

Foreign Language Anxiety in e-Tandem Learners: Is It Predictable?

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Abstract

Learning a foreign language (FL) is a challenging path, and speaking interaction with native speakers of the target language (TL) is perceived as a threatening event for many students. Nevertheless, the use of telecollaborative practices, such as e-Tandem, is considered to have an anxiety-reducing effect on learners over time (Appel & Gilabert, 2002). The present study investigates foreign language anxiety (FLA) in the context of e-Tandem language learning. The aim of our research is to understand to what extent e-Tandem learners' innate tendency to experience FLA (*trait anxiety*; Spielberg, 1972) is related to the FLA they experience while completing speaking activities in pairs. The sample of the study is composed by 50 students (26 native speakers of English; 24 native speakers of Spanish) enrolled in a free and open online conversation course based on e-Tandem language learning tasks. Once the course starts, the subjects complete a demographic questionnaire and a questionnaire based on 23 items extracted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS; Horwitz et al., 1986). Then, after each speaking task, they self-rate their FLA using an adapted version of the Anxometer (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). By conducting an exploratory statistical analysis, we expect to identify the relationship between the FLCAS scores of the learners of our sample and their FLA while participating in online speaking tasks in pairs, taking into account their age and gender. Our results will provide the Language Learning Community with more information on this emotion in e-Tandem learners.

Keywords: Foreign language anxiety, foreign language learning, online learning, e-tandem.

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Introduction

In the context of foreign language learning (FLL), the use of technology is growing day by day. Since the last two decades, educators and researchers have shown an increasing interest in looking for alternatives to traditional textbooks (Godwin-Jones, 2016) in order to foster learners' foreign language (FL) skills.

One of the advantages that the implementation of technology in language education brings to FL learners is the possibility to meet with native speakers of the target language (TL) they are studying, despite being physically distant. For this reason, telecollaborative projects foster FL learners' interest in learning others' language and culture (O'Dowd, 2011).

In the present research, we focus on the study of one specific type of telecollaborative practice: e-Tandem language learning, and the foreign language anxiety (FLA; Horwitz et al., 1986) that some learners experience while taking part of it. FLA is a debilitating emotion that, to date, has been little researched in online learning environments (Bollinger & Wendt, 2016). Thus, the purpose of this study is to find out new insights into the topic of e-Tandem language learning and FLA, by observing to what extent e-Tandem learners' FLA is predictable, and which is the relationship between learners' age and gender and the FLA they experience in e-Tandem language learning environments.

e-Tandem language learning and FLA

e-Tandem is a computer-assisted language learning (CALL) practice in which two students who have a different native language (NL) want to learn each other's language, so interaction is produced 50% in one language and 50% in the other language. This practice is carried out following two principles (Brammerts, 2003): the *Principle of Reciprocity*, for which two speaking partners "bring certain skills and abilities which the other partner seeks to acquire and in which both partners support each other in their learning" (2003: 29), and the *Principle of Autonomy*, for which students are responsible of their learning.

While in traditional classroom environments it might be difficult for students to carry out peer-to-peer speaking activities because they might end up using their common NL or lingua franca (Appel, 2012), e-Tandem allows learners to practice their FL speaking skills, having real life conversations with native speakers of their TL. This practice offers, indeed, stimulating opportunities for students to practice their FL skills (Fernández-Quesada, 2015) and it has been considered a confidence-increasing practice over time (Appel & Gilabert, 2002). However, e-Tandem is also perceived as an anxiety-triggering practice by some learners (e.g., Appel & Gilabert, 2002; El-Hariri, 2016; Martin & Álvarez Valdivia, 2017).

In fact, FLA is a debilitating emotion related, most of all, to the oral aspects of the FL use (Horwitz, 2001). This emotion has negative academic effects (e.g., poor academic achievement and lowered grades); negative cognitive effects (e.g., difficulties to process the language inputs), and negative social effects (e.g., lack of willingness to communicate in the FL) on language learners (MacIntyre, 2017).

Research findings showing the negative effects of FLA on learners' learning processes are consistent (Baralt & Gurzynski-Weiss, 2011), but there are still many controversies regarding the characteristics of anxious FL learners. For instance, when considering two main learner biographical variables, age and gender, previous research shows that age is negatively related to FLA (i.e., older students tend to experience less FLA than the younger ones) (Dewaele, 2013), and females tend to experience more FLA than men (e.g., Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Park & French, 2013). Nevertheless, in both cases, scholars claim that further research should be carried out in order to achieve more consistent results.

