The relationship between EFL learners' proficiency and speaking anxiety

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EFL LEARNERS' PROFICIENCY AND SPEAKING ANXIETY

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the relationship between EFL learners' proficiency and speaking anxiety. Foreign language speaking anxiety is a complex phenomenon that has attracted a lot of attention, especially its relation to proficiency levels. The purpose of this research was to measure Croatian high school students' levels of foreign language speaking anxiety and to examine whether proficiency levels would have any effect on them. Moreover, this study aimed to investigate which of the indicators of proficiency level would correlate the most with students' speaking anxiety. The results show that Croatian high school learners of English experience moderate levels of speaking anxiety, and that proficiency can either decrease or increase these levels. Furthermore, the indicator of proficiency that correlates the most is the score on the proficiency test, followed by self-perceived proficiency levels and teachers' evaluation of students' speaking skills. However, English GPA does not seem to have a linear relationship with speaking anxiety.

Key words: foreign language speaking anxiety, proficiency, self-perceived proficiency, Croatian high school students, English as a foreign language

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1. Introduction

Foreign-language learning is a complex process that involves numerous factors which can affect its outcome. It cannot be boiled down to learning grammar rules and vocabulary by heart, and everyone has to face different challenges on the path to mastering a language. The individuality of this process lies not only in learners' cognitive abilities, but also in their social and cultural backgrounds, the environment in which they learn a language, their personal traits and their feelings and attitudes towards a certain language. In other words, learning a foreign language cannot be simplified with a formula, given that it is, in fact, an interplay of various factors, all of which are as dynamic and complex as the language-learning process.

Precisely because it is so multifarious, there are constantly new theories and approaches that are supposed to help both language learners and teachers alike. The field of SLA is a relatively young one, but it is ever-evolving, and it has already taken big steps towards the understanding of the phenomenon that is language acquisition. Although in the beginning the focus was primarily on the cognitive realm, this discipline has turned its gaze towards the affective factors as well. According to Pavlenko, this 'affective turn' happened during the 1990s and the 2000s (2013, 6). Nonetheless, some research on this aspect of language learning can be found even earlier in the work of Horwitz et al. (1986).

Among affective factors, special attention has been paid to anxiety, a phenomenon that is not restricted to the language-learning process, but that has a significant effect on its outcome. Anxiety is also multifaceted and due to its psychological nature, somewhat difficult to explore. The definitions of anxiety are numerous, depending on the type, but many researchers agree that foreign language anxiety deserves to be observed and examined separately. The effects of foreign language anxiety cannot be ignored and researchers are striving to provide an insight into this aspect of foreign-language learning in order to facilitate both learning and teaching.

This elusive phenomenon can be studied from different angles and in relation to other elements, such as motivation, willingness to communicate and proficiency. The link to the latter has been given the most prominence and has been investigated the most. Since this relationship is bidirectional, some research deals with the effects of anxiety on proficiency, whereas the purpose of other research is to examine the effects of proficiency on anxiety. Some

researchers limited their study to a type of foreign language anxiety related to a certain skill, such as listening or speaking.

This paper, too, deals with the relationship between proficiency and foreign language speaking anxiety, with emphasis on Croatian learners of English as a foreign language. More specifically, its aim was to investigate whether the level of proficiency would have any effect on learners' levels of speaking anxiety. To examine the level of proficiency, various variables were taken into consideration and tested. In the first part, the theoretical background on anxiety and proficiency is laid out. The second part of the paper is concerned with the research and the results. Lastly, there is a discussion based on the results of the research. Some potential problems and limitations to the study, as well as suggestions for further research are also discussed.

2. Theoretical background

Before delving into the description of the research and laying out its results, we will briefly describe the two central constructs; anxiety and proficiency. Both are complex phenomena, and, although there are ways to measure them, the obtained results should be generalized with caution.

2.1. Anxiety

The most general definition of anxiety defines it as an "unpleasant emotional condition" which encompassed anything from a slight feeling of uneasiness to a strong feeling of fear (Karatas et al., 2016, 383). The investigation into this psychological phenomenon began in the second half of the 20th century, resulting in more precise definitions than the aforementioned one. May, for example, defined it in 1977 as "an emotional response to a threat to some value that the individual holds essential to his existence as a personality" (qtd. in Balemir, 2009, 10). At first it may seem that this definition almost equalizes anxiety with fear. However, thanks to the emphasis on the individual, it is clear that these two emotions are not the same, given that anxiety can be present in situations that do not involve any real danger.

