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КНИЖЕВНИ И КУЛТУРОЛОШКИ ИСТРАЖУВАЊА

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## **ПАЛИМПСЕСТ**

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ВО МЕЃУНАРОДНОТО НАУЧНО СПИСАНИЕ „ПАЛИМПСЕСТ“  
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## LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND SPEAKING ANXIETY IN MACEDONIAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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**Abstract:** A number of studies have investigated the connection between students' proficiency level and their speaking anxiety, for which mixed results have been presented. Namely, some claim that the more proficient the learner, the lower their anxiety level and vice versa, however, some disagree. This study aims to investigate the possible relationship between language proficiency level and speaking anxiety, contributing to the existing literature for better understanding of the core issues that top and average students experience. Results revealed that the more proficient participants (C1 level) are more relaxed compared to the less proficient participants (B1 level) with the former classified as experiencing "low anxiety" while the latter - "moderate anxiety". The main issue of the less proficient participants is found to be low self-confidence during speaking activities, which further supports the majority of the past findings, while grammatical correctness is something that high proficient participants are most aware of during speaking activities. The results also showed that both groups do not feel particularly frightened to speak right after receiving corrective feedback.

**Keywords:** *proficiency; anxiety; speaking; self-confidence; feedback.*

### 1. Introduction

Language is expressed in four ways: reading, speaking, writing and listening. These four language skills are also defined as the macro skills of communication for any language, including English. Speaking is considered as the most crucial in learning a second language (Bordios et al., 2022), but practicing this skill carries some challenges for second language learners. Understanding the grammatical rules and having a wide range of vocabulary when studying a second language may not be enough for a student to be able to express themselves properly. There are some psychological difficulties that a student can experience while speaking, one of them being anxiety. Anxiety is said to be one of the most disputed and complex concepts, as there are various internal and external factors that influence it. Nurmansyah and Nurmayasari (2018) define anxiety as "a feeling of frustration, being threatened, apprehension, tension, and worry" (p. 120) and they argue that anxiety plays a role in affecting especially low proficiency level students in learning

English, particularly in speaking. Establishing the relationship between anxiety and foreign language learning has been a topic for investigation for decades. For example, Horwitz et al. (1986) talk about the importance of understanding the foreign language classroom anxiety and that it negatively influences the process of foreign language learning. Their work has influenced many future studies, since they recognized the foreign language classroom anxiety as a factor in foreign language learning. Young (1990) also claims that language anxiety can greatly influence the language learning process. Similarly, Woodrow (2006) states that “anxiety experienced in communication in English can be debilitating and can influence students’ adaptation to the target environment and ultimately the achievement of their educational goals” (p. 309). Wilson (2006) noticed that his students in the classroom felt discomfort and were aggravated, especially when asked to speak in class, which further supports the connection between anxiety and foreign language learning. However, Marcos-Llinás and Garau (2009) claim that there are different views on language anxiety and that some studies show that some level of anxiety is not so important in foreign language learning, as some research shows. For Frantzen and Magnan (2005), the different levels of anxiety can give different results depending on whether the student has previous knowledge of the language or not. Spielmann and Radnofski (2001) give a different approach to anxiety, arguing that the potential benefits of it have not been thoroughly researched, because “most communicative teaching methodologies strive to reduce the perceived causes of language anxiety in order to create a more relaxed—and, it is believed, more productive—learning environment” (p. 259). They claim that prior beliefs about language learning and personal expectations are linked to the level of anxiety and that anxiety does not play a significant role in students’ learning. Marcos-Llinás and Garau (2009) also claim that “some level of language anxiety may not be as negative and debilitating as traditionally believed” (p. 105). There are also discussions among researchers about the many variables that play a role when investigating anxiety in students while speaking, mainly students’ gender (Bordios et al., 2022) and their oral proficiency level (Nurmansyah and Nurmayasari, 2018) since they claim that anxiety affects lower proficiency students in learning a new language, especially while speaking. Additionally, research has been done on personality traits, such as introversion and extraversion, which were found to be associated with students’ anxiety, with extroverts being slightly less anxious due to their preference for socializing and communication (MacIntyre and Charos, 1996). Other affective factors in language anxiety suggested by researchers are the perfectionist tendencies learners exhibit, since those learners are more concerned about making errors while speaking, which increases their anxiety (Gregersen and Horwitz, 2002), learners’ stylistic preferences (Rahim, 2024), and emotional intelligence, which has a negative correlation with foreign language anxiety (Kurt and Savuran, 2016).

