

## THE DESPAIR OF DISPARITY: THE CONNECTION BETWEEN FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY AND THE RECOGNITION OF PROFICIENCY DIFFERENCES IN L2 SKILLS

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This study examines the relationship between foreign language (FL) anxiety and learners' recognition of their proficiency differences across the four skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. To this end, 191 French and Spanish FL graduate and undergraduate students were surveyed to assess their FL anxiety attributable to self-perceived L2 skill disparity, and their personal assessment of the importance of each skill. Results suggest that a FL learner's awareness of skills disparity, coupled with a high value placed on the lacking skills, elicited heightened FL anxiety when learners engaged in activities using the deficient skill(s). These findings suggest a need to consider integrated approaches to language instruction that foster mutually supportive growth of the four skills simultaneously.

Key words: foreign language anxiety, language skills, proficiency differences

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Learning a foreign language (FL) can evoke a plethora of emotions: From the euphoria of the dehydrated English speaker who ordered a glass of water in Arabic in downtown Cairo and actually got one, to the poignant shame aroused by the incomprehensible stuttering of a language learner trying to answer a teacher's question in a FL class. Although affective variables do not alone determine learner achievement in a FL, they do go a long way in explaining a learner's failure (Brown 1981). Among the most debilitating of the affective variables is FL anxiety, "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning and arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope 1986: 31).

This situation-specific definition of FL anxiety is anchored in an individual's self-comparison on two fronts. First, learners realize that they fall short when comparing their FL skills with those of their first language (L1) (Horwitz et al. 1986). They

recognize that the articulateness, eloquence, and fluency of their L1 are replaced in the FL by *ums*, imprecise circumlocutions, and unappreciated interlanguage creativity. This awareness of the chasm between what the individual desires to communicate and is actually capable of communicating in the FL elicits anxiety. This anxiety, in turn, evokes fear of making mistakes, discomfort with correction, inhibitions about communicating, and overall self-consciousness, particularly in the production and comprehension of spoken language. This self-comparison also extends to the disparity between what a FL learner knows and what that learner is able to express, as is the case, for example, with foreign students working on advanced degrees in the United States, who often have knowledge and skills that greatly exceed what they are able to express in English.

The second intrapersonal comparison made by highly anxious FL learners is between the naturalness of their L1 communication and the limited authenticity of their FL communication. Adult language learners in particular have a defined sense of self, and the restricted range of thoughts and emotions they can express in the FL may threaten self-perceptions of genuineness (Horwitz et al. 1986). Combine a learner's cognizance of the inability to present the same persona in the FL as in the L1 with the recognition of a L1–L2 disparity in competence, and the resulting situation is primed for an affective meltdown.

Although the definition of FL anxiety as a situation-specific construct that originates in self-comparative L1–L2 ruminations has proven useful in understanding the nature of this pedagogically significant affective variable, it may also prove beneficial to ask further questions about the anxiety-provoking internal comparisons learners make while learning a FL. Understanding this intrapersonal reflection may shed more light on how better to help these students. This article examines the relationship between FL anxiety and another type of internal self-comparison that learners may make, namely, comparing competence in one FL skill with that in another skill. Does a FL learner's awareness of his or her disparity in competence across the four language skills elicit FL anxiety in those skills found lacking?

Even though current research encourages integrating reading, writing, speaking, and listening in FL instruction, particularly when considering the demonstrated efficacy of task- and content-based courses, many intensive language programs are still insisting on separating the skills into discrete, self-contained units. A brief navigation on the Internet unearthed some interesting results. The researcher typed *Intensive Language Programs* into a search engine and then investigated the first 100 relevant hits. Of the 100 programs listing course schedules 72 still segregated, totally or partially, the curriculum into discrete skills<sup>1</sup>.

Besides separating language structures from content, traditional curricular approaches also tend to establish artificial sequences of language skills to be

<sup>1</sup> This tendency, however, is not as evident in 4-year language degree programs or in university language classes offered to meet institutional requirements.

mastered (Ovando, Collier, and Combs 2003). Such separated sequences are contrary to the integrated way that people use language skills in normal communication (Oxford 2001); they make language the end rather than the means of communication, and increase the probability that proficiency levels in one skill surpass those in another skill.

