

## ANXIETY AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING FOR YOUNG ADOLESCENTS

*La ansiedad y el aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera desde la  
perspectiva de adolescentes*

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**Abstract:** This paper aims at analyzing the most common factors that produce anxiety in a group of young adolescents learning English as a foreign language as part of the outreach project “ED-2884” in the Pacific Regional Center of University of Costa Rica. In order to do this, a modification of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by Horwitz et al. (1986) is used. The study indicates that language anxiety is provoked mostly by impromptu speaking and the pressure to obtain good grades; meanwhile, listening exams and mistake making do not seem to represent a problem to these learners.

**Key Words:** adolescence, English, language instruction, psychological factors.

**Resumen:** Este trabajo analiza los factores más comunes que le producen ansiedad a un grupo de adolescentes a la hora de aprender inglés como lengua extranjera en un programa perteneciente al proyecto de Acción Social “ED-2884” de la Sede del Pacífico de la Universidad de Costa Rica. El instrumento empleado en este estudio está basado en la escala para ansiedad en el aula de lengua extranjera (FLCAS, por sus siglas en inglés), elaborado por Horwitz et al. (1986). El estudio indica que la ansiedad por el aprendizaje de un idioma es mayormente producida por el habla espontánea y la presión por obtener buenas calificaciones, mientras que los exámenes de comprensión auditiva y equivocarse no pareciera generar problema para estos aprendices.

**Palabras clave:** adolescencia, inglés, enseñanza de idiomas, factores psicológicos.

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## 1. Introduction

Foreign language learning brings many benefits along. Nowadays, as we take part of a globalized world, being able to speak at least two languages permits people to communicate with the other citizens of the world allowing them to reach more possibilities than those that speak only one language. Particularly, the English language has become an international one, spoken in, if not all, almost every country in the world, permitting business transactions, political interactions, academic mobility, tourism and others to be much easier to achieve for those who master it. In fact, “English is now the language most widely taught as a foreign language” (Crystal, 2003: 5), which demonstrates its relevance in the world of today.

Despite these benefits, learning another language can also be hard. From this perspective, several aspects such as time, economy, age, previous instruction, self-esteem, among others, can make it difficult for learners to accomplish their linguistic goals; in this sense, some of the factors that have proven to be an obstacle in foreign language performance are affective factors such as motivation, self-confidence and anxiety. (Krashen, 2009).

Furthermore, adolescence is a crucial stage for individuals’ growth, as Salyers & McKee (s.f: 1) claim: “During this stage of life, young adolescents experience more growth than any other time in their life except for infancy”. Indeed, these changes include not only physical but intellectual and emotional changes; therefore, it would not be unusual for these changes to interfere in their learning process, which includes foreign language learning.

Hence, this article will deal particularly with the effect of anxiety for a group of teenagers in their process of learning English as a Foreign Language.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. *The Project: ED-2884*

The University of Costa Rica has different campuses around the country; these campuses offer programs to the community through outreach projects in different categories. In this sense, the project ED-2884 “Idiomas para la Comunicación Internacional” offers foreign language courses to the community of the Central Pacific Region of Costa Rica at the Arnoldo Ferreto Segura Campus, in Puntarenas province.

This project has provided the inhabitants of this region the opportunity to study different languages without having to leave their hometown and spend large amounts of money as they do so. Since 2012, it has offered courses of English, French, Portuguese, Italian, Mandarin and LESCO (Costa Rican Sign Language) but mainly, English.

For López (2014), the project coordinator, it is important that universities facilitate language-training opportunities to communities outside the capital city, especially because these communities are usually highly impacted by tourism, which reveals a clear necessity for learning additional languages. This is why this project’s purpose is to be part of those language learning possibilities: for the community’s development and the social gap reduction.

#### 2.1.1. *English program*

The school year in this project is divided in four periods of ten weeks each, every language program is distributed through six courses; that is, one year and a half, the amount of hours

per course depends on the program in particular. The English language happens to be the most requested by the population, mainly because of academic and professional reasons; besides, such situation is not unusual since “No other language has spread around the globe so extensively”, says Crystal (2003: 71).