Finally, regarding the research instruments that have been developed to assess learners' FLA, it is worth highlighting the relevance of the Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (FLCAS; Horwitz et al., 1986), a widely used and validated scale (Dewaele, 2013). As Gregersen et al. (2014) suggest, this scale is useful as a starting point to assess learners' tendency to experience FLA. Since, to our knowledge, few scholars have focused on the study of FLA in e-Tandem language learning contexts (e.g., El-Hariri, 2016; Fondo & Erdocia, 2018), the adequacy of the applicability of the FLCAS in this type of online learning environment is still uncertain.

Research Questions

The research questions (RQs) that the present study addresses are:

RQ1: Do learners' age and gender have an influence on the FLA they experience while participating in e-Tandem language learning activities in pairs?

RQ2: To what extent e-Tandem learners' scores in the FLCAS are related to the FLA they experience while participating in e-Tandem language learning activities in pairs?

Methodology

Research context

The research context of the study is a free and open online speaking course called *TandemMOOC18*. The course had a duration of six weeks and consisted of a series of task-based speaking activities that students completed via videoconference in pairs. The course was addressed to NSs of English and NSs of Spanish who were FL learners of Spanish and FL learners of English respectively. Thus, activities were designed to be carried out 50% in English and 50% in Spanish, following the *Principle of Reciprocity* of e-Tandem language learning (Brammerts, 2003).

All participants were assigned one speaking partner randomly by an automatic system, which was integrated in the course. Dyads were established taking into account learners' NL and their time availability to complete the activities. All participants had, at least, an *Intermediate* level of FL, which was the minimum level of proficiency required to participate in the course.

Participants

The sample of the study was composed of 50 volunteer participants: 26 NSs of English and 24 NSs of Spanish. Female students predominated in the entire sample and in both subsamples (learners of English and learners of Spanish), as shown in the table below:

Table 1. Classification of participants according to their NL and gender.

	Males	Females
Learners of English (N=26)	9	17
Learners of Spanish (N=24)	8	16
Total participants (N= 50)	17	33

The majority of the English learners resided in Spain (25), while one English learner resided in Colombia. On the contrary, the countries of residence of the Spanish learners were more varied: Ireland was leading the list (9), followed by the USA (8), the UK (5), Denmark (1) and Hungary (1).

When taking into account the age of the participants of the sample, it is worth mentioning that the majority of the participants were between 40 and 59 years old, as shown in Table 2. The average age of the overall sample was 43.

Table 2. Classification of participants according to their age and language learnt.

	18 – 29 years old	30 – 39 years old	40 – 49 years old	50 – 59 years old	60 – 69 years old
Learners of English (N=26)	6	6	7	5	2
Learners of Spanish (N=24)	3	3	6	8	4
Total participants (N=50)	9	9	13	13	6

Research instruments and procedure


First, the 50 volunteer participants enrolled in *TandemMOOC18* were asked to complete a socio-demographic questionnaire and a short version of the FLCAS (Park, 2014), which were both available within the course site.

Second, they started to complete several speaking tasks in pairs. The total number of fulfilled tasks during the six-week course changed notably from one participant to another. In fact, participants were required to complete, at least, three speaking tasks, but there was not established a maximum number of tasks to be carried out.

All tasks followed a similar design and had the same level of difficulty, in order to avoid biases. Each time participants completed one task, an adapted version of the Anxometer (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991) automatically popped-up, so they could rate, in an 11-point Likert scale, the FLA they experienced while doing that task.

Finally, once the course was over, an exploratory statistical analysis was conducted using *R*, in order to answer our RQs.

Durante esta tarea me he sentido...*



Muy tranquilo

-5

-4

-3

-2

-1

0


1

2

3

4

5



Muy nervioso

Todos los campos marcados con asterisco (*) son obligatorios

Send

Figure 1. Adapted version of the Anxometer created for this study (-5 *Very comfortable*; 5 *Very nervous*).

