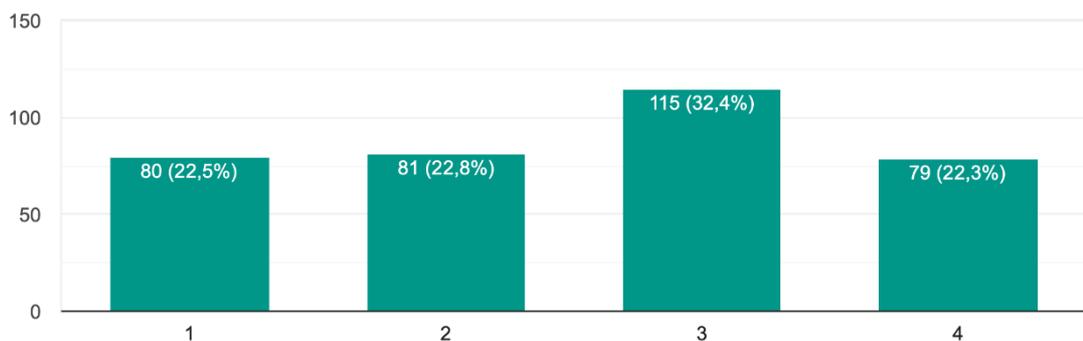


Figure 41

Indeed, more than half of the students declared that, due to anxiety, they are always (22,3%) or often (32,4%) worried about being asked by the teacher.

To answer the previously posed research question more completely, it is interesting to discover if this just mentioned fear is an effect that English Language Anxiety has both on females and males and whether there are distinctions considering age differences.

Firstly, by establishing the nominal variable of gender as the independent variable and question number 24.17 as the dependent one, the following percentages have been achieved:

		24.17) L'ansia provoca preoccupazione di essere interpellato dall'insegnante			
		1	2	3	4
		% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga
2) Sesso	F	21,2%	21,2%	33,1%	24,5%
	M	25,5%	26,4%	30,9%	17,3%

Figure 42

As evident from the table, percentages reported by males and females are pretty similar. However, females once again declared being more worried about the possibility of being asked by the teacher and, therefore, much deeper affected by English Language Anxiety than their male counterparts.

Secondly, by establishing class/year course as the independent variable and the same statement 24.17 as the dependent one, it is possible to see, one more time, the impact that age has on various forms of anxiety.

Here are the results:

		24.17) L'ansia provoca preoccupazione di essere interpellato dall'insegnante			
		1	2	3	4
		% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga
3) Classe/Anno di corso	1° anno di università	36,8%	21,1%	26,3%	15,8%
	1° superiore	33,3%	13,3%	40,0%	13,3%
	1ª media	17,9%	20,5%	33,3%	28,2%
	2° anno di università	28,6%	28,6%	14,3%	28,6%
	2° superiore	35,7%	35,7%	21,4%	7,1%
	2ª media	13,5%	13,5%	44,2%	28,8%
	3° anno di università	16,0%	32,0%	24,0%	28,0%
	3° superiore	24,1%	17,2%	31,0%	27,6%
	3ª media	13,5%	27,0%	40,5%	18,9%
	4° anno di università	20,0%	25,0%	35,0%	20,0%
	4° superiore	29,0%	12,9%	35,5%	22,6%
	5° anno di università	32,0%	32,0%	20,0%	16,0%
	5° superiore	22,9%	31,4%	28,6%	17,1%

Figure 43

Analysing figure 43, interesting age differences have been discovered.

To begin, the majority of University students agree in declaring being not particularly worried about the possibility of being asked by the teacher.

Conversely, the majority of younger learners, more precisely Middle School students, indicated to be affected by anxiety so much that they fear the teacher will interrogate them.

4.17 Students' experience with positive Anxiety

Another previously mentioned kind of anxiety which affects this study's respondents is positive Anxiety.