Additionally, research has been done on corrective feedback related to students’ anxiety as well. For example, Zhang and Rahimi (2014) state that corrective feedback (CF) may be necessary when students are not able to distinguish between their native and the target language when exposed to the meaningful input and that anxiety plays a great role in how students react to CF. Hussain et



al. (2023) were interested in the effectiveness of CF on speaking anxiety and they argue that the effect is positive. Furthermore, Seyedebrahimi et al. (2022) claim that the effects of different types of feedback on speaking anxiety can vary and that dissimilar types of CF could have potentially distinct effects across different proficiency levels. Claims on the effects numerous types of CF have on speaking anxiety have been made by many investigators, with most of them focusing on oral corrective feedback. As there can be multiple levels of anxiety, Mufidah's (2018) discussed the effects of oral CF on anxiety and claims that it can have a different impact on the different levels of language anxiety. Moreover, Lee (2016) stated that students' speaking anxiety could be reduced by teachers' oral CF by influencing their affective variables. The benefits of implicit and explicit types of feedback on low- and high-anxiety learners were also investigated and Rassaei (2015) claims that recasts would be most effective for low-anxiety learners. Finally, the effects of immediate CF and delayed CF on learners' speaking fluency and speaking anxiety was investigated as well, with claims that the latter could have a positive effect on learners' anxiety level (Akhtari and Azad, 2023).

The results of some of the mentioned studies and their importance will be presented in the next section.

## 2. Literature review

Bordios et al. (2022) investigated 18 males and 42 females who were all from the Second Year College of Education in Notre Dame of Midsayap College and found that they have a high level of anxiety when speaking in English, and there was no significant difference between the participants when grouped according to their gender. The reason for this, they claimed, is that the participants were not confident and were afraid of negative criticism. Toubot et al. (2017) found that Libyan EFL fourth-year students generally experience moderate to high level of speaking anxiety, due to mostly the same factors: low self-confidence and fear of negative evaluation. Krashen stated that students report that talking in a foreign language in a classroom causes them anxiety the most (as cited in Young, 1990).

Other studies investigated the correlation between the proficiency level and students' speaking anxiety. Brown et al. (2001) investigated 320 Japanese students enrolled in the Intensive English Language Program at Temple University Japan in Tokyo, and they focused on several learning variables one of which was anxiety. Classifying the students into high, middle, and low proficiency groups and using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, they discovered that high proficiency students seemed to be less anxious on average than the other groups. Jin et al. (2015) investigated the effects of foreign language anxiety on foreign language proficiency over time within English and Japanese learning contexts. They found that "anxiety changes had a significantly negative, but weak, correlation with the development of overall proficiency and the proficiency in subskills such as reading or speaking, for both English and Japanese, suggesting the interference of anxiety with proficiency levels" (p. 41). When it comes to anxiety being considered as an unfavourable feeling when studying a foreign language, Wijewantha (2021) investigated a group of 60 second year undergraduate students who were a mixed ability group representing both rural and urban areas of the