Furthermore, the English program is offered to the most varied population in terms of age: children, teenagers and adults. In the case of adults, the courses are taught twice a week during a three-hour session each; that is, a total of 60 hours per course. On the other hand, *English for Kids* is a program of six participative courses of 20 hours each, its purpose, according to López & Rodríguez (2017), is to increase students’ motivation during the learning process as well as to contribute in the development of positive attitudes towards the English language as they learn in an enjoyable atmosphere.

It is important to say, that other specific courses have been developed depending on the necessities detected in the population, which is the case of the most recent program: *English for Teens*.

#### 2.1.1.1. *English for Teens*

Particularly, the program directed to teenagers has been specifically created for students who finish the program called *English for Kids* between 10 and 12 years old; therefore, when students get to this stage, they have been taking English courses in this project for an average of 18 months and they are no longer young kids.

Nonetheless, the courses for children are participative; the focus is not to evaluate them quantitatively but to keep a progress of their learning at their own pace as they input the language with no grade pressure whatsoever. Therefore, once they have concluded the program for kids, a new program, originally requested by parents, begins. The program lasts two more years; the first year is for conversational workshops that intend to improve their oral skill through the analysis and discussion of topics of interest for the students, the second year is conformed of a series of four courses that develop specific abilities each: pronunciation, public speaking, listening comprehension and writing.

Moreover, these courses require one more hour per class and include a qualitative evaluation with specific activities, which demand more commitment from students. So far, three generations have initiated this program: the first one has already concluded it successfully, the second one is half way and the third one has recently begun it; the second generation is the source for this study.

### 3. Theoretical framework

#### 3.1. *Adolescence*

Notably, during teenage years individuals go through several changes; in fact, according to the American Psychological Association, “The physical changes that herald adolescence (...) are the most visible and striking markers of this stage. However, these physical changes represent just a fraction of the developmental processes that adolescents experience” (2002: 5). No wonder, young people face many challenges in different aspects of their life as they try to discover the people they will become.

Furthermore, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent’s Facts for Families (2008) establishes that adolescence is divided into three stages: early, middle and late adolescence, each stage has specific characteristics for physical, cognitive and social-emotional

development. In this sense, early adolescence covers ages from 11 to 13 years old, middle adolescence from 14 to 18 and late adolescence covers the period of 19 to 21 years of age. Needless to say, the multiple changes individuals experience through the stages of adolescence, might interfere with several aspects of their life; for example, the development of their sense of identity plays a relevant role in terms of handling their emotions which, at the same time, would help them cope with their life experiences:

When adolescents are able to specify that they feel “anxious” about an upcoming test or “sad” about being rejected by a possible love interest, then they have identified the source of their feelings, which can lead to discovering options to resolve their problem. American Psychological Association (2002: 17).

Undoubtedly, adolescence plays an outstanding role in the development of people’s lives; it is a time of changes, which can lead to confusion that, at the same time, might affect teenagers in their learning processes, as in the case of language learning.

### 3.2. *Affective factors in foreign language learning*

Many factors take place in the process of foreign language acquisition: social, biological, cognitive, and of course, affective; overall, it is a complex process. Regarding this matter, Du (2009) mentions that “there are also some affective factors in language learning that are like a filter which filtrates the amount of input in learners’ brains” (p. 162); indeed, it is not possible to refer to affective factors in language learning without mentioning the Affective Filter Hypothesis. Such hypothesis, claims Du (2009), was first proposed by Dulay and Burt in 1977 and was later incorporated to Krashen’s five input hypotheses in 1985. “The Affective Filter hypothesis states how affective factors relate to the second language acquisition process” (Krashen, 2009: 30).

The way this theory works in language learning is explained by Du (2009) as follows:

Comprehensible input may not be utilized by L2 acquirers if there is a “mental block” that prevents them from fully profiting from it. The affective filter acts as a barrier to acquisition. The filter is up when the acquirer is unmotivated, lacking in confidence, or concerned with failure. The filter is down when the acquirer is not anxious and is trying to become a member of the group speaking. (Du, 2009: 1)

In other words, affective factors could facilitate or, on the contrary, hinder the process of learning another language even though students receive the adequate linguistic input. About this, Du mentions that: “affect includes motivation, attitude, anxiety, and self-confidence”. (2009: 1). That is to say:

The Affective Filter hypothesis captures the relationship between affective variables and the process of second language acquisition by positing that acquirers vary with respect to the strength or level of their Affective Filters. Those whose attitudes are not optimal for second language acquisition will not only tend to seek less input, but they will also have a high or strong Affective Filter--even if they understand the message, the input will not reach the part of the brain responsible for language acquisition, (Krashen, 2009: 31)

Therefore, the effect of affective factors in language learning is to be taken seriously by language instructors since it can determine in a great deal, the success of second language acquisition. Naturally, learning another language is a hard process by itself; indeed, to be immersed in that process and own a low self-esteem, have no motivation for goals achievement, demonstrate a negative attitude and high anxiety levels, would definitely interfere in the learning process in despite of the well-directed methodology and amount of input received in a classroom. Consequently, “The Affective Filter hypothesis implies that our pedagogical goals should not only include supplying comprehensible input, but also creating a situation that encourages a low filter” (Krashen, 2009: 32).

### 3.2.1. Anxiety

Definitely, everyone has experienced anxiety at some point of their lives due to different situations: presenting a test, making an important decision, the first day of school, a new job, are just some of the experiences that might cause people to feel anxious. Actually, “a certain amount of anxiety is normal and necessary; it can lead you to act on your concerns and protect you from harm” (Rector, Bourdeau, Kitchen & Joseph-Massiah, 2008: 4).

Moreover, these authors explain the *fight or flight* response, which is a normal anxiety response: “Increased adrenaline causes us to feel alert and energetic, and gives us a spurt of strength, preparing us to attack (fight) or escape to safety (flight)” (2008: 4); in other words, experiencing anxiety is fine. Nonetheless, if the anxiety responds to fears that are only part of one’s imagination, that is negative anxiety (García, 2011: 44).

In addition to the stated above, Marsh (2015) claims that, “anxiety is a word that we use to describe feelings of unease, worry or fear” (p. 4), she continues on to saying that anxiety “incorporates both the emotions and the physical sensations we might experience when we are worried or nervous about something” (2015: 4). That is to say, that anxiety can provoke not only emotional but also physical effects.

In sum, anxiety can push people to overcome obstacles, this is a good type of anxiety, but it can also provoke symptoms that inhibit people and keep them for accomplishing their goals, such is the case of language anxiety.

#### 3.2.1.1. Language anxiety

Indeed, learning a new language can produce a sensation of anxiety; in fact, “for many students, language class can be more anxiety-provoking than any other course that they take” (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991: 296), that is how important the role of anxiety is in the language classroom. In this sense, Krashen (2009: 31) comments that: “Low anxiety appears to be conducive to second language acquisition, whether measured as personal or classroom anxiety”. As a result, if students handle low levels of anxiety, the more likely they will be to achieve their learning task and produce the language.

Because of the particular effects it has, the role of anxiety in the language classroom must be addressed specifically in terms of language learning and not as something broad and general. Regarding the above, García (2011) explains how Gardner & MacIntyre -1991- were the first to demonstrate that language anxiety is different from other types of anxiety and that there is a negative relation between anxiety and certain tasks in a foreign language. These authors, says García (2011) define language anxiety as the fear that takes place when a student has to

perform in a different language; such fear is directly related to the target language itself and not to the performance in general. In other words, it is "the apprehension experienced when a situation requires the use of a second language with which the individual is not fully proficient" (Gardner & MacIntyre -1993- in Du, 2009: 163).

Additionally, particular attention should be given to *situational* anxiety since it is closely related to experiences developed in ESL and EFL contexts, "it consists of the anxiety which is aroused by a specific type of situation or events such as public speaking, examinations, or class participation" (Ni, 2012: 1509); certainly, these are day-to-day situations students face in the language classroom. Therefore, it becomes relevant to facilitate friendly language-learning environments where students generate positive experiences as they deal with new vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar rules that differ in a great deal from the ones in their mother tongue.

Considering the reasons why this occurs, Ni (2012) says that it is due to learners' competitive natures and that they "tend to become anxious when they compare themselves with other learners in the class and found themselves less proficient" (p. 1510). Of course, lack of self-confidence contributes to this, if students do not feel they are linguistically competent, this would inhibit their participation in the classroom but also, "a learner may meet anxiety because of the lack of skills and the ability to interact in appropriate manner inside and outside classroom" (Edinne, 2013: 25).

