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**Socio-affective strategies for reducing foreign language anxiety levels in university students**

**Estrategias socio-afectivas para reducir la ansiedad ante las lenguas extranjeras en estudiantes universitarios**

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## Socio-affective strategies for reducing foreign language anxiety levels in university students

### Estrategias socio-afectivas para reducir la ansiedad ante las lenguas extranjeras en estudiantes universitarios

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#### Resumen

El objetivo principal de la investigación es analizar el impacto que tiene el uso de estrategias socio-afectivas usadas por estudiantes universitarios para obtener confianza y reducir la ansiedad de lenguas extranjeras cuando desarrollan monólogos. Los participantes de este estudio fue un grupo de inglés básico de una Universidad Mexicana. El enfoque de la investigación fue cuantitativo con el uso de un cuestionario en línea que empleo escala de Likert, cuantitativa con el uso de diarios de alumnos y entrevista semi-estructurada. El diseño metodológico adoptado fue investigación-acción el cual se dividió en cuatro etapas planear la intervención a la problemática del salón de clases, accionar la intervención aplicando estrategias socio-afectivas y monólogos, observar los cambios ocasionados por intervenir de forma crítica y reflexionar sobre los resultados de todo el proceso. Los resultados fueron que los estudiantes de inglés básico redujeron sus niveles de ansiedad de lenguas extranjeras.

**Palabras clave:** ansiedad de lenguas extranjeras, autoconfianza, estrategias socio-afectivas, habla, monólogos

#### Abstract

The main objective of the research is to analyse the impact it has on the use of socio-affective strategies employed by university students to gain confidence and reduce foreign language anxiety when performing monologues. The participants of the study were students of Basic English at a language centre from a southeast Mexican university. The following investigation has a quantitative focus the online questionnaire technique was applied and employed a Likert scale, qualitative with the implementation of students' diaries and semi-structured interview. The methodological design adopted an action research approach. It was divided in four stages planning the intervention of the problematic situation in the classroom, Action the intervention by applying socio-affective strategies and monologues, observe the changes done by the critical intervention and reflect about the results of the whole process. The outcomes were that English Basic students reduced their levels of Foreign Language Anxiety.

**Keywords:** foreign language anxiety, monologues, self-confidence, socio-affective strategies, speaking

## Introduction

### Problematic situation

According to an exploratory questionnaire that was administered to the English basic group, most of the students seemed to have the knowledge and the competence to perform the oral activities. The main problem identified is that students tend to feel uncomfortable when speaking. Most of the students felt anxious, nervous, stressed, and had other negative feelings towards speaking activities.

Additionally, during this process, students were asked about their feelings toward oral performance activities like individual oral participation, presentations, role plays, and monologues. However, most of them reported that they were uncomfortable with those activities because they did not feel secure about their speaking skill when performing in an individual way. That claim made the researcher inquire if that issue was a real problem. Therefore, a teacher's diary was kept, from 8<sup>th</sup> October to 12<sup>th</sup> November, to register all the possible evidence to assure if that was a real problem experienced by students.

Dealing with students who suffer from Foreign Language Anxiety when performing speaking activities seems to be common. However, it is the teacher's task to search for strategies that enhance students' self-confidence to speak without fear. This action research presents a study on the use of socio-affective strategies to reduce foreign language anxiety levels in university students when performing monologues.

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is a linguistic phenomenon characterized by a subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, negative emotional reaction, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system when learning a second language (McIntyre 1999, McIntyre & Gardner 1994, in Lucas & Miraflores, 2012). FLA has a determinant role in the development of language skills such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

According to Horwitz *et al.* (1991) have identified three components or kinds of foreign language anxiety (from now on, FLA): communication apprehension, Fear of negative evaluation, and, Test anxiety.

Communication apprehension is defined as a type of shyness that arises from learners' inability to adequately express mature thoughts and ideas when communicating with people (Brown, 2014).