country. Their first language was Sinhala and they all learned English as a core subject during the first two years of their respective degree program. The author claims that according to the results, students' speaking anxiety influences the language proficiency of students, because it has a negative effect on language acquisition and prevents learners from getting involved in some speaking activities. Sa'diyah et al. (2021) obtained the data for their study from 5th and 7th semester students of the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, English Language Education Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember, which had a total of 30 EFL students. They concluded that there is a relationship between language proficiency and anxiety, more specifically, more proficient students showed lower levels of anxiety compared to less proficient students, who tend to be more anxious when speaking. They claimed that anxiety can cause students issues regarding their ability to speak to foreigners or it can negatively influence their speaking tests. Interestingly, Marcos-Llinás and Garau (2009) investigated 134 first-, second-, and third-year college students who were learners of Spanish and students from a variety of degree programs enrolled in 11 courses of Spanish as a foreign language at a midwestern American university, and found that advanced learners have higher levels of anxiety than beginners and intermediate learners. That is why, they claim, some anxiety is necessary for learners to do well, which is in contradiction to previous studies which claim that anxiety is related to learning problems. In addition, their study showed that "students with high levels of anxiety did not necessarily exhibit lower course achievement in comparison to students with low levels of language anxiety, as concluded in previous studies" (p. 94). Furthermore, a study conducted by Kondo (2009) focused on the correlation between language anxiety and English proficiency among Japanese university students and by investigating 64 participants, Kondo found that higher anxiety did not necessarily correspond to lower proficiency levels. This study challenges the assumption that anxious students are always less proficient and claims that other factors such as self-confidence and learning environment play a significant role.

When it comes to teachers' feedback, Mouhoubi-Messadh and Khaldi (2022) investigated sixteen EFL undergraduates who took part in focus group interviews, and their findings showed a significant impact of the teachers' role in alleviating much of the anxiety experienced by the participants in EFL speaking. They also revealed that students' reduced self-confidence results in heightened anxiety and according to their research, the teacher has to show the students how relevant making mistakes is for their improvement. Moreover, Hussain, et al. (2023) investigated 150 Pakistani undergraduate students enrolled in a public college, to study the effects teachers' CF has on second language speaking anxiety. They found that incorporating CF in ESL education can significantly reduce speaking anxiety. Seyedebrahimi et al. (2022) investigated how various CF methods influence speaking anxiety among 90 Iranian IELTS candidates at different proficiency levels and found a significant reduction in speaking anxiety across proficiency levels, suggesting that implementing various CF types can effectively alleviate learners' speaking anxiety. On the other hand, Zhang and Rahimi (2014) mention that some investigators claim that corrective feedback may be harmful

to learning a second language because it can increase anxiety among students, however, their research discovered that students with both higher and lower anxiety levels believed that their errors should often be corrected, as it helps the effectiveness of their learning. This is confirmed by researchers such as Gamlo (2019) who asserted that students prefer receiving CF during speaking activities as they believe it could enhance their speaking proficiency.

Many researchers have established a solid relationship between the proficiency level and anxiety, however, there is a significant gap in North Macedonia on this specific topic, and since the native language and culture can be a variable influencing anxiety, this study will shed some light on how Macedonian learners feel while speaking English and whether there is a relationship between proficiency level and anxiety. We are interested in how students react to feedback as well, and because of this, we have decided to investigate the following research questions:

1. Is there a connection between the language proficiency level and speaking anxiety in Macedonian learners of English as a foreign language?
2. Does corrective feedback influence students negatively?

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Participants**

For the purpose of this small-scale research, 18 Macedonian learners of English, aged 18, found through social media, were investigated. Their native language is Macedonian and the Republic of North Macedonia is their current residence. This particular age group was chosen due to the fact that they are all in their 4<sup>th</sup> year of high school and have 12 years of experience learning English, so they can provide more insights into one's feelings when speaking a foreign language. This covers the language background variable which can greatly influence the results. 50% of the participants were at level B1 and 50% were at level C1, according to an online proficiency test which was conducted at the beginning of the study. Five participants of the B1 level group were female and four were male, and four participants of the C1 level group were female and five of them were male.

#### **3.2. Materials**

The information was elicited from the participants by a language anxiety questionnaire which is an adapted version of the one created by Sheen (2008). The original version was adapted by Jang (2011) and this adapted version was used in the present study as it was considered more appropriate for the purposes of the study. The questionnaire consists of 8 items with multiple-choice answers. Each item presents four possible answers for students to choose one of them, varying from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. The statements in the questionnaire mainly focus on how participants feel during speaking activities, how the reactions from classmates affect their confidence, etc. In summary, each item is structured to get information about participants' anxiety levels while speaking English in the classroom.