All things considered, MacIntyre & Gardner (1991) summarize the negative effects of anxiety in second and foreign language instruction; for example, students are less likely to volunteer and participate in oral activities, they avoid difficult linguistic structures and might feel they are left behind; therefore, they will not produce as much. Thus, not only is oral production affected but there is a limitation in listening comprehension, as well as in vocabulary retrieval; consequently, those negative implications would extend to learners' tests and grades. Undoubtedly, language anxiety is worth of attention.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Participants

The participants for this study belong to a group of 12 students, 8 girls and 4 boys in early and middle adolescence, with ages from 12 to 14 years old. These students are sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth graders of public high schools from Puntarenas main county and started taking English courses in this project in 2015; back then, they were part of the project's program *English for Kids*, a special program of the project that provides participative courses for children. At the time of the study, they were taking the last of four conversational English workshops and most of them had been classmates in this program for at least one year.

### 4.2. Instrument

The instrument used for this study is based on the *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale* (FLCAS) by Horwitz et al. (1986): the most widespread instrument for measuring language anxiety. This instrument originally includes 33 items that cover aspects related to teachers' feedback, exams, error correction, pressure for good grades, and public speaking; however, because of the purposes of this study and the specific characteristics of this population, the instrument administered has been narrowed down to 27 items and particular aspects of interest have been included in the form. In order to answer it, students have to

choose one of five possibilities for each item: *strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree* or *strongly disagree*.

Also, the questions were translated into Spanish and adapted to a much simpler language, directed to teenagers “because the original scale was designed for adult students” (Ay, 2010: 85).

First, the instrument includes a section for general information of the participants that intends to gather their current age and school year, gender, their community and high school. Secondly, there is the list of questions and the instructions of what they should do.

### 4.3. Procedure

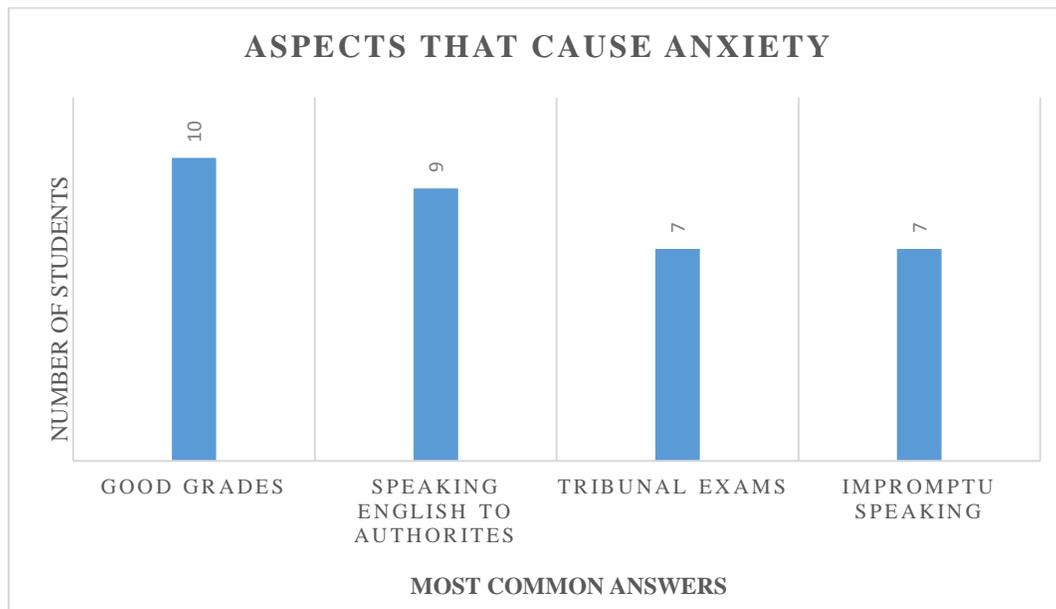
Participants were provided with a copy of the instrument, which they completed during a regular class session. For this, the teacher in charge facilitated the time from her class to do so and contributed explaining what the instrument consists of.

At the time to analyze it, the answers for every item were counted separately, so it was possible to know the number of students that agree or disagree with each aspect, as it is shown below.

## 5. Results

First, in order to have a general view of the results, a brief description is presented; then, a more detailed analysis will be carried out.