Fear of Negative Evaluation is another factor that causes language anxiety. "This factor comprises students' fear of appearing awkward, foolish or incompetent in the eyes of learners' peers and teacher, teachers' methods of evaluation and classroom activities, and a fear of losing face" (Zarate, 2017 p. 10).

Test Anxiety is described as an unpleasant feeling or emotional state that "has physiological and behavioral concomitants and that is experienced in formal testing or other evaluative situations" (Zarate 2017 p. 11.). The main cause of this kind of anxiety is the fear of failing a test. As a result, losing self-confidence, feeling inferior to others and other psychological stress may have an impact on students' motivation, which will affect learning.

Those foreign language anxiety sources can have a huge impact on students' performance, abilities, and confidence. they can also be translated into students' difficulty to express themselves and their own views. Additionally, students may create a tendency to underestimate their own abilities.

### **Antecedents**

Learning a foreign language depends on the students' attitude towards it. According to Tsiplakides and Keramida (2010), learning a foreign language successfully implies high levels of motivation and low levels of anxiety. For that reason, anxiety and motivation in learning a foreign language can be regarded as two factors that have a strong relationship between them. This fact has been confirmed by numerous empirical studies which expose that motivation has a direct effect on anxiety and second language achievement. Liu's (2009, in Liu and Huang, 2012) study of 547 Chinese university students revealed that the more anxious student tended to be, the less motivated they were to learn English. It also supported a similar finding by Hao *et al.* (in Liu & Huang, 2012).

Both studies revealed that the more a student is worried about the English language class, the worse s/he performed in English. On the other hand, the more intrinsically and integratively motivated s/he was, and/or interested in foreign languages and cultures, the better s/he performed

in English. It can be concluded that foreign language anxiety and English learning motivation are related to student's performance in English (Liu & Huang, 2012).

There are different definitions of the word speaking that have been suggested by different researchers in language learning. Speaking is to say words orally, to communicate by talking, to make a request, and to make a speech (Nunan, 2015). Speaking can also be defined as an ability that is naturally developed since childhood. Therefore, human communication is a complex process (Harmer, 2015).

Speakers need communication when they want to say something and transmit information. Additionally, speakers apply language according to their own goals. Thus, speakers should be both listeners and speakers at the same time for having effective communication. In this sense, it seems that developing speaking skill is the most important aspect of learning a second or foreign language. It is a means through which learners can communicate with others to achieve certain goals and express their opinions, viewpoints, hopes, and intentions. Therefore, speaking is considered as the prime goal of language learning and the most fundamental skill to attain (Aleksandrak, 2012) Its importance relies on interaction and communication among others to satisfy the hierarchy of human needs.

Speaking satisfies the needs of safety, love-belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. What is more, being able to speak in a foreign language also implies a high dose of elements belonging to the affective domain. In the English as a Foreign Language context, teaching speaking seems to be a fundamental part of a course. One of the main goals of teaching speaking is that students develop their oral skills by applying communication strategies and engaging in the negotiation of meaning (Richards, 2015).

### **Objective**

- The main objective of this action research project is to reduce foreign language anxiety levels in *English basic 300* students when speaking by using socio-affective strategies.

### **Specific Objectives**

- Know which elements foster the foreign language anxiety in speaking activities
- Know which socio-affective strategies the students know and practice in English classes

## Research Question

- How can the use of socio-affective strategies help *English basic 300* students to reduce foreign language anxiety levels when performing monologic tasks?

## Sub Research questions

- Which issues cause Foreign Language Anxiety when English students perform oral activities?
- Which socio-affective strategies are used by English students when performing oral activities?
- How was students' confidence improved when performing monologues after implementing the action plan?

## Materials and Method

The following investigation has a quantitative focus the online questionnaire technique was applied and employed a Likert scale. At the same time, the qualitative method was used with the implementation of students' diaries and semi-structured interview. The methodological design adopted an action research approach. It was divided in four stages planning the intervention of the problematic situation in the classroom, Action the intervention by applying socio-affective strategies and monologues, observe the changes done by the critical intervention and reflect about the results of the whole process. Action Research (AR) is related to the ideas of 'reflective practice' and 'the teacher as researcher' (Burns, 2010). Action Research provides teachers with a rather unique opportunity to analyze how they teach. Teachers can observe objectively and analyze what is happening in the classroom and how learning is occurring. The central idea of the action part of AR is to intervene in a deliberate way to find a solution to a problematic situation and to improve teaching practice.