Looking at the following table, a very encouraging and reassuring finding can be noticed:

24.8) Provo ansia motivante e positiva che mi stimola a migliorarmi (competizione con me stesso/a)

355 risposte

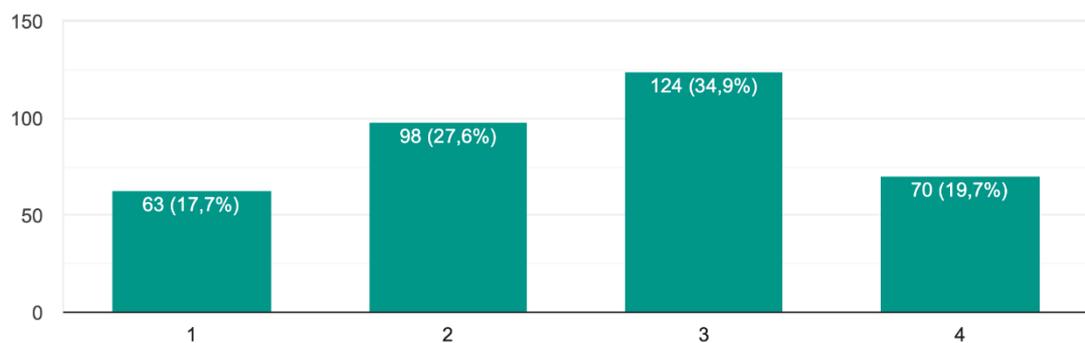


Figure 44

The majority of students responding to this questionnaire declared to often (34,9%) or always (19,7%) experience a kind of positive and motivating anxiety related to the English Language.

This kind of positive anxiety stimulates the majority of the participants to improve their skills and general English Language competence.

The whole situation can be seen as if the student competes with himself/herself.

Considering gender differences, it is interesting to discover whether males and females are both affected by positive stimulating anxiety or not.

By establishing the nominal variable of sex as the independent variable and item 24.8 of the questionnaire as the dependent one, the following percentages have been found:

		24.8) Provo ansia motivante e positiva che mi stimola a migliorarmi (competizione con me stesso/a)			
		1	2	3	4
		% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga	% casi riga
2) Sesso	F	16,7%	25,7%	38,0%	19,6%
	M	20,0%	32,7%	28,2%	19,1%

Figure 45

As highlighted in figure 45, females seem more affected by this kind of positive anxiety than their male counterparts.

Indeed, 38% of girls declared to often experience motivating anxiety that leads them to be more focused towards the objective of personal improvement.

In contrast, the majority of male respondent (32,7%) chose the option “hardly ever” to indicate how often they experience stimulating anxiety.

Once again, the percentages report variations connected to gender differences.

In particular, this last table supports the idea that being girls more affected by negative kinds of English Language Anxiety (as highlighted in the preceding tables of this chapter), they are, in response, more worried about doing well and ameliorating themselves.

5. Final discussion and conclusions

The objective of this study was that of answering the previously posed research questions.

Later in this chapter, those questions will be mentioned and then answered on the basis of what has been found through this investigation.

To begin with, the results obtained in the previous chapter thanks to the connection of different variables will be discussed.

Besides, some didactic and pedagogical implications that could result useful to teachers to ameliorate the whole English Language Learning process will be suggested.

Those educational recommendations include both theoretical and practical implications, together with various indications for teachers concerning some changes to make about their teaching methods.

It is appropriate to say that the results of this research revealed that the majority of the respondents are affected, more or less severely, by a certain form of English Language Anxiety, therefore they represented the ideal sample for this study.

To start, the following paragraphs will concentrate on the differences and points in common that have been found concerning males and females' perspectives.

5.1 Divergent perceptions caused by gender differences

First of all, no significant distinctions have been found between boys and girls when they were asked whether they usually experience a general feeling of anxiety towards the English Language since the majority of both male and female respondents declared to generally encounter this kind of anxiety.

A noteworthy finding, however, is that among those who declared of being affected by a certain form of English Language Anxiety, female participants' percentage is higher than that of males.

5.1.1 Gender differences concerning confidence in using the English Language

The results of this research demonstrate that the majority of participants in this study are not sure of themselves and their competence when dealing with the English Language.