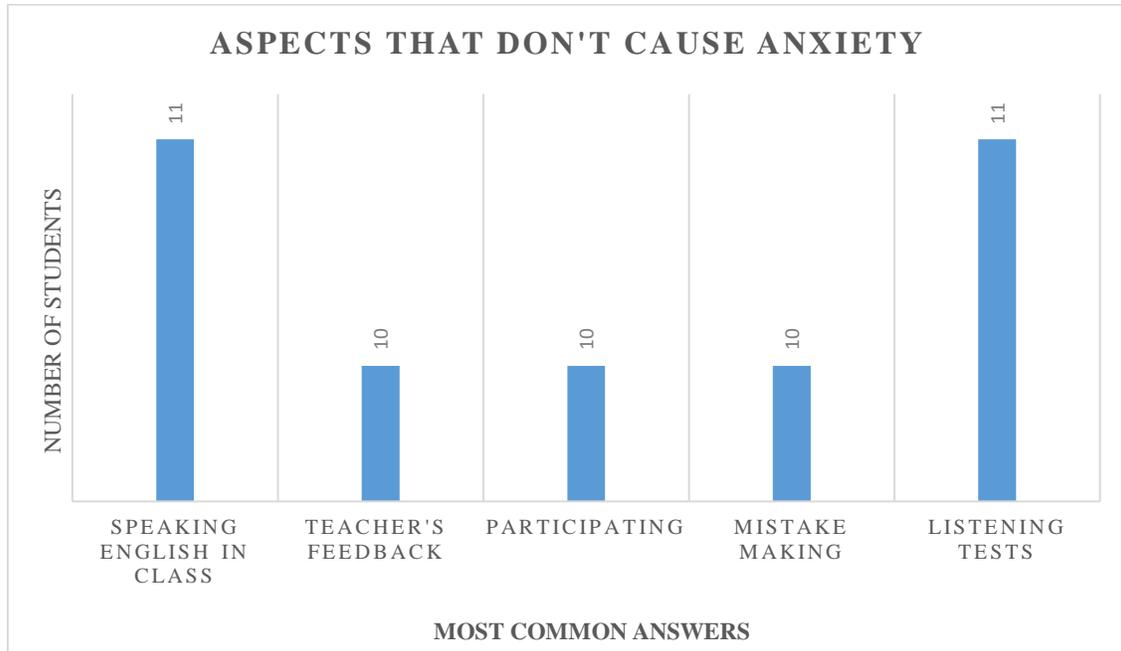
**Graph 1.** Aspects that produce anxiety



First, the aspects in which most students agree or strongly disagree as being aspects that make them feel anxious or nervous are: obtaining good grades, speaking in the target language to

authorities such as the project’s coordinator, tribunal exams and speaking without previous preparation. On the other hand, the aspects that do not seem to generate anxiety in the group are mentioned in Graph 2:

**Graph 2.** Aspects that do not produce anxiety



As demonstrated above, most students disagree when asked if the aspects shown in the graph cause them any kind of anxiety. Speaking English as part of the regular class routine, as well as listening tests, do not tend to provoke anxiety in these learners, neither participating nor making mistakes, although these last two do not provoke anxiety for a lower number of students.

## 6. Analysis discussion

Affective factors have already been explored in this population. A previous study by López (2016) covered the topic of motivation and beliefs when they were still taking part in the program for kids. The importance to mention this is that according to that study, these learners have a positive attitude towards the target language; in addition, they commented they were taking the courses because of something beyond their parents command or wish; that is, they like the courses. Therefore, the analysis of anxiety gets much more interesting under these circumstances: to know if there are any factors that still produce anxiety even though they have a positive attitude towards the language.

The analysis of this instrument will be categorized into three sections based on the students' answers: aspects that produce anxiety, aspects that do not provoke anxiety and aspects that seem to have mixed effects in students.