Furthermore, particularly in the pursuit of biliteracy, if one of the skills is developed to the neglect of another, a learner's overall communicative competence and future success as a FL communicator may be jeopardized. Reading, writing, speaking, and listening are all interrelated, with one skill often reinforcing another. An individual learns to speak by modeling what is heard, and learns to write by examining what is read (Brown 1994). Developing one skill does not necessarily transfer abilities to the others.

Schmidt (1990) claimed that the act of "noticing" language and its forms is necessary for acquisition. However, focused concentration on listening and reading alone, for example, may not make elements of vocabulary, syntax, grammar, and pragmatics salient enough for a learner to produce these elements correctly in speaking or writing. Krashen (1985) proposed that if input was "comprehensible" and the message understood, then the structure would be acquired. However, Swain's (1998) research into Canadian French immersion programs rich in comprehensible input but fairly void of language production indicated that students were able to understand effectively what they heard and read, but were far from target-like in their writing and speaking. Swain proposed the need for output to promote noticing the gap between what learners want to say and can say, making clear what they partially know and what they do not know at all. Output forces learners to create and test hypotheses, then reprocess based on the feedback received in interaction, fostering metalinguistic reflection that helps them control and internalize knowledge. Only by integrating all four language skills can we foster an environment rich enough in both the input and output needed for full acquisition. Brown (1994: 219) referred to production and reception as "two sides of the same coin" which cannot be split in two. Although segregating the skills may seem logistically easier to administer, it does not represent authentic language use.

We must, however, recognize that individuals decide to learn a FL for different reasons. A learner may be satisfied knowing how to read and write in a FL without ever developing speaking and listening skills, thus being content with the ability to read a manual or write a report, as is the case with many participants in English for Specific Purposes programs. These learners, usually with highly specific academic and professional reasons for FL study, are probably not bothered by differences in their intralanguage proficiency levels because they consider some skills less important than others. For instance, if a learner is doing well in reading and writing and if these literacy skills are viewed as most important, then positive affect is enhanced. If a different student falls behind in reading and writing but does not rate these competencies as personally important, positive affect is maintained despite this difference in competence across skills.

It must also be noted that anxiety is not necessarily debilitating and that different learners handle it differently; for many learners, a mild degree of anxiety can be helpful and stimulating (Crookall and Oxford 1991). Citing various studies in educational psychology, Campbell and Ortiz (1991) pointed out that some anxiety can actually promote learning, but that too much can hinder academic performance at specific stages in the learning process and with certain types of activities. Effective performance depends on enough anxiety to arouse the neuromuscular system to optimal levels of performance, but, at the same time, not so much that the complex neuromuscular systems underlying these skills are disrupted. "Facilitating anxiety motivates the learner to 'fight' the new learning task; it gears the learner emotionally for approach behavior. Debilitating anxiety, in contrast, motivates the learner to 'flee' the new learning task; it stimulates the individual emotionally to adopt avoidance behavior." (Scovel 1978: 139)

However, when a FL learner desires communicative competence in all four skills, a problem could arise if the learner does not do well with specific skills; in this situation FL anxiety could intensify. Consider, for example, the learner who enters a traditional segregated skills language program and discovers that development in one of the skills necessary for his or her future is lagging far behind the others. Let's imagine a learner of English wishing to attend a university in the United States who speaks and comprehends English well, but perceives his or her writing ability to be sorely lacking in comparison. The research question is: Will such a learner's awareness of the disparity among equally valued skills result in heightened FL anxiety, particularly when engaging in the deficient skill?

Understanding the relationship between FL anxiety and learners' self-perceptions of their sometimes disparate abilities to read, write, speak, and listen might hasten teachers and administrators to create more authentic, integrated programs that minimize the risk of FL anxiety. In this study, I therefore sought to: (a) identify learners who perceived a disparity in their abilities to read, write, speak, and listen in their FL; (b) discover whether these learners valued each skill equally; and (c) determine whether an awareness of skills disparity, coupled with a high value placed on the lacking skills, elicited heightened FL anxiety when engaging in activities using the deficient skill.