## Participants

The Action research took place in a public language center located in Xalapa, Veracruz. The language center offers different language courses such as Italian, Japanese, Chinese, German,

French and English. It holds different certifications which are Comités Interinstitucionales para la Evaluación de la Educación Superior (CIEES) evaluation and the Consejo para la Acreditación de Programas Educativos en Humanidades (COAPEHUM) accreditation.

For this study, an English basic 300 group was chosen. The group has a total of 6 students. English lessons are taught four days per week. Such English lessons have two hours per day. English basic 300 students who are the ones participating in this project are a mixed group of 17 to 38 -year-old men and women.

At this level, English basic 300 students have had English lessons for a period of three semesters. These students should have reached a level of English A1, according to the 150 hours of English instruction for the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

During English classes at the language center the development of the four skills of language is promoted: Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening. Thus, it includes receptive as well as productive skills development. During the lessons, the main practice for these learners consists of answering questions related to grammar structures, vocabulary themes, or reading comprehension topics in their books.

### **Techniques and instruments**

During the process of data collection, the methods used for gathering data were:

1. Online Questionnaire (Quantitative)
2. Student's diary (Qualitative)
3. Semi-structured Interview (Qualitative)

For the data, collection of the online questionnaire a quantitative analysis was used. According to Burns (2010), a quantitative analysis is used to characterize or describe a set of numbers, to show numbers succinctly in terms of averages, frequencies, and percentages, and to show how numbers disperse or vary around a central point. The information measured and quantified for each student was categorized as foreign language anxiety when speaking, situational anxiety and trait anxiety. Data were entered into a spreadsheet and then graphed. It was displayed in a bar chart. Each wedge in the bar chart presented levels of agreement or disagreement of foreign language anxiety when speaking, situational anxiety and trait anxiety.

Students' diaries took place during the implementation stage. Teachers and students' diaries had information about the feelings of students during the implementation of the socio-affective strategies for reducing Foreign Language Anxiety. The students' diaries were written by students in the eight weeks of the implementation stage. Content analysis was employed for analyzing information provided in the diaries. The data obtained from the students' diaries provided enough information to answer the sub-research questions in this action research.

Monologic tasks took place during the implementation stage also. Monologic tasks can be defined as “an extended piece of discourse that an individual produces for an audience in formal or informal situations” (Goh & Burns, 2012 p. 210) Additionally, monologic tasks are best conducted within small groups because it reduces the language anxiety that learners face (Goh & Burns, 2012). For that reason, it was created with a group of six English basic 300 students. Additionally, Small groups also maximize class time and give more opportunities to the learner to speak extensively on a topic without interruptions. At the same time, learners may share personal experiences, and view on issues, stories, or topics that they have knowledge or experience of (Goh & Burns, 2012).

Semi-Structure-Interviews took place at the end of the implementation stage. They were video recorded and transcribed Semi-Structure-Interviews had information about students' feelings and thoughts before and after the implementation. The semi-structured interview had eleven questions. The data obtained from the interview allowed the emergence of three categories. The first one is named ‘oral participation in the English classes. The second category was ‘topic selection’. Finally, the third category was ‘self-confidence’. These three different categories were addressed to answer the three sub-research questions of this action research. To analyze the gathered information content analysis was performed. According to Cohen *et al.* (2018 p. 563), “Content analysis can be undertaken with any written material, from documents to interview transcriptions from media products to personal interview”.

Finally, for making visible the results in integrated manner some aspects of the Grounded Theory (GT) and Triangulation technique were used. From GT, selective coding was implemented to establish the central categories that represented the main theme of the research (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Regarding the Triangulation technique, it was employed



Methodological triangulation to increase the in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation as well as to ensure the validity of the results (Guion, 2002).