Therefore, at first glance, lack of confidence can surely be indicated as something that, regarding the English Language, males and females have in common.

Deeply analysing the results taking into consideration the gender of the respondents, the first unexpected finding comes to light.

Generally speaking, without any sexist preconception, females are commonly believed to be more suitable and fluent in speaking Foreign Languages, therefore, the expected results saw female participants indicating themselves as usually confident.

Contrary to what is expected, the majority of female participants not only declared to not being confident in the use of the English Language, but also the results showed that they are even less self-reliant than male respondents are.

Moreover, the majority of female participants also proclaimed to not being confident in using the English Language even if they are well prepared for the lesson or exam.

On the contrary, males declared that, if aware of their adequate preparation, they are mostly confident for what concerns English.

5.1.2 Girls, due to English Language Anxiety, never spontaneously intervene during the lesson

One of the findings of the research is that there are clear and precise gender differences concerning anxiety to spontaneously intervene during the English lesson.

Particularly, the majority of male participants declared not having concerns in spontaneously intervening during the English lessons, while girls chose the opposite option, admitting to never instinctively intervene, even when they are sure that what they would like to say is an appropriate thing, consistent with the subject matter.

This perfectly connects with what has previously been said about girls' lack of confidence and it slowly leads to the first outcome of this study, that will be presented later in this chapter.

5.1.3 Gender differences concerning the difficulty to show the real maximum potential

This investigation demonstrates that anxiety, in its debilitating effects, might impede learners from showing their English Language maximum potential, as declared by the majority of the participants in this research.

Considering gender differences, again substantial and decisive disagreement has been found.

Taking into account the results analysed so far, it can be said that female respondents are deeply affected by English Language Anxiety, more than their male counterparts declared to be.

Therefore, also regarding the problem of not being able to show their real maximum potential, girls admitted to be more subjected to this issue than boys are.

Until now, male participants showed to be less affected by English Language Anxiety than female respondents and, furthermore, boys demonstrated to be more confident when working with the English Language.

Having to name something that surely does not help neither males nor females, one cannot avoid to mention the well-known fear of making mistakes, that, unfortunately, affects both boys and girls who took part in this research.

For that reason, later in this chapter, some suggestions regarding this last discussed problem will be furnished to teachers.

5.1.4 Girls are affected by fear of looking bad in front of others due to English Language Anxiety

After having analysed the participants' answers, it is safe to say that another discrepancy between the two genders has been found.

Specifically, it has been discovered that, not surprisingly, girls go through the fear of looking ridiculous when using the English Language in front of their classmates.

On the contrary, male respondents showed more indifference concerning what other people may think about them and, consequently, less apprehension towards the fear of looking bad in front of others.

This impeccably connects to the previously mentioned distinction between males and females which saw boys as more confident than girls.

Males and females are different not only from a biological point of view, but also regarding their inclinations and preferences towards evaluation methods, teaching techniques and useful strategies to diminish the level of perceived English Language Anxiety.

Therefore, in the following paragraphs, a brief presentation of all the just mentioned aspects will be provided.

5.1.5 Gender differences concerning preferred strategies to diminish Foreign Language Anxiety

The majority of the female respondents declared that, having the possibility to choose a specific classroom-practicable strategy that could be employed to diminish their level of English Language Anxiety, they would propose to create a more relaxing and stimulating classroom environment.

Differently, male participants, to minimize their level of anxiety, would like to carry out more classroom activities without having to worry about the mark, instead of being constantly evaluated.

This would permit them to train their skills and, at the same time, to perceive less English Language Anxiety that is, as already seen in the previous chapter, frequently caused by the fear of being negatively evaluated by the teacher or the most specific fear of bad grades.

5.1.6 Gender differences concerning male and female students' perception of evaluation methods

Continuing talking about the subject of evaluation, it is of great importance to discuss evaluation methods, which have always been considered as highly anxiety-arousing factors.

Considering gender differences, again another discrepancy between males and females' perspectives has been found.

Indeed, the majority of girls declared that their English Language Anxiety is not provoked by oral or written tests, as main sources.