I elected to use a self-report measure of affect, which warrants the consideration of important theoretical questions. One question is related to the variance often present in self-reported affective variables. Oller and Perkins (1978a, 1978b) suggested that when responses are self-reported, participants will be concerned with looking good in their own eyes and in the eyes of others, and in being consistent in answering questions of similar content, thus calling into question the validity of their answers. "These three tendencies, self-flattery, approval seeking, and consistency, all presuppose the subject's ability to understand the questions and to figure what responses will represent the subject in a favorable light, will fit the expectations of the questioner, and will be consistent" (Oller 1981: 232). Along similar lines, Holtgraves (2004) discussed how respondents to self-report instruments are affected by social desirability, which means that in their eagerness to look good, respondents may be enticed to answer in

a less-than-accurate manner. He concluded, however, that although social desirability does not always influence the specific answer respondents give, it does effect how long it takes them to respond.

Another issue with self-reporting is “optimizing” versus “satisficing” (Krosnick 1999). To answer a question optimally, a respondent must interpret the question and deduce its intent, tap the memory for pertinent information to create a value judgment, and then select one of the alternatives offered on the questionnaire. When respondents do this thoroughly and without bias, they are optimizing. When they lower their standards, expend less energy, and are less thorough, they are satisficing. These arguments challenging survey methodology need to be considered as readers digest the conclusions being drawn from the results of the self-report measure used in this investigation.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

A survey was administered to 191 participants: 180 undergraduate and 11 graduate students, 131 of whom were enrolled in Spanish courses and 60 in French courses at a small Midwestern university. With the cooperation of the foreign language instructor in 12 classes (4 French and 8 Spanish), the researcher requested that each instructor choose a student in the class to hand out and then collect the consent forms and surveys during a regularly scheduled class period around midterm of the semester. Participation was voluntary, and students gave their consent by signing an informed consent form. Although 38% of the respondents were taking a FL course because they anticipated a career where FL use was important, a relatively large number of participants (26%) were fulfilling university requirements. Of the respondents 36% reported *other* reasons, among which were *to connect with another culture* and *to have fun*. The average age of the participants was 21.5 years old. A total of 136 females (71%) and 55 males (29%) responded to the survey. The average number of years of previous language study was 3. Although most respondents considered themselves minimally competent in two languages, there were some learners who reported knowing only one language, and others who knew six. When asked about the formal instruction in their FL, 64% of respondents reported that reading, writing, speaking, and listening were either partially or totally segregated, and 36% said that the skills were integrated. These percentages mirror the Internet findings discussed in the introduction and are another indication that language programs still separate instruction into the four skill areas.

### *The Questionnaire and Participant Responses*

At the outset of the study, students were asked to complete a brief questionnaire providing information on their age, gender, year in school, number of languages in which they consider themselves minimally competent, reasons for FL study,

language class in which they were currently enrolled, and whether they felt their formal instruction in their FL segregated or integrated the four skills. They were also asked to specify all their languages, L1 and others. They then answered two questions designed to sort them into two groups according to the pivotal variables of the study: self-perceived FL skill disparity, and self-assessment of the importance of each skill. The two questions were:

- A. When I consider my abilities to read, write, speak, and listen in my FL, I feel that I have one (or more) skills(s) that is (are) significantly weaker than the rest.
- B. When I consider the purpose for learning my FL, I realize that all four of the language skills are equally needed.

Information gathered in these two questions place the participants into one of four possible categories:

1. High Disparity/High Value: Those FL learners who self-reported that they *agreed* or *strongly agreed* to both questions A and B.
2. Low Disparity/High Value: Those FL learners who *neither agreed nor disagreed*, *disagreed*, or *strongly disagreed* to question A, but who *agreed* or *strongly agreed* to question B.
3. High Disparity/Low Value: Those FL learners who *agreed* or *strongly agreed* to question A, but who *neither agreed nor disagreed*, *disagreed*, or *strongly disagreed* to question B.
4. Low Disparity/Low Value: Those FL learners who self-reported that they *neither agreed nor disagreed* to question A, but who *neither agreed nor disagreed*, *disagreed*, or *strongly disagreed* to question B.

The Segregated Skills Foreign Language Anxiety Survey (SSFLAS) is a 7-item self-report instrument developed to assess a learner's FL anxiety attributable to self-perceived differences in his or her abilities to read, write, speak, and listen in a FL. Participants respond to each item on a 5-point Likert Scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The items were balanced for wording to reduce the effects of acquiescent and negative response sets.