As Steimer explains, the difference between anxiety and fear lies in the reality or objectivity of danger; whereas fear is caused by real, objective danger, anxiety relies more on the perception of a certain situation (2002, 233). Spielberger's description of anxiety is in line

with the thought that anxiety and fear are two distinct emotions. According to him, anxiety can be defined as "the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system" (qtd. in Balemir, 2009, 10). This definition again underlines the subjectivity that is characteristic of the feeling of anxiety. To illustrate this distinction between anxiety and fear, or perceived and real danger, one can take a look at this simple example. A person may feel anxious when in larger groups of people, although there is no real danger that somebody is going to hurt him or her. On the other hand, a person may feel fear if he or she sees that one person from the group holds a knife or a gun.

When confronted with some perceived danger, people often feel like the situation is out of their control. Şimşek and Dörnyei conducted a study the results of which led them to a conclusion that people create 'anxious selves'; in other words, people perceive themselves as a separate identity when in anxiety-inducing situations (2017). This other self acts on its own, independent of the will of the person it belongs to.

Co-existence of multiple selves often entails an internal struggle, given that various selves are competing for dominance. According to MacIntyre and Gardner, this increases cognitive load; their claim that anxiety interferes with a person's cognition, which consequently affects this person's performance (1994, 285). That could explain why some people who usually talk without any difficulties start to stutter in situations that make them anxious. If we apply this to the classroom setting, we can explain why some students who are successful in class fail an exam. For them, exams are triggers for anxiety and, despite the vast knowledge they may have, their cognitive load becomes too big for them to cope with it and to focus on processing relevant information.

Apart from increased cognitive load, anxiety also causes some more easily noticeable, physiological symptoms. Some of the most common indicators that a person feels anxious are hand shaking, shivering, sweating, dry mouth, squeaky voice and fast heartbeat (Rajitha & Alamelu, 2020, 1054). These symptoms usually occur in clusters, which should facilitate identification of somebody who is anxious. They are also often used in definitions of anxiety. Casado and Dereshiwsky notice that most definitions "[range] from an amalgam of overt behavioral characteristics that can be studied scientifically to introspective feelings that are epistemologically inaccessible" (2001, 39). It could be said then that anxiety has three manifestations: it causes the physiological symptoms that can be measured, provokes feelings that only the person experiencing them is aware of, and increases cognitive load, thus

obstructing information processing. Living with anxiety inhibits a person from performing well in a range of situations from interaction with other people to exams or job promotions.

While some people are anxious by nature, others only experience anxiety in certain situations. Consequently, we can talk about different types of anxiety, depending on the circumstances of their occurrence. According to the literature on the subject, there are three types of anxiety. If a person is always anxious, if it is their personal characteristic, then we are talking about anxiety as a trait (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2005, 203). This type is of stable nature and does not depend on circumstances or situations; anxiety is present all the time. On the other hand, there are state and situation-specific anxiety. State anxiety is induced only on certain occasions, but it does not follow a rule or a pattern (Tercan & Dikilitaş, 2015, 17). For example, one can feel anxious about getting a particular medical exam, but this does not mean anxiety will occur every time this person has to get a medical exam. It means there is something specific about that exam that causes anxiety, but the feeling does not reflect on all situations of the same type. If anxiety is induced by certain types of situations, we can talk about situation-specific anxiety (Balemir, 2009, 12). For instance, one can feel anxious every time he or she has to drive, but is not normally an anxious person. Anxiety will be induced on every occasion this person sits behind the wheel. Another "clearly-defined situation" would be language learning, or some aspects of it (Tercan & Dikilitaş, 2015, 17). Somebody can be anxious about having to learn a language for various reasons, or only about some specific tasks, like listening or speaking.

There is another way we could classify anxiety types. If we choose to focus on the effects anxiety has on the individual, then we can talk about facilitating and debilitating types. Balemir (2009, 12) as well as Gass et al. (2013, 462) agree that anxiety does not have to be perceived as something negative; on the contrary, they believe that anxiety can, in fact, propel a person to work harder and to become more successful precisely thanks to the feeling of anxiety. For example, if a student is anxious about an exam, he or she would want to make sure he or she is well prepared for it in order to feel calmer. However, Balemir also talks about the type of anxiety that inhibits an individual from performing well; this type of anxiety stifles the potential that this individual might have (2009, 12). The feeling of anxiety simply becomes too overwhelming for the person to deal with the task at hand. The debilitating type ties in with the theory proposed by MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) that anxiety represents an interference with cognition.