## **Process**

At the beginning of the implementation, an online questionnaire was administered to the English basic 300 students who participate in the study. The online questionnaire was adapted from Theseira (2014) and validated by some experts in the area. This online questionnaire collected information about students' Foreign language anxiety levels. Additionally, the online questionnaire helped to identify the students with higher levels of foreign language anxiety.

A workshop was implemented for those students with higher levels of foreign language anxiety. In this workshop students practiced monologic tasks. The main reason of having a workshop with students with higher foreign language anxiety levels was because monologic tasks were best conducted within small groups. Additionally, the workshop might not only reduce the foreign language anxiety that many learners face, also maximize the use of class time and give more learners a chance to talk. The workshop was held twice a week. Furthermore, on the workshop four different socio-affective strategies were applied for reducing foreign language anxiety when performing monologues. Since the pandemic of COVID-19 was a factor that did not allow face-to-face interaction, this workshop was held online by using an online videocall (Zoom) and some of the activities were uploaded to an educational platform called EDMODO.

During the implementation stage students' diaries were written. This data collection method provided information about students' feelings during the implementation stage. The student's diaries were written in a word document and uploaded in EDMODO. Afterword, their content was analyzed by the researcher in order to identify categories that provide this data collection method.

Finally, the semi-structured interview provided information about the feelings and thoughts of students that were facing problems with foreign language anxiety before and after the implementation stage. Furthermore, the semi-structured interview took place by Zoom and was video recorded. The semi-structured interview was transcribed and analyzed.

The implementation phase was for eight weeks long, and the sessions in the implementation phase were two hours per day. The workshop was two days per week. To have

access to the participants the researcher had to invite them to be part of it. The six students were interested in this research from the beginning to the end. During this phase, activities were developed in the following way. In the first week, the first data collection method was administered. In the second week, the workshop started with the introduction of the strategies. The training for the monologues started in the third week. The first socio-affective strategy was administered and the training for the monologue was in the fourth week. The second socio-affective strategy was developed and the main activity was group discussion. In the sixth week, the third socio-affective strategy was applied, in this week the main activity was a group discussion one more time. Finally, in the seventh-week students got the fourth socio-affective strategy and trained the monologue they gave a talk with the members of the workshop about a topic they choose. At the end of the implementation, students got interviewed by the researcher to know their feelings towards this implementation phase and the progress of their English skills. Results will be presented in the next chapter

## **Results and discussions**

In this chapter, the results that emerged are presented. These answer the three research sub-questions mentioned at the beginning of this action research. The different sections in which this chapter is divided include the three different categories that emerged through the analysis of the information collected through the data collection methods.