Items 1, 2, 5, and 7 target indicators of communication apprehension, or "the personal knowledge that one will almost certainly have difficulty understanding others and making oneself understood" in the FL (Horwitz et al. 1986: 30). Items 3, 4, and 6 ask participants to report their feelings concerning the negative evaluation they perceive when they communicate in the four language skills. This performance anxiety is prevalent in individuals who are concerned about the impressions that others form of them, and thus behave in ways that minimize the possibility of unfavorable evaluations (Gregersen and Horwitz 2002).

## RESULTS

*Anxiety Scores*

Table 1 shows the number of respondents who fell into each of the categories defined in Table 1, and the mean scores and standard deviations of each group on the SSFLAS anxiety survey.

Table 1

Percentage of Participants in each Category and Results of the SSFLAS

1. High Disparity/High Value $n = 130$ (67.7% of the sample) Survey Score: $M = 24.5$ $SD = 3.6$	3. High Disparity/Low Value $n = 11$ (5.7% of the sample) Survey Score: $M = 25.9$ $SD = 3.6$
2. Low Disparity/High Value $n = 48$ (25.5% of the sample) Survey Score: $M = 20.3$ $SD = 3.3$	4. Low Disparity/Low Value $n = 2$ (1.0% of the sample) Survey Score: $M = 21.5$ $SD = 0.7$

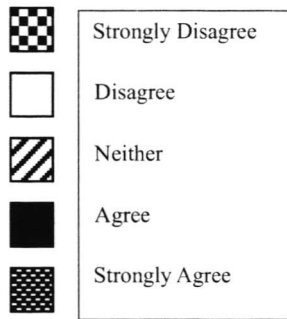
Roughly 67% of the participants reported that they have “one (or more) skill(s) that is (are) significantly weaker than the rest,” although at the same time they concurred that “all four of the language skills are equally needed.” Their recognized disparity in competence across skills, coupled with their acknowledgement of the importance of all four skills may have contributed to their high mean anxiety scores. Respondents in this group scored an average of 24.5 on the SSFLAS. They comprised Group 1: High Disparity/High Value learners.

Making up the next group in size were the 48 participants (25.5%) who reported that they do not feel a disparity across the language skills, and equally value reading, writing, speaking, and listening in the L2; Group 2: Low Disparity/High Value learners. The average anxiety score of these respondents in Group 2 was 20.3, significantly lower than their disparity-recognizing counterparts in Group 1 ( $t(177) = 6.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

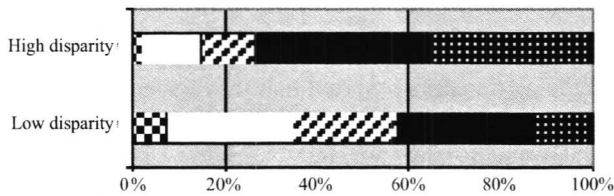
Groups 3 (High Disparity/Low Value) and 4 (Low Disparity/Low Value) took distant third and fourth places, respectively, in terms of the number of respondents in each group. In view of the small numbers represented in these two groups (11 and 4 respectively), a discussion of results for them is superfluous and statistical tests were not run. Groups 3 and 4 will not be discussed further. It is noted, however, that Group 3 had a high mean score for anxiety. Given that Groups 1 and 2 both exhibit high value, they will henceforth be called only by their distinguishing element: High Disparity (HD, group 1) versus Low Disparity (LD, group 2).

Percentages of responses to all the SSFLAS items HD and LD groups are reported in Figures 1 through 7. Percentages for each response option (*strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *neither agree nor disagree*, *agree*, or *strongly agree*) are rounded to the nearest integer. Reverse-written items are marked (-).