MacIntyre and Gardner were not the only ones to notice the connection between anxiety and cognition, and the debilitating effect anxiety can have on one's ability to process information. Another scholar that focused on cognition-anxiety relationship was Stephen Krashen. Krashen paid special attention to the learning environment and the effects of anxiety on learning. Through his research, he came up with the 'affective filter hypothesis' that postulates that "the intake of knowledge for processing is inhibited when the affective filter is high" (qtd. in Tercan & Dikilitaş, 2015, 17). In other words, learning is disabled by the influence of emotions, more specifically anxiety. A learner's processing capacity is burdened by an overflow of information of the emotional type, thus preventing him or her from processing new information.

2.1.1. Foreign language anxiety

Krashen's hypothesis can be applied to language learning as well. Although in the beginning of SLA not much importance was given to the affective domain, that started to change during the 1990s. The results of research conducted during that time (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Horwitz et al., 1986; Saito & Samimi, 1996) showed that the affective domain is as important as the cognitive one (Balemir, 2009, 1). This meant that no matter how capable a learner cognitively was, there was still a chance that learning would not take place if he or she lacked motivation, felt anxiety, or had some negative attitudes towards the language in question.

Among all affective factors that may influence language learning, anxiety seems to be given the most prominence, according to Çağatay (2015, 648). As the attention shifted to this element and as the body of research on the topic started to grow, there was more and more evidence that anxiety and language learning are connected, and that this type of anxiety was not the same as other types. The first ones to notice this and initiate a shift in the way the relationship between anxiety and language learning was observed were Horwitz et al. in 1986. Their research showed that language-related anxiety does not share many similarities with other types of anxiety (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2005, 203). Horwitz et al. believe that '(foreign) language anxiety' is "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning" (ibid.). It is interesting that they chose to put 'classroom' in their definition, although language learning can take place in other ways, for example, through one-on-one conversations with a native speaker or via television and other media. Their insistence on the existence of a separate type of anxiety related specifically to the

realm of language learning brought a new perspective on the issue. From that point on, scholars started to differentiate between anxiety in a more general sense and foreign language anxiety.

MacIntyre and Gardner also noticed that "not all forms of anxiety would influence second language learning" (1994, 284). Their definition differs slightly from the one proposed by Horwitz et al. For them the term '(foreign) language anxiety' denotes "the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening and learning" (ibid.) By using the syntagm 'second language contexts' MacIntyre and Gardner manage to cover all language-learning situations, thus assuring that anxiety can arise in all kinds of language-learning environments, and not just in the classroom.

The reason foreign language anxiety must be distinguished from other types of anxiety lies in its nature. If we were to classify foreign language as one of the three types previously mentioned in this paper, then we could say that it belongs to situation-specific anxiety, given that it manifests itself only in a set of clearly defined circumstances that is language learning (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2005, 203). Moreover, it is not necessarily tied to trait anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986). In other words, anxiety may not be a stable personal characteristic of an individual, but it may be induced by the language-learning context. It may not be provoked by the entire language-learning process, but only by certain aspects or, even, stages (Balemir, 2009, 11). For instance, a learner may feel anxious only when asked to speak, or he or she may feel anxious in the beginning stages, but later anxiety dissipates. Jin et al. (2015) investigated the stability of foreign language anxiety through a longitudinal study, and found that, in the case of Japanese learners of English, anxiety started to diminish as their language proficiency got higher.

Since learning a language is a process that requires tracking of the progress that has been made, a learner is often exposed to situations in which his or her knowledge is tested in a way. Whether his or her receptive or productive skills are being tested, it could be seen as a kind of performance. Horwitz et al. claim that due to this fact, we can observe language anxiety in relation to three types of performance anxieties: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (1986, 127). Communication apprehension is possibly related the most with foreign language anxiety, taking into consideration the fact that language's main purpose is communication with other people. The concept refers to shyness that one may feel when communicating. According to Horwitz et al., it can be further divided into oral communication anxiety (when it comes to pair or group work), "stage fright" (when it comes to public speaking) and receiver anxiety (related to the fear of not understanding the interlocutor) (ibid.). Aspects, or skills, that are affected the most by this type of performance

anxiety are speaking and listening, and it can be noticed that the main concern is understanding or being understood. Test anxiety, on the other hand, is not related solely to the area of language learning, but to all types of situations where some kind of evaluation is required. The roots of this type of performance anxiety can be traced to a fear of failure (Horwitz et al., 1986, 128). Test anxiety is experienced more often by people who are perfectionists because they attribute more importance to success (Toubot et al., 2018, 48). Finally, fear of negative evaluation can be defined as the fear of others' judgment, and it does not refer only to tests, but to all types of situations where others can evaluate an individual's performance (Horwitz et al., id.). For example, fear of negative evaluation can arise when an individual is talking to a native speaker of some language because in that situation the native speaker is thought to be evaluating the individual's performance.