On the contrary, the majority of male respondents blamed assessment methods for their high level of perceived anxiety towards English.

How can this difference in the perception of the same evaluation methods be explained? It is highly probable that assessment methods have been calibrated with reference to female students and their preferences, not thinking about what could be in accordance with male students' inclination.

Since the beginning of this chapter, this is the first case in which males show a higher level of anxiety towards something related to the English Language.

Therefore, later in this chapter, some rightful methodological suggestions about the creation of evaluation methods that could be suitable for everybody, regardless of gender, will be proposed.

5.1.7 Differences concerning male and female students' perspective on teaching techniques and English class enjoyment

Another crucial matter on which a substantial divergence between boys and girls has been found is that regarding teaching techniques and the degree of English class enjoyment.

Teaching methods are abundant and, thanks to this survey, there has been the possibility to investigate female and male participants' degree of liking and impressions on teaching techniques that are employed in English Language classes.

Male respondents revealed to be consistent with their negative judgement on teachers' choices.

Indeed, the majority of males declared that their English Language Anxiety is caused by teaching methods implemented in the classroom, such as activities that do not represent their ideal way of working with English or the teacher's way of explaining, that does not help males in reducing their level of anxiety. Therefore, all these things are described as anxiety-provoking factors.

Moreover, as expected, male participants declared to hardly ever enjoy the English classes.

Opposite is girls' perception of teaching techniques.

Indeed, contrarily to males, the majority of female participants declared that teaching methods are adequate and they do not cause them English Language Anxiety, therefore, it is easy to imagine that they declared to often or almost always enjoy the English classes.

After having seen so many discrepancies and totally different opinions regarding females and males' inclinations and preferences towards useful strategies to diminish English Language Anxiety, evaluation methods and teaching techniques, later in this chapter, this topic will be resumed to propose some useful educational implications that will hopefully bring male learners to the same level of English classroom procedures appreciation that girls declared.

5.1.8 Female students are more affected by Positive Anxiety than males are

As mentioned in previous chapters, Positive Anxiety can represent that incentive that leads students to feel that burning desire to improve their English language competence or just one specific skill.

This can happen in the form of a competition with peers or with oneself.

In any case, as other forms of anxiety, Positive Anxiety is susceptible to individual variations based on many factors, including gender.

The majority of the students responding to this questionnaire declare to experience this kind of stimulating anxiety.

For that reason, it has been possible to investigate differences on this topic among males and females.

It is no surprise to find that females are more affected by this positive kind of anxiety, too.

Considering what has been said so far, it is clear that, as a response to their high levels of debilitating anxiety, girls try their very best to compensate and, therefore, are more susceptible to stimulating anxiety too.

On the contrary, males show more indifference for what self-improving is concerned and declare to hardly ever experience this kind of positive anxiety that leads to competition with peers or oneself.

Taking into consideration the main objectives of this investigation, all the findings that have been mentioned and discussed so far suggest differences between male and female participants that could not be ignored.

What about age differences?

5.2 Age difference triggers different opinions

Concerning the second set of research questions, it must be said that age difference turned out to be another determinant factor of this research.

Although with respect to many topics (e.g. fear of making mistakes, fear of looking ridiculous in front of others, the choice of the most anxiety-provoking skill and the most anxiety-provoking person to talk with) students currently attending different years of schooling gave similar responses which created homogeneous percentages, the age factor proved to be very significant in the participants' perception of English Language Anxiety.

5.2.1 Different age leads to a different perception of the educational context

The educational context is one of the most influencing factors, considered to be responsible for provoking English Language Anxiety by a great number of students taking part in this survey.

However, several dissimilar opinions have been collected and were originated from learners of different ages.

Younger participants, those currently attending Middle School and High School, described the English Language class context as anxiety-arousing, something extremely impacting on them in a negative way.

On the contrary, older students, those currently attending University, declared themselves as indifferent to the context or used to it.

This completely different perception of the same factor reveals how much age can be significant.

Some considerations have been made: teenage students usually perceive schooling as an obligation imposed by others. They may study English because it is a compulsory subject at school and not because they chose to or because they like it.