### *6.1. Aspects that produce anxiety*

Definitely, a factor of importance for participants of the study has to do with the worriedness that produces them the possibility to fail the course, all the students agree on this. Similarly, there is a perception for the majority of the group that they need to get good grades; in this case, ten students consider they always have to obtain good grades in the course. This could be good in the sense that they are aware of the importance of studies, of keeping good grades and do well in school or in academic activities in general, but it also shows the pressure they feel on themselves if this does not occur which, at the same time, would make them anxious. In a similar fashion, most students feel nervous when they do not understand what their teacher is saying, only five students do not agree with this. In addition, something that produces nervousness in most of these learners is having to speak English in front of the project's coordinator, only 3 out of the 12 claim that they do not feel nervous at all whereas two believe this situation is simply not relevant to them. Apparently, not being able to communicate with a person of authority to them, like another teacher, produces anxiety to these teenage students, feeling they might make a mistake or that they are being evaluated could encourage this idea. Teachers are aware of this, that is why "The effective language teacher is someone who can provide input and help make it comprehensible in a low anxiety situation" (Krashen, 1982/2009: 32).

The previous idea is not too distant from the scenario perceived when learners are being graded: seven of these individuals affirm to feel nervous when they are in a tribunal exam, in this kind of test, students' speaking skills are evaluated by a group of two to three professors. Of course, a situation like this could weaken anybody's confidence; besides, as García (2011) points out when quoting Horwitz et al., (1986) exams represent one of the main anxiety sources.

Interestingly, however, all except for one has a preference for written tests over oral ones while three of the students do not care about the type of exam they take. This is interesting because, as García (2011) mentions, anxiety used to be related to oral exams, but when the students are asked to choose between written and oral tests, most of them prefer the latter; perhaps having to prepare for an oral test or actually taking it is not an issue to them, but being evaluated might certainly be.

Equally important, 7 out of 12 students claim that they need preparation for their speaking activities; otherwise, they would panic. Also, the same number of students affirm that sometimes they get so nervous when they speak that they tend to forget what they want to say; this is not unusual when considering that both situations require for the student to be exposed at some level.

Overall, the aspects that make students anxious in their English class deal with the pressure to obtain good grades and results, speaking to a teaching authority or not understanding what they are saying and being forced to speak when unprepared.

### 6.2. *Aspects that do not produce anxiety*

Interestingly, speaking English in class is among the aspects that do not seem to influence the students' anxiety levels. In spite of claiming that they feel nervous when they have to speak unprepared, they also claim that they always feel confident when they speak English in class. Based on this information, it seems that what generates lack of confidence is related to those activities that require some in advance-preparation, like tests or formal presentations, but not regular speaking activities in which they can express freely what they think or want. Furthermore, teacher feedback does not upset most of the group, they do not feel bothered if they do not understand the teacher's corrections; nevertheless, two of the students do seem to find it troublesome; even though this percentage is a minority, it is still a factor to pay attention to.

In fact, the answers indicate that the group presents a generally good level of confidence because everyone except for two do not feel embarrassed if they have to talk in front of other students or participate in class; actually, they volunteer. Equally, the same number of students indicate that they are not worried about making mistakes when speaking and they do not feel the subject rules are too many. In all these situations, ten of the people under study agree on not having any trouble whereas the rest, which is represented in only two students, feels the opposite way.

Similar scenario occurs for listening tests. In such case all the group except for one feels confident when presenting that kind of exam; apparently, this type of test does not produce the same effect as the oral tribunals in this group even though it is known nowadays that anxiety is not exclusive for oral tests but for all kinds of exams (García, 2011).

Equally important is to highlight that the majority of the group disagrees when asked if they think their classmates speak better than they do; then again, this fact reveals confidence on their own speaking abilities, which is supported by the comfort they would feel talking with native English speakers. In fact, this represents another aspect in their instrument, and 8 out of 12 believe that they would probably feel very comfortable speaking the target language with foreigners.

Gladly, students do not feel reluctant to attend English lessons; on the contrary, they would not mind taking further English courses.

### 6.3. *Mixed opinions*

At this point, it is necessary to refer to those aspects that have proved to produce mixed effects on students; in other words, aspects for which half the group feels anxiety and the other half does not. This is important since it means that even though they have studied the language and gained confidence, there are still factors that produce anxiety to some learners. One of these aspects is that half prefers group activities rather than individual activities whereas the other half affirms not having any problem with the kind of activity developed in class.

Similarly, half the group claims not to feel any anxiety when having to present something in front of the class; on the contrary, the other half does feel anxiety to some extent when doing so. Considering that it is quite common to feel some anxiety when speaking in public, this anxiety may not necessarily be a wall for performing well in the target language but a normal feeling for this kind of activities.