Results

RQ1: Do learners' age and gender have an influence on the FLA they experience while participating in e-Tandem language learning activities in pairs?

In the first place, before participants took part of the speaking activities, we classified them as low anxiety or high anxiety participants, according to their scores in the FLCAS. As a starting point, we observed the relationship between this classification and their age.

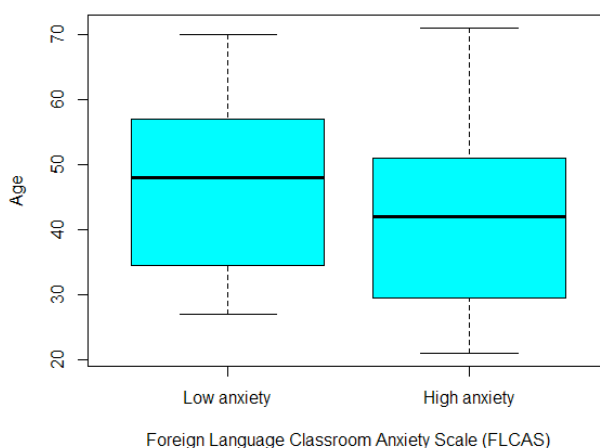


Figure 2. Box plot of participants' classification (FLCAS scores) and age.

As shown in the figure above, the median age of the low anxiety participants was slightly higher than the median age of the high anxiety participants. Also, most of the low anxiety participants were generally older than the high anxiety participants.

In the second place, we observed the relationship between participants' age and their Anxometer average values, which reflected the level of anxiety that they felt while completing the speaking tasks of the course. In this case, we found no significant correlation between the independent variable (age) and the Anoxmeter average values, as shown in the dispersion graphic:

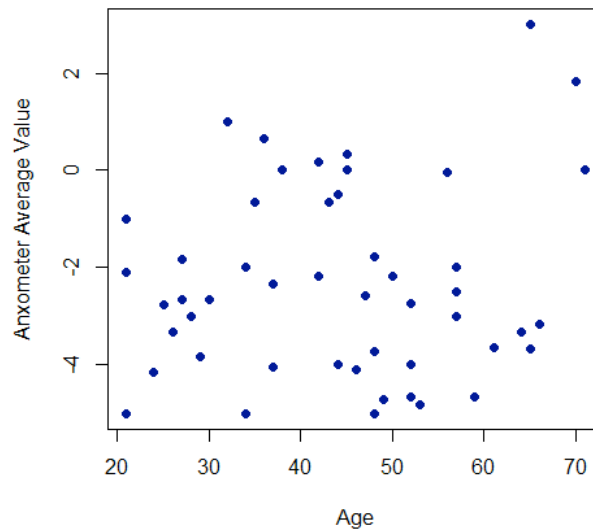


Figure 3. Dispersion graphic of participants' age and Anxometer average values.

In the third place, in order to understand the relationship between participants' gender and FLA, we observed, previously, participants' classification according to their FLCAS scores and gender. As reflected in the table below, high anxiety participants were predominant in the total sample, and in both subsamples (males and females).

Table 3. Classification of participants according to their FLCAS scores and gender.

	Low anxiety	High anxiety	Total
Males	16%	24%	40%
Females	22%	38%	60%
Total	38%	62%	100%

Finally, we explored the correlation between participants' gender and their Anxometer average values. We observed that the median of females' Anxometer values was slightly higher than the median of males' Anxometer values. However, males' Anxometer average values were more dispersed than females' Anxometer average values. Also, the higher Anxometer values appeared in the group of males, who showed a tendency to experience more FLA than females.

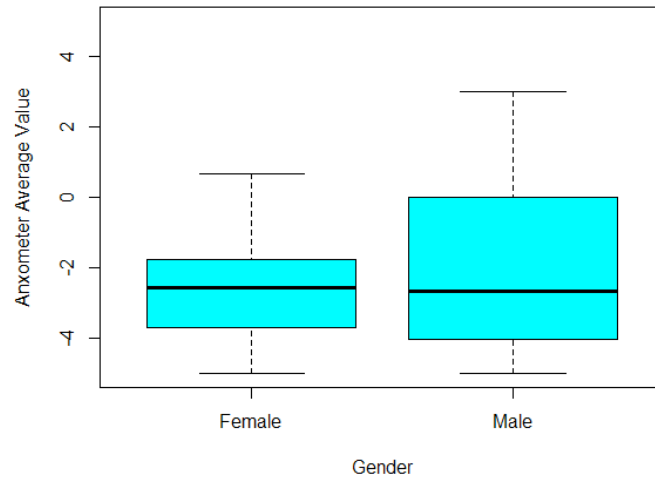


Figure 3. Box plot of participants' gender and Anxometer average values.