3.3. Procedure

Before the beginning of the study, a consent was obtained from each participant, and once signed, an online proficiency test was sent to them in order to determine their proficiency level. The test was a general English test which is publicly available and was retrieved from the Cambridge University Press & Assessment website. When the results of the proficiency test were gathered, the participants who belonged to B1 and C1 level were selected for investigation. After that, an electronic version of the questionnaire was administered. The questionnaire was completed anonymously, so that they could answer the questions without providing personal information, such as their name or surname. They were able to answer the items within 24 hours.

3.4. Data Analysis

To calculate the results, an ordinal 4-point Likert scale was used, because for the purpose of this study specific responses were required, so the participants were ‘forced’ to form an opinion, in other words, there was no safe ‘neutral’ option that they could choose. As mentioned, there were 4 possible answers ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. Points from 1 to 4 were assigned to each answer depending on the item. Furthermore, the mean value for each question was calculated and is presented in the table below. The Likert scale mean score criteria was set as: 1-1.9 (low anxiety), 2-2.9 (moderate anxiety), and 3-4 (high anxiety). Lower scores indicate that there is little to no anxiety, while higher scores indicate having more anxiety during speaking activities.

4. Results

Table 1 shows the results of the questionnaire for the two groups of participants, B1 and C1.

Table 1. Results of the questionnaire

Statement	Mean	
	B1	C1
1. I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do.	2.3	1.8
2. When I give my answers in my English conversation class, I often lose confidence.	2.8	1.7
3. I feel good when I have to speak English in front of my classmates.	2.6	1.8
4. I’m afraid the other students will laugh at me when I speak English.	2.2	1.5
5. I’m generally nervous when participating in my English conversation class.	2.4	2
6. When speaking in my English conversation class, I’m not worried about English grammar.	2.5	2.2
7. I’m enjoying my English conversation class because I’m comfortable with the level of English.	2.4	1.7
8. I’m afraid of speaking right after the teacher corrects my errors.	2.1	1.7
Average mean value:	2.4	1.8

The results summarised in the table above indicate that the participants from the B1 level group feel moderately anxious during speaking activities with a total average mean value of 2.4. They self-reported higher anxiety in activities that require speaking in front of the class with a mean value of 2.6, which also affects their confidence, as the mean value is the highest for statement 2 (2.8). It is evident that these students also care about being grammatically correct, since the mean value for this item is also higher (2.5). The lowest mean score for this group (2.1) is about the corrective feedback students receive from their teachers. Since this is the case, it is evident that B1 level learners do not particularly feel afraid to speak right after their errors are corrected.

The results of the C1 level group indicate that these participants experience low anxiety while speaking, with a total average mean value of 1.8. Despite this, C1 level participants also show some level of nervousness during activities that require speaking in front of the class with a mean value of 2, and they mostly care about their grammatical correctness with a mean value of 2.2, which is the highest in the table. A low mean score (1.7) is also shown for the corrective feedback from the teacher, which informs us that C1 level students are not afraid to continue speaking after they are corrected.

## 5. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate whether there is a correlation between the proficiency level and anxiety during speaking activities. Using the questionnaire and based on participants' self-reports and chosen answers, the results showed that there is a difference between different proficiency levels. Namely, C1 level participants showed lower anxiety compared to B1 level participants, however, the difference is minimal. C1 level participants seem to cope better with the pressure that speaking anxiety brings, since the average mean value for their results is 1.8 compared to the B1 level participants' which is 2.4. C1 level participants seem more relaxed and belong to the "low anxiety" group, while B1 level participants showed greater nervousness while performing speaking activities which puts them in the "moderately anxious" group. The reason behind this may be the fact that C1 level participants have more confidence in expressing themselves in the target language and according to the low mean score of the fourth item of the questionnaire (1.5), they do not care about other students' opinion about them. On the other hand, less proficient participants show greater anxiety when asked to speak in front of the class, evidently because of their lack of self-confidence, perhaps due to their limited vocabulary and uncertainty about their grammar. Indeed, the results show that students are worried about making grammatical mistakes, however, they do not seem particularly anxious about the corrective feedback the teacher gives them.