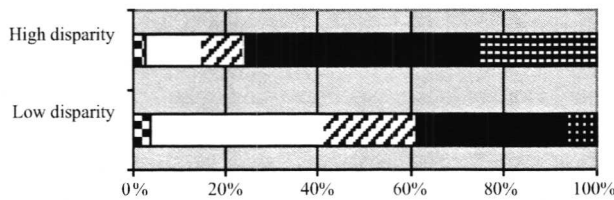
FIGURES 1 THROUGH 7



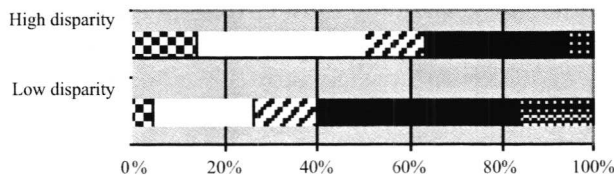
1. It bothers me that I cannot read, write, speak, and listen with equal proficiency



2. I avoid using my less proficient language skills in favor of my stronger ones when possible

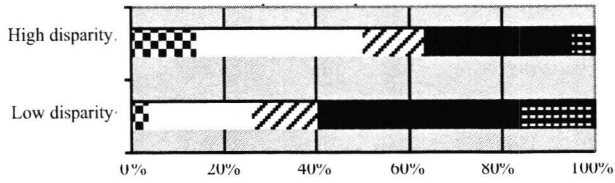


3. It embarrasses me to participate in language classes where I must use my least proficient skills

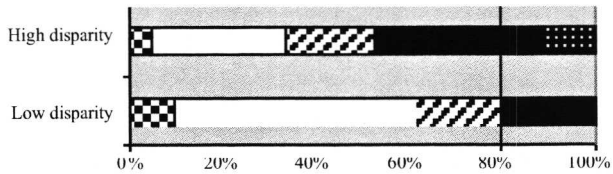




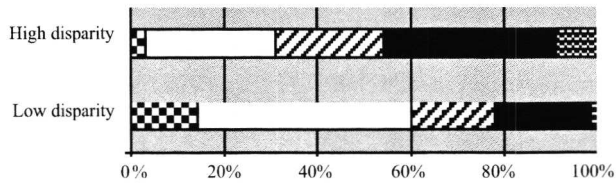
4. I would probably feel comfortable when using any of the four language skills with native speakers (-)



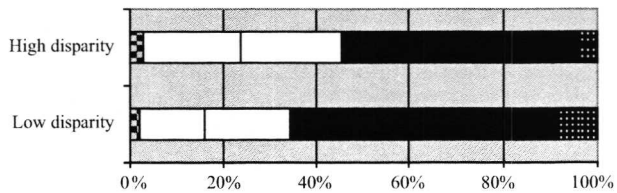
5. I avoid situations where I know my weak language skills may be called upon



6. I think that other foreign language students are better at balancing their abilities in reading writing, speaking, and listening



7. I invest equal emotional energy in preparing for classes that will incorporate either written or oral participation (-)



## DISCUSSION

Language learners in this study overwhelmingly regarded reading, writing, speaking, and listening as equally important in their pursuit of FL competency. In fact, 93.2% of the participants, when considering their purpose for learning a FL, agreed that all four language skills were equally necessary. However, 67.7% of the same respondents felt that there are inconsistencies in their abilities to communicate in one or more of the skills.

Furthermore, participants' responses to the SSFLAS consistently supported the premise that language learners who are aware of a disparity across their language skills, but who also equally value all of them (the HD group), have a greater propensity toward FL anxiety, particularly in the weaker skills, than those learners who did not report such a disparity. Learners who reported feeling that one or more skills were deficient scored higher on the anxiety scale than those who did not. Learners who perceived a difference in their skill levels as opposed to those learners who did not (the LD group), were more bothered by their inability to read, write, speak, and listen with equal proficiency. A comparison of the percentages of students who strongly agreed or agreed with the survey items suggests that these participants were more embarrassed in class when their inferior skills had to be used, and that they were more likely to avoid using those weaker skills. They also felt more uncomfortable using the inadequate skills around native speakers, and they thought other students were better at balancing their abilities in the four skills than they were.

## PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

First of all, assuming that FL researchers are correct in their position that integrated skills instruction is the most effective means of equilibrating competency in the four skills, responses from these learners indicate that teachers and administrators are not heeding these findings, as 64% of the respondents claimed that their formal FL instruction segregated the four skills. As for FL anxiety itself, experts in the past have focused both on what students can do for themselves and on teacher-mediated remedies. Suggestions for student initiated action include: transforming negative self-related cognitions by focusing on positive experiences (MacIntyre and Gardner 1991); participating in relaxation exercises, behavioral contracting, and journal keeping (Horwitz et al. 1986); developing realistic expectations (Price 1991); and increasing feelings of self-efficacy (Pappamihiel 2002). As for language teachers, researchers have suggested that we first identify students experiencing FL anxiety in order to take corrective measures (Aida 1994, Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, and Daley 1999). Such measures include: incorporating group dynamic activities into the syllabus (Clement, Dörnyei, and Noels 1994); creating student support systems and closely monitoring the classroom climate to identify specific sources of student anxiety (Horwitz et al. 1986); giving more positive reinforcement (Price 1991), and making the classroom as relaxing and friendly as possible through pair and small group work, games,