Different is University students' situation: they chose to enrol to a determined course, therefore, studying and being immersed in an educational context is something that they want and expect.

5.2.2 Different age leads to different suggestions regarding classroom-practicable strategies to diminish the level of perceived English Language Anxiety

Linked to this just mentioned topic, the findings also show differences in strategies proposed by University students and Middle School students to diminish the level of perceived negative anxiety.

The majority of the participants currently attending University proposed to establish a more relaxing and stimulating classroom environment that will substantially help in the decrease of feelings of anxiety.

A different strategy has been proposed by Middle School students.

As typical of their age, they asked for more opportunities to stay in close contact with their classmates by indicating "more group/couple activities", that they declared to particularly enjoy, as the best strategy to diminish their level of English Language Anxiety.

5.2.3 Different age leads to a different perception of evaluation methods

Evaluation methods are a matter that, one more time, creates discrepancies among the respondents.

The relationship between age of the participants and evaluation methods brought results that, once again, demonstrate the huge impact that age can have.

A different age leads to different behaviour and perception toward evaluation methods such as oral or written tests.

Indeed, the majority of Middle School students, differently from those currently attending High School and University, described evaluation moments and methods as highly anxiety-provoking.

This is presumably because Middle School students are less used to exams and tests and, therefore, oppositely to older learners, they do not know how to precisely handle a particular kind of anxiety: test anxiety.

On the contrary, instead, the majority of High School and University students described assessment techniques as not responsible for their English Language Anxiety.

Besides, it is appropriate to say that another divergence triggered by age differences is that “being asked by the teacher” (although without any evaluation purpose) is perceived and described by Middle School students only, as highly anxiety-provoking.

Again, age impact is very strong and incontestable, since neither High School students nor University students indicated the possibility of being asked by the teacher as an issue that particularly worries them.

This topic will be re-examined later in this chapter, since some useful suggestions for Middle School teachers will be furnished.

It is now opportune to concentrate on factors that are considered as anxiety-stimulating by the majority of students, regardless of age and gender.

5.3 Speaking is considered the most anxiety-provoking skill by the majority of students, regardless of gender and age

Taking into account age differences, the majority of respondents, from Middle School to University, agree in electing speaking as the most anxiety-stimulating among English Language skills.

In the same way, according to male and female participants, no differences have been found in declaring that speaking is the most anxiety-provoking skill.

Therefore, having to indicate a thing that all the respondents in this study have in common, one cannot refrain from mentioning speaking anxiety.

Moreover, considering the results and findings of previous researches from all over the World, it is safe to say that fear for speaking is something that almost all Foreign Language learners have in common.

5.4 Fear of making mistakes is something that unites the majority of students, regardless of age and gender

Another weak point that, regardless of age and gender, unites the greater part of students is fear of making mistakes.

Undoubtedly, this fear turned out to be the one which presented the most alarming and surprising results. Indeed, the percentage of respondents who declared to be scared by the possibility of making mistakes is exaggeratedly high.

Considering that, later in this chapter some necessary suggestions to future and present teachers will be given to try to ameliorate this disturbing situation that includes almost all Foreign Language learners.

5.5 Previously made assumptions check

It is curious and appropriate now to verify whether the previously made assumptions (chapter 2, section 2.5) turned out to be correct or erroneous.

The first supposition concerned the connection between the age factor and English Language Learning, since it is commonly believed that early starters experience less negative debilitating anxiety than those who approached the Foreign Language in older age.

As can be easily noticed in figure 27 (chapter 4, section 4.10) this assumption proved to be correct.

Indeed, early starters declared to generally experience less nervousness and frustration towards the English Language than their colleagues who approached the language at an older age.

Continuing, the second assumption concerned the common belief that sees languages as generally more appreciated by girls than they are by boys.

Therefore, female learners will demonstrate more interest, enjoyment and sense of adequacy during the English classes.

This second supposition also turned out to be correct.

Indeed, females declared to usually have fun during the English class and, by indicating evaluation methods and teaching techniques as non-anxiety-provoking, demonstrated to experience a sense of adequacy during the English classes, opposite to males.