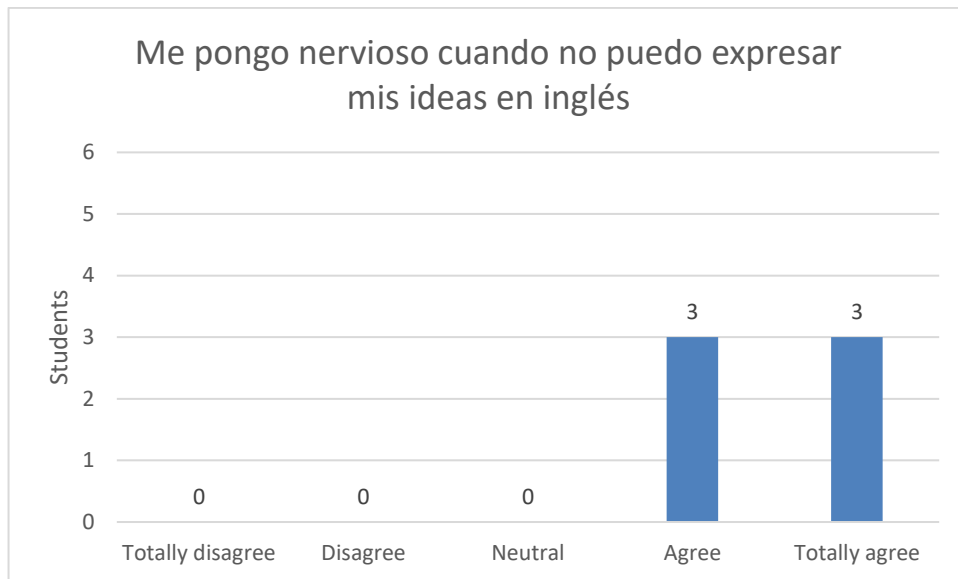
### ***Online questionnaire***

From the online questionnaire, three categories emerged: Foreign Language Anxiety levels, Situational anxiety levels and Trait anxiety levels. The first category 'Foreign Language Anxiety' dealt with feelings of tension, apprehension, nervousness, negative emotional reaction and worry when learning a second language. The second category 'Situational Anxiety' explores the intensity and duration over time. It is experienced under circumstances, events or acts that can be tense and uneasy when learning a second language. Finally, the third category 'Trait Anxiety' is an emotional state that an individual experiences frequently or intensely. It is related to the individual's personality.

In figure 1 there are three answers out of six in the agree option. This represents (50%) of the answers and there are three answers in the option that totally agree; this represents the other (50%) of the answers. The statement asked was “*Me Pongo nervioso cuando no puedo expresar mis ideas en inglés*”

**Figure 1.**

*Foreign language anxiety.*

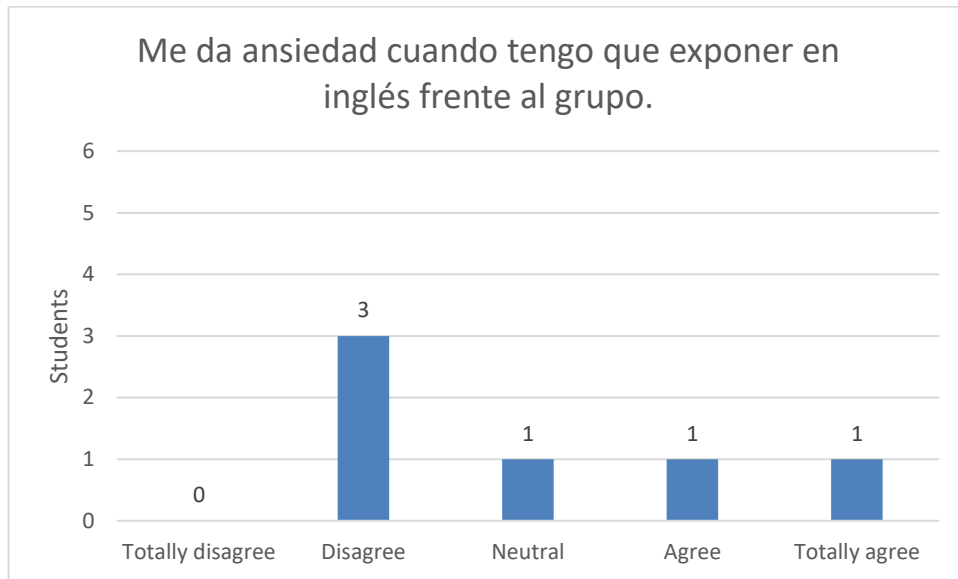


Source: researcher own design (2021)

In figure 2, there are presented the answers of the students to the statement “*Me da ansiedad cuando tengo que exponer en inglés frente al grupo*”. (50%) of the answers are represented in three answers of the option disagree. In addition, there is one answer per options neutral, agree and totally agree. This represents (16.7%) of the answers for each one.