simulations, and structured exercises that alter the communication patterns of the classroom (Crookall and Oxford 1991). This is obviously not an exhaustive list, but knowing a few techniques gives us the incentive to work toward the creation of anxiety-free learning environments.

Although all of these strategies are useful in reducing FL anxiety, none of them directly targets the source of anxiety discussed in this study—a FL learner's awareness of his or her disparity in competence across the four language skills. To alleviate anxiety potentially arising from this source, teachers and administrators should consider approaches to language instruction that foster mutually supportive growth of the four skills simultaneously. Previous research has demonstrated that integrative teaching of the skills would give priority to process over predetermined linguistic content and would teach through communication rather than for it (Larsen-Freeman 2000). Furthermore, integrated methods expose learners to authentic language, involve them in meaningful activities, and give them a true picture of the richness and complexity of language as used for communication (Scarcella and Oxford 1992). Among the most popular of these methods are Content-based and Task-based Instruction, Participatory Approaches, and Experiential Learning.

Content-based Instruction integrates language learning with the learning of some other content, often academic subject matter. This integration necessitates the creation of clear language objectives as well as content objectives (Larsen-Freeman 2000). Content-based instruction allows students to practice all of the language skills in a highly integrated fashion while participating in activities or tasks that focus on content. The primary goal is the use of normal, real-life communicative language, which presupposes the integration of the four language skills. According to Brown (1994), this type of instruction is therefore dictated more by the nature of the subject matter than by language forms and sequences. Language is a medium to convey informational content of interest and relevance to learners.

The Participatory Approach is similar to Content-based Instruction. Both methods center on meaningful content, but interaction in the Participatory Approach revolves around issues of concern to students, such as social issues or political dilemmas. By grappling with problems in their lives, learners are able to explore the social, historical, and cultural forces that influence them and at the same time improve FL literacy (Larsen-Freeman 2000).

Task-based Instruction, in contrast, is organized around communicative tasks. As learners work to complete a task, they have ample opportunity to interact. The tasks present language learning situations that stimulate problem-solving negotiation between previous knowledge and new concepts (Larsen-Freeman 2000). This approach requires learners to comprehend, produce, manipulate, and interact in authentic language while focusing on meaning rather than on form (Scarcella and Oxford 1992).

Experiential Approaches based on Dewey's principles that one learns best by doing, and that inductive learning by discovery activates strategies enabling students to take charge of their own learning progress. This method gives students concrete experiences through which they discover language principles by trial and

error, processing feedback, building hypotheses about language, and revising these assumptions toward fluency (Eyring 2001). Teachers do not simply explain to students how language works; rather they open up opportunities for students to use language as they struggle with problem-solving complexities in a wide gamut of concrete experiences (Brown 1994).

## CONCLUSION

This study has presented provocative evidence suggesting that FL anxiety may be partially rooted in a FL learner's awareness of disparity in competence across the four language skills, particularly when the learner needs equal proficiency in all four skills. Although learners in this study overwhelmingly desired competence in all four skills, a majority of these learners also perceived a disparity in their language abilities across skills. This cognizance of difference in proficiency, when learners want equal proficiency, stimulates behavior indicative of FL anxiety. Although measuring affect has certain limitations, these findings provide researchers with a point of departure for examining whether integrative approaches could limit or reduce FL anxiety.

Experts in FL teaching have advocated the integration of skills in language teaching for quite some time. The results of this study serve to fortify that position by giving another compelling reason for skills integration —as a means of reducing FL anxiety. If indeed, as the results of this investigation suggest, learners' recognition of a disparity in their skills perpetuates their anxiety, it behooves FL educators to discover ways to make language learning more integrative, with the aim of developing all four skills equally. It also suggests further research on whether integrated approaches to FL teaching can reduce anxiety for FL students.

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