RQ2: To what extent e-Tandem learners' scores in the FLCAS are related to the FLA they experience while participating in e-Tandem language learning activities in pairs?

In this case, we studied the correlation between participants' FLCAS scores and their Anxometer average values. Results showed that the median of the Anxometer average values of both groups -high anxiety participants and low anxiety participants- were very similar. However, the Anxometer average values were more dispersed in the group of high anxiety participants.

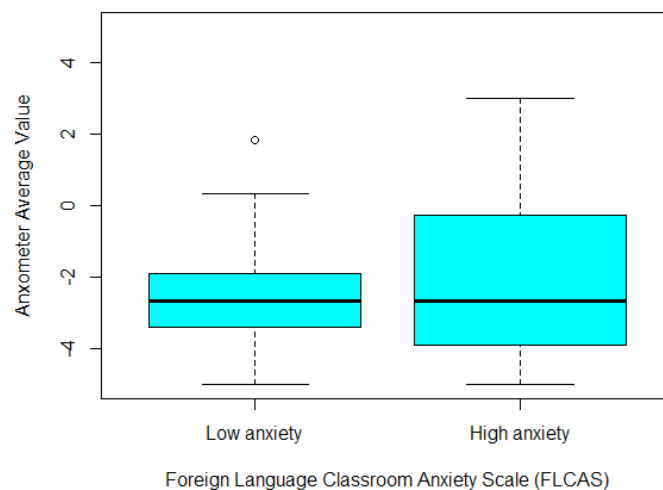


Figure 4. Box plot of participants' classification (FLCAS) and Anxometer values.

As the figure above shows, the Anxometer average values of most high anxiety participants were comprised between 0 and -4 (being -5 *very comfortable*; + 5 *very nervous*), while the Anxometer average values of most of the low anxiety participants were comprised between -2 and -4. Also, it is worth highlighting that the group of

high anxiety participants counted with higher Anxometer average values than the group of low anxiety participants.

Conclusions

Despite having been widely studied in traditional language learning environments, FLA is still an unexplored emotion in online language learning contexts such as e-Tandem. Within the findings of the present study, we expect to provide the FL education community with new insights into this topic.

In the first place, we found no significant correlation between participants' age and the FLA they experienced while taking part of e-Tandem activities. However, when we assessed, beforehand, their tendency to experience FLA (measured by the FLCAS), we noticed that older participants, in general, scored lower than younger participants. Thus, older participants were expected to be less prone to experience FLA while participating in e-tandem activities, as previous literature claims (e.g., Dewaele, 2013). However, this tendency was not shown during the *TandemMOOC18* course.

In the second place, we observed that both males and females presented a similar median of FLA while taking part of e-tandem activities. Nevertheless, males' values of FLA were more dispersed than those obtained by female participants, pointing to a tendency of males to experience higher levels of FLA in e-Tandem contexts than females. These results are contrary to the findings of previous studies conducted in traditional learning environments (e.g., Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Park & French, 2013).

Finally, we found no significant correlation between learners' classification as high anxiety participants or low anxiety participants (measured by the FLCAS) and the FLA they experienced during the e-Tandem activities. Nevertheless, the values of FLA while taking part of the e-Tandem activities were more dispersed for the high anxiety participants than for the low anxiety participants. These results point to a tendency of high anxiety participants to experience more FLA than low anxiety participants in e-Tandem learning environments, so we believe that further research with a bigger sample will lead to interesting results.

Indeed, predicting e-Tandem learners' FLA might be a utopian idea. However, identifying the main characteristics and traits of anxious learners in online language learning environments is a more reachable goal. By knowing which students are more prone to experience FLA in online learning environments, teachers and educators could adapt these learning contexts to the most anxious learners, facilitating their language learning process. Hereby, more research is needed to achieve conclusive findings on this topic.

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