**Figure 2.**

*Situational anxiety.*

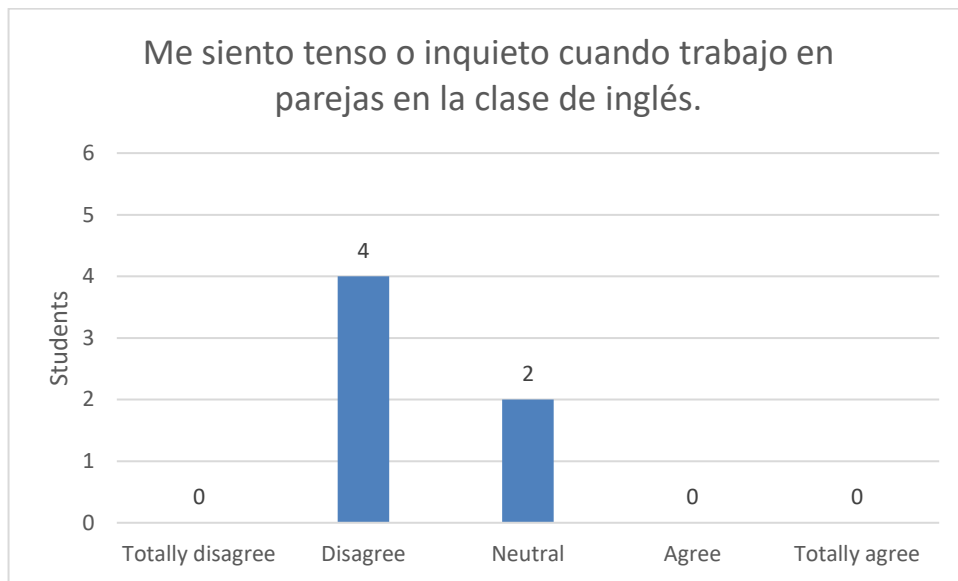


*Source: researcher own design (2021)*

In figure 3, the results of the trait anxiety category are presented. Statement “*Me siento tenso o inquieto cuando trabajo en parejas en la clase de inglés*” results show that (66.7%) of the answers are disagree on this statement. On the other hand, two answers that are from option neutral belongs to (33.3%) of the total answers.

**Figure 3.**

*Trait anxiety.*



Source: researcher own design (2021)

### ***Semi-structured interview***

This data collection method provided these three different categories:

1. Oral participation in the English class
2. Topic Selection
3. Self-confidence.

In the first category (oral participation in the English class), the findings suggested that students have enough time to speak and express themselves in different situations during all the English classes. Student 3, who has been studying for two semesters at the language center answered:

*S3: 'al término de cada sección como Reading, listening, writing después de cada una'*

Student 2, who has also been studying for two semesters at the language center, also shared the idea that the teacher provided different spaces during the English session to practice speaking after different sections like reading, listening, or writing.

*S2: 'aparte del speaking que ahí viene podíamos practicar muchos ejercicios en inglés y hablar las dudas también o mientras veíamos cada uno. en los rooms o mini classrooms de 2 o 3 ahí se podía hablar muchísimo''*

Both students agree that during English class there was enough space to talk. Additionally, there were sufficient opportunities for solving different doubts faced by students.

In the second category (topic selection) students 1 and 2 stated that the selection of the topics was an agreed decision between the teacher and the students.

*S1: 'creo que ambos porque usted sugirió si ese tema estaba bien y ya nosotros le decíamos si nos parecía o si no'.*

*S2: 'creo que entre los dos porque como que todos hablando fuimos buscando el tema y pues se dio el de las vacaciones creo que los dos'.*

At the same time, students stated that topics were meaningful for them. This also had an impact on the development of speaking skill. Student 1 said that the topics selected were helpful to remember their goals whereas student 2 declared that the topics were part of their daily lives.

*S1: 'si me ayudo para recordar no se mis metas que tenía en ese tiempo y que quisiera mejorar también'.*

*S2: 'Son temas que pues a final de cuentas son de parte de tu vida'.*

In the third category (Self-confidence), answers are related to self-confidence. To begin with, S6 share that she improved. Additionally, she expressed that the exercises implemented in class helped her a lot to know better how to write or pronounce. Recordings also helped her to improve her speaking skills.