The third and final assumption concerned the fact that, since females are generally described as more susceptible to critics and less confident, as a consequence, debilitating anxiety will have a greater impact on them.

This last theory also turned out to be right.

Indeed, female respondents demonstrated to be affected by negative English Language Anxiety in a stronger way than males are.

Besides, girls indicated to usually experience several debilitating effects caused by negative anxiety than their male respondents hardly ever encounter.

5.6 Final answers to research questions

It is now the time to answer the previously posed research questions on the basis of what has been found as a result of this investigation.

The first set of research questions dealt with gender differences:

- 1) Are there any differences between males and females in the way they experience English Language Anxiety? What are the factors contributing to English Language Anxiety from female or male students' perspective?

The findings of this study revealed that the sex of the respondents can produce evident differences concerning the level of perceived English Language Anxiety, both negative and positive, therefore, it can be said that gender does have an impact on English Language Learning Anxiety.

More specifically, female students reported a higher general level of English Language Anxiety, less confidence than males, even when aware of their best preparation, and

more apprehension about making mistakes and spontaneously intervening during the English class.

Besides, they consider the fear of being negatively judged by the teacher and the fear of being laughed at by other students as anxiety-provoking factors, in contrast with male participants.

All that has been just listed substantially contributes in preventing girls from showing their maximum potential towards the English Language. This does not happen to boys, that are less severely and deeply affected by English Language Anxiety.

Furthermore, male learners declared that the factors causing them high levels of negative debilitating anxiety are, aside from speaking activities, evaluation methods and teaching techniques, believed to play a negative role in the whole learning process, in contrast with female learners' declarations.

The factors contributing to English Language Anxiety that both male and female participants have in common are the context, more specifically the English Language Learning environment and speaking activities, together with the already mentioned fear of making mistakes that unites all the students.

In further detail, different genders proved not to change English learners' perspective towards speaking and reading activities, that have been indicated as respectively the most and the least anxiety-provoking skills by both male and female participants.

Along with the just mentioned negative aspects, at the same time females, differently from males, demonstrated to experience positive anxiety too.

Specifically, they report a significant higher level of English Language Enjoyment than their male counterparts.

Therefore, it is relevant to highlight that female participants, having reported more emotion overall in the English Language classroom, usually encounter both more positive and negative feelings.

Answering this first set of questions, it can be concluded that the whole English Language Learning process is seen and experienced differently by males and females, since anxiety-arousing factors are also different.

The second set of research questions dealt with age differences:

- 2) What are the factors contributing to English Language Anxiety from Middle School, High School and University students' perspective? Are there any differences in preferred strategies to diminish English Language Anxiety?

Firstly, it is necessary to say that differences triggered by the age of the respondents concern students' judgement on the English class learning context.

It has been indicated as non-stimulating anxiety by University students only. Differently, younger learners described it as anxiety-arousing and as one of the factors contributing to English Language Anxiety.

Another difference in the factors contributing to English Language Anxiety is that Middle School students indicated evaluation methods as one of the main anxiety-provoking factors, contrary to what older learners said.

Continuing, other differences between University students and Middle School students have been found in the strategies the respondents illustrated as their favourite to beat English Language Anxiety.

Indeed, older learners lingered on the idea of creating a more relaxed and stimulating learning environment, while Middle school students proposed group activities as the best solution.

The present research was an attempt to obtain a general overview of English Language learners' experience of anxiety, taking into consideration their age and gender.

Thanks to the findings of this study, it is safe to say that anxiety is an intricate topic, very susceptible to subjective variations.

Besides, the ultimate aim of this research is to make teachers aware of the fact that their role is paramount in the English Learning process.

Therefore, in the following paragraph, some pedagogical implications that may result useful to teachers to improve the whole English Language Learning process will be suggested.

5.7 Didactic and educational suggestions

To start, since English learning context has been indicated by the majority of students as something that is anxiety-provoking and, therefore, a noteworthy cause of anxiety, an adequate didactic implication for teachers might be that, as a first thing, to listen to their students' opinions and to change what they indicate as anxiety-provoking in the classroom environment.