## 7. Conclusions

After this analysis, it is possible to reach the following conclusions: first, in spite of the fact that students have been studying English in this modality since late childhood, they still experience feelings of anxiety in the classroom; especially, in aspects regarding grades and speaking with no *in advance*-preparation.

On the other hand, however, some aspects that are usually known to cause anxiety do not provoke it in this generation of students; for instance, the possibility to make a mistake, teacher's feedback and listening tests. Nonetheless, there are usually two people who have opposite opinions from the rest of the group regarding these aspects, these might be the same two individuals; therefore, it is important to identify them in order to pay more attention to the strategies that can be implemented for them to increase their self-confidence and reduce their anxiety levels. Perhaps they are the youngest students in the group or a particular factor in their lives makes them feel this way.

Also, even though the number of participants for this analysis is small, the study generates valuable outcomes for the work developed in the project and it facilitates insights that will improve English teaching for the future generations of the teenage program as well as other programs.

Indeed, by identifying what causes anxiety, teachers can take action on different strategies to reduce that feeling among students and achieve a stress-free environment that facilitates learning by strengthening confidence, something that is particularly important in this stage of life: adolescence.

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## Appendix A

Instrument modified from FLCAS



¡Hablamos de cómo te sentís estudiando inglés!

¡Hola! El siguiente es un instrumento para conocer tu opinión sobre aspectos afectivos en la enseñanza del inglés: cómo te sentís, te gusta, no te gusta, si tu opinión es la misma a cuando empezaste a estudiar, etcétera. La información proporcionada es confidencial y nos servirá para mejorar en el futuro.

### I Parte. Información general

Edad: \_\_\_\_\_ Sexo: F ( ) M ( )

Comunidad en la que vivís: \_\_\_\_\_

Colegio al que asistís: \_\_\_\_\_

Año que cursás: \_\_\_\_\_

**II Parte.** Lee los siguientes aspectos y marcá la opción con la que te sintás más identificado o identificada, siendo:

MD = Muy de acuerdo

D = De acuerdo

M = Me da lo mismo (ni de acuerdo ni desacuerdo)

DS = En desacuerdo

MDS= Muy en desacuerdo

Aspecto	MD	D	M	DS	MDS
Usualmente <b>no</b> me dan ganas de ir al curso de inglés.					
Me siento muy seguro (a) cuando hablo inglés en clase.					
No me molestaría tomar más cursos de inglés.					
Me preocupa si repruebo el curso.					
Me distraigo mucho durante el curso de inglés.					
Siento pánico cuando tengo que hablar en inglés sin haber preparado algo antes.					
Nunca me siento seguro (a) de mí mismo (a) cuando hablo en inglés.					
Me molesta cuando no entiendo las correcciones de la profe.					
Usualmente me siento muy tranquilo (a) cuando hago exámenes del curso de inglés.					
Me pongo nervioso (a) cuando no entiendo lo que la profe está diciendo.					
Me da pena cuando tengo que hablar en inglés delante de otros estudiantes.					
No me preocupa cometer errores cuando hablo inglés.					
Me da vergüenza ofrecermelo como voluntario (a) para participar en clase.					
Sólo participo si la profe me lo solicita.					
Me parece que mis compañeros hablan inglés mejor que yo.					
Me pongo nervioso (a) cuando sé que la profe me va a preguntar algo.					
Aunque me prepare bien, siempre siento que me pongo algo ansioso (a) cuando tengo que presentar algo en frente del grupo.					
Siento que las reglas que tengo que aprender para inglés son muchas.					
A veces me pongo tan nervioso (a) cuando hablo, que se me olvida lo que iba a decir.					
Probablemente me sentiría muy cómodo (a) hablando con personas nativas del inglés.					
Me siento nervioso (a) cuando tengo que hablar inglés en frente de la coordinadora.					

Me siento nervioso (a) cuando me están calificando en exámenes por tribunal.					
Prefiero trabajos en grupo que individuales.					
Me siento muy seguro (a) cuando realizo pruebas de escucha.					
Prefiero los exámenes escritos a los exámenes orales.					
Siempre tengo que sacar buenas calificaciones.					
Siento preferencia cuando las pruebas son de gramática.					

¡Muchas gracias!



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