The results of this study are similar to the ones by Sa'diyah et al. (2021), who stated that students with higher proficiency are less anxious compared to less proficient students who feel more anxious when speaking. Similarly, the findings of Brown et al. (2001) align with our results as well, since they found that high proficiency students are less anxious on average than the lower proficiency



students. On the other hand, Marcos-Llinás and Garau's (2009) study showed that advanced learners have higher levels of anxiety than beginners and intermediate learners. This might be due to the difference in learners' nationality and culture, as well as the learners' age in the two studies.

Considering the second research question, whether corrective feedback influences students negatively, our results show that the participants in the C1 level group are not afraid to speak right after the teacher gives them corrective feedback. The participants in the B1 level group show some level of fear of speaking after the corrective feedback, however, considering their overall anxiety during speaking, it can be concluded that they are more anxious in other aspects, such as speaking in front of their classmates due to their low self-confidence and not so much in speaking after the teacher corrects them. These findings are in line with the study done by Zhang and Rahimi (2014) who found that learners prefer to be given corrective feedback, despite their feeling of anxiety, whether it be low or high level. Another investigation done by Gamlo (2019) supports our results since the students reported preference toward teacher CF. The participants in both aforementioned studies believed CF could help them improve, so we believe that this might be the case with our participants as well, since both lower and higher proficiency level groups showed that they do not feel particularly afraid of speaking after the corrective feedback, despite their overall low or high anxiety, from which we might assume that they welcome such feedback. Considering all of the above, it is safe to assume that speaking is somewhat difficult for students, as the pressure to perform in front of the teacher and classmates creates a challenging situation for many of them.

## **6. Limitations**

This study has several limitations which might be important for replication studies and future research. The first is the limited number of participants, which makes it difficult to generalize the findings. Second, a structured questionnaire was used, so not enough freedom was given to the participants to give their thoughts on the topic. Also, a variable which was not calculated here is the personality type of each participant, which may influence the results. Their previous learning experience and relationship with their English teachers can also influence the results, which was not considered either. Further research is needed, possibly with a larger group of learners and including more variables which would be relevant to the topic in question.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study aimed to investigate the possible correlation between language proficiency and speaking anxiety among Macedonian learners of English, as well as the influence of corrective feedback. The results pointed out that there is a difference between students who are more proficient compared to those who are less proficient. The aforementioned results showed that the C1 level participants are more relaxed and because of that, they belong to the "low anxiety" group, compared to the B1 level participants who fall under the "moderate anxiety" group.

Namely, the C1 level participants are more confident and are not influenced by the presence of their classmates and their reactions, while the B1 level participants pay attention to their peers resulting in low self-esteem causing anxiety to increase. We can conclude that this is the main difference between both groups i.e. how their classmates influence their confidence, which in turn influences their anxiety. Regarding the question of corrective feedback and its influence on speaking activities, we found that it is similar for both groups, namely, they both lack fear of corrective feedback. Considering their overall speaking anxiety, both groups show that they would not be particularly afraid to continue speaking, despite the corrective feedback given to them. It is worth mentioning that our results revealed that the C1 level group showed heightened anxiety level when it came to their grammatical correctness. The reason behind this is likely that many people associate knowing grammar with knowing the language.

Finally, some implications for educators are that they should create a supportive classroom environment that minimizes public speaking pressure, particularly for lower-proficiency learners who are more anxious when speaking in front of their peers. Given that both proficiency groups in this study did not exhibit significant fear of corrective feedback, teachers are encouraged to continue providing immediate, constructive corrections during speaking activities to enhance language learning. Educators might also consider incorporating collaborative speaking tasks and exercises for building confidence into their lessons to help all students, especially those with moderate anxiety, develop greater self-assurance in using English.

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