The aim is to create an always stimulating and relaxing environment that, evidently, can help learners in lowering the affective filter that, consequently, will permit them to show their maximum potential. This just described kind of context maintains learners' motivation always high and leads students to an effective way of learning.

A starting point could be that of changing the classroom setting.

Sometimes, it happens that the desks disposition, decorations, lightings, temperature (too cold or too hot) provoke a nervous state in the students, that can come from anything, even small things like not enough comfortable chairs or lack of cleanliness in the classroom, so that students cannot wait to be outside of the classroom.

Frustration resulting from a not appropriate classroom environment is something that, unfortunately, really exists.

Letting the learners choose where to sit, letting them decorate the walls, and other little adjustments are examples of easy ways from where to start empowering students that, as a response, will be aware of the fact that the professor has trust in his/her students' decisions.

Since several contrasting opinions have been collected concerning teaching methods and techniques, from boys and girls and students of different age, it is appropriate to concentrate on this topic and give some suggestions to teachers.

A pedagogical implication drawn from the results of this study is that of employing teaching methods that are suitable to every person attending the class.

How can this result be achieved?

In order to do this and to make the acquisition of the English Language more effective and pleasant, teachers should be conscious of what are their students' desires, their

ultimate and short term objectives, necessities, more preferred activities, acquired learning styles and habits.

Language education methods, to be enjoyable and less frustrating, have to be organized on way to completely correspond to students' expectations.

Learners want to feel that every didactic activity "fits them like a glove", that everything as a sense and that each exercise is necessary to reach the goal.

Learners should never feel like they are doing anything unnatural and unnecessary.

Considering all this, teachers should choose topics that can be interesting both for females and males, considering their age too.

This implies that, even if a class were to be formed by a majority of females and a minority of males, the topics covered must not be of exclusive female interest, but must reflect the interests and, above all, the needs of the whole class.

An even better solution, coming back to the already briefly discussed theme of "students empowerment" is to let the learners choose and develop a list of topics they would like to examine and converse about.

Meaningful students involvement is fundamental to make learners feel important and considerate an integral part of the learning process and not just the recipient of a series of concepts.

This approach allows students to gain the ability and authority to make decisions and implement changes in their syllabus, avoiding the usual disadvantageous practice where teachers are ultimately responsible for all activities and processes.

In brief, teachers should share their power with students.

With reference to the findings of this study, the already mentioned Cooperative Learning is what seems suitable for Middle School students between 11 and 13 years old, considering their previously expressed preferences and suggestions about strategies to diminish the level of anxiety.

Indeed, it is good to point out that only a small percentage of the respondents indicated classmates as a cause of their anxiety. Moreover, the majority of participants declared that, usually, there is a nice collaborative spirit among peers that should be cultivated.

A paramount thing to always keep in mind when dealing with education is that during Middle School age, boys and girls are used to team up and join forces against what is outside their “comfort zone”.

Several pedagogical and developmental psychology studies remind us how important group identity and a supportive peer group are during the teenage years.

Therefore, bringing up the already mentioned Vygotskyan theory of *the Zone of Proximal Development*, working together in a cooperative way seems to be the best style to adopt when approaching teenagers.

Teachers must always consider who their students are, therefore, they must be aware that their teaching techniques, methods and approach are better to be flexible and to adapt to the learners they are guiding.

Every little thing matters, even materials adopted, that should be various (to give an example, technology can help in keeping the students’ attention always high) on way that every learner can approach to the English Language in his/her favourite learning style.

For the same reason, the information given should be clear, comprehensible and offered through different modalities, such as sight and hearing.

As already mentioned in chapter 1, professors should always keep in mind what the *Universal Design for Learning (UDL)* suggests: to offer students various means of representation, expression and involvement.

An anxiety-arousing context, indeed, may also depend on the kind of approach that teachers have with their students.

It is not only a matter of physical context; it is also the atmosphere where students are immersed in.

Learners can perceive a tense, judgemental, and full of negative competitiveness atmosphere and it will not facilitate in any way English Language Anxiety decrease.