*S6: 'Yo creo que sí, todavía siento que me falta reafirmar algunas cosas porque es con más práctica, pero justamente esos ejercicios como que también ayudaron mucho a estar pendiente de cómo se escribe como se pronuncia estarlos repitiendo y a la hora de grabarlos pues tratar de que queden bien entonces yo creo que si ayudaron un poco más a esta habilidad de hablar'*

### **Students diaries**

Students from the *English Basic 300* course were asked to write a student journal during the implementation stage of this action research project. The student's journal was written in a Word document and uploaded to the EDMODO platform. This data collection method was used to know about the feelings of students during the implementation of socio-affective strategies.

From students' Journals emerged two different categories.

1. Positive aspects of my classmates
2. How I felt in the English class

In the first category (positive aspects of my classmates) students provided different positive aspects of their classmates. This is one of the main objectives of socio-affective strategies, to develop a supportive classroom atmosphere where everybody sees positive things about their peers.

S1 wrote positive things about S2. For instance, 'He is participative, a good classmate, he has helped me to understand things about the class, he also is very polite and a hardworking person

*'Es muy participativo, es dedicado, le pone mucho empeño a las actividades, es buen compañero, me ha explicado cuando tengo dudas, es muy gentil y es alguien que le pone todas las ganas en lo que se propone'.*

In how I felt in the English class category, students wrote about their feelings when they were in the English class. This category allowed the researcher to know the progress and feelings during the implementation phase.

S4 wrote that at the end of the class she was happy because she did not feel that kind of socialization that only happens in an English classroom. For instance, she was able to make jokes and make new friends.

*'Realmente estaba feliz, ya tenía rato que no sentía ese tipo de socialización que solo se da en el salón de clase, cuando puedes bromear un rato con el compañero de alado, con los que puedes hacer nuevos amigos'.*

From the previously collected information, three general categories emerged. These categories allowed the researcher to analyze the gathered data. These are the three categories:

1. How I perceive language content.
2. How I interact in the EFL classroom.
3. How my peers influence me.

In the first category, 'How I perceive language content' semi-structured interviews provide answers about the topic selection. To begin with, the topics of the monologue activities were decided between the teacher and the students. According to Thanasoulas, (2002), allowing students to define and incorporate their preferred topics into the curriculum might be an advantage for reducing foreign language anxiety when speaking. The main reason is owed to students know the topic that they are developing. Additionally, it was shown in the answers to the students' questionnaires that students did not feel anxious when they spoke about their hobbies or their families in front of the group. The results confirm that students seemed not to be anxious when speaking about the topics they chose.

The second category 'How I interact in the EFL classroom?' revealed that when students needed to interact in a couple they tended to work and help each other much better through continuous collaboration. This fact is in line with Thanasoulas (2002) and Tsiplakides and Keramida (2010) beliefs about the necessity of a relaxed and supportive classroom atmosphere



for learning to occur. Furthermore, it could be seen in the answers to the questionnaire that most students do not feel anxious when they work in a couple. Moreover, half of the students did not feel unquiet when they speak with their classmates. Students also report in their journals that they were happy about this kind of interaction. They think that having a good classroom atmosphere makes them feel much more confident. According to Tsiplakides and Keramida (2010) teachers should show students that they care for them, and that teachers are in the classroom to help them master the English language.

In the third category 'How my peers influence me' students made it evident that they were more secure speaking in English. Additionally, they did not feel embarrassed or nervous when they spoke with their peers. This fact was also confirmed by the questionnaire's results. Most of the students revealed not to feel anxious when they posed a question to the teacher (50% of the answers disagree). Additionally, half of the students confirmed not to be anxious when they introduced themselves. Furthermore, in the journals, this could be seen in students' writings about their classmates. Writing about what they think about their peers allowed them to know what others thought about them, which led to the establishment of a supportive classroom atmosphere (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2010).

### **Conclusions**

It can be concluded that the use of socio-affective strategies is helpful to develop oral skills. At the same time, they seemed to be effective to reduce Foreign Language Anxiety among university students. In addition, these strategies helped to develop students' self-confidence and to create a good classroom atmosphere where students helped each other for building their progress together. In this sense, the results obtained could guide university English language professors in taking advantage of using socio-affective strategies and monologues to help students to feel confident to speak in English in the classroom.

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