As already mentioned before, teachers play a crucial and determinant role in incrementing or mitigating learners’ anxiety.

To best perform his/her paramount role, a teacher should know who are the students, what are their preferences regarding teaching techniques, evaluation methods and

teachers' behaviour, since the teacher is more responsible than anyone else in working on anxiety-arousing factors.

His/her objective should be to perfectly organize the language learning process on way that English classes will not be considered frightening anymore.

Regarding all that has been said so far with reference to speaking activities, considered to be the most anxiety-arousing among all the other activities, an easily achievable solution that teachers should adopt could be that of creating more moments during which students can talk to each other to train their abilities.

Since both native and non-native English speaker teachers are considered by the majority of the respondents as the most anxiety-provoking people to talk with, and since the greater part of respondents indicated speaking with other students as less anxiety-provoking, this can be viewed as a way to develop speaking skills and to discover some useful communication strategies without the fear of being judged by teachers and, on the contrary, having friends' support.

Besides, peers can facilitate enjoyment and, as a consequence, speaking hopefully will not be considered as much frightening as it is now.

It must be said that the fear of oral communication has already been accepted as a psychological phenomenon.

Well-known physical symptoms of speaking anxiety comprehend trembling voice, shaking, sweating, blushing, fast heart beating, etc.

Similar to previous studies' findings, through this research it has been discovered that fear of making mistakes is still present in languages students' minds.

Unfortunately, it is a fear that all the participants in this study have in common, regardless of their gender and age.

To diminish or remove this kind of anxiety, the first thing that languages teachers should do, starting from elementary school, is to invest time in clearly explaining students that making mistakes is part of the learning process.

It is fundamental to immediately remove learners' fears and to make students understand that it is natural to be sometimes wrong.

Language learners must have a clear understanding of the fact that, to learn a language in the best way possible, it is necessary to actively engage with the target language.

The idea of looking bad in front of others should not be considered by students anymore, since effectively learning a language involves the act of taking risks and try to communicate using the Foreign Language.

Teachers should instil in their students' minds the notion that it is better to attempt, fail and finally learn that to never try.

Again, a friendlier and more empathic relationship of the teacher with his/her students may help to reach this goal, as well as making students feeling totally understood.

Since the majority of male respondents and the greater part of Middle School students indicated evaluation methods as anxiety-provoking, it is appropriate to again concentrate on this topic.

There are plenty of things to say concerning evaluation methods, but one paramount concept must be clear: evaluation is, as inherent in its characteristics, something that creates anxiety, therefore, teachers should present various kinds of evaluation methods to their students and let them familiarize with all of them.

A further step would be that of empowering students letting them chose which one to adopt in order to lower their level of anxiety.

Relatively to Middle School, a didactic suggestion to ameliorate this situation is that of furnishing students with more examples, such as facsimile, of what they are going to be asked during English oral or written tests, as frequently happens in High Schools and Universities.

The ultimate objective is to form Languages students that are familiar with any kind of test.

Evaluation methods and types of examination must be well-known by students, that, as a response, will only concentrate on the English Language, without having to divide and lower their attention.

In short, assessment methods, not to be considered as anxiety-arousing factors, must be well-known by every student much before taking the test.

With respect to male students, it is opportune to reiterate the assumption concerning classroom procedures, materials and methods that seem to have been erroneously calibrated on female students' characteristics and preferences.

The participants in this survey proved to be aware of which are the factors that engendered their English Language Anxiety and are conscious of the fact that their performance is usually negatively affected, being anxiety not letting them show their maximum potential.

Like previous studies on Foreign Language Anxiety, the findings of this research confirm that anxiety plays a debilitating role through the whole process of English Language learning, regardless of age and gender of the students.

However, anxiety can negatively affect students' English learning experience in several ways, depending on individual subjective variations.

Regarding all the considerations that have been made, a sense of community is what seems to work best for several students to reduce those feelings of negative anxiety, together with a relaxed and stimulating classroom environment and a solid empathic relationship with English teachers, considered to be agents for change.

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