In some cases, due to language anxiety, an individual will perform badly. Research has shown that language anxiety negatively affects one's performance (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1986; Balemir, 2009; Karatas et al., 2016). In other words, they consider anxiety to be the cause of poor performance. Learners that exhibited high levels of anxiety were not able to perform as well as the ones with lower levels of anxiety. Observing their performance might lead us to a conclusion that they simply have poor language skills, although this may not be the case; their performance might have been affected by anxiety. What Karatas et al. also noticed is that higher levels of anxiety are usually related to lower grades (2016, 383). It can be derived that anxiety tends to have more debilitating than facilitating effects. However, it has to be emphasized that performance does not reflect skills or knowledge of a language, and that grades do not reflect success in the learning process.

On the other hand, there are scholars that question the causal relationship between language anxiety and performance. They invert the direction of this relationship, assuring that anxiety is, in fact, the consequence of having poor language skills and performing badly (Ganschow et al., 1994; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2005, 2006). According to the arguments and Language Coding Deficit/Difference Hypothesis (LCDH) proposed by Sparks et al. (1998), some learners may face difficulties while coding in their native language. These difficulties are then transferred to a foreign language as well, meaning that these learners will experience anxiety as a consequence of their lack of language skills. Whether anxiety is the cause or the consequence of poor language skills has not yet been agreed on.

However elusive the concept of foreign language anxiety may seem, it can be measured. Horwitz et al. (1986) developed a Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), a 33-item questionnaire in the form of five-point Likert scale. Answers for each of the items range

from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’, based on how the person feels about each statement. Nonetheless, as the person doing this questionnaire can be dishonest for a number of reasons, it should not be the only measure of one’s anxiety. Dawala Wiland and Duy Vo (2018) used a complex approach to the issue, based on the dynamic systems theory. They measured even participants’ heartbeats to gain a more complete and objective insight. Another popular method is an interview. This is possibly the most exhaustive one, given that the researcher can find out the most speaking directly to a person, asking all the questions FLCAS cannot provide answers to. If the research is longitudinal, one can opt for a diary on anxiety participants are asked to keep.

2.1.2. Foreign language speaking anxiety

As mentioned previously, foreign language anxiety can affect the language-learning process in its entirety or in some of its aspects and stages. Among all language-learning situations, speaking seems to be the most anxiety-inducing for learners (Karatas et al., 2016, 383). The reason behind this phenomenon can be found in the nature of this activity or skill. As Goh and Burns (2012) suggest, “speaking is a highly complex skill that comprises knowledge of language and discourse, core speaking skills and communication strategies” (qtd. in Chou, 2018, 612). While we speak, we are not only thinking about what we want to say and what we are saying, but we are also trying to understand our interlocutor and pick up on conversation cues. This means that several processes are running parallel to each other, which increases cognitive load. If we look at Levelt’s model of speech (1989), we can see that the person doing the talking is at the same time monitoring what has been said. A lot of processes are running simultaneously, which requires not only accuracy, but also speed, thus putting pressure on the speaker and causing anxiety (Balemir, 2009, 3). Other skills do not require that much automaticity and that is why speaking stands out when it comes to foreign language anxiety.

Not even speaking causes anxiety every single time; some circumstances seem to make learners more anxious than others. Hence, Dawala Wilang and Duy Vo highlight the importance of the task itself, that is, its nature (2018, 696). In other words, we cannot exclude this factor when trying to gain a deeper understanding of the problem of speaking anxiety. Ganschow et al. (1994) point out impromptu speaking, which includes answering questions without preparing beforehand, but also all kinds of activities that do not leave room for preparation in advance. Young et al. (1990) also mention on-spot activities as well as speaking

in front of the class. This can be due to fear of negative evaluation, as it was proven in a study conducted by Toubot et al. (2018). The only research that yielded different results was the one by Huang (2004); oral exams and presentations proved to be more anxiety-provoking for the participants than group or pair work. A possible explanation for this, if we exclude lack of topical or lexical knowledge, could be script-reliance (Dawala Wilang & Duy Vo, 2018, 696). Unfortunately, learners rarely talk spontaneously in these situations; rather, they learn their "lines" by heart. In other words, while giving a presentation or being examined orally, learners fear that they have not memorized the "script" or a portion of text they are supposed to narrate.

Aside from a lack of linguistic or topical knowledge, research has also shown other factors that could trigger anxiety. Rajitha and Alamelu (2020) mention psychological, physiological and cultural factors. Psychological factors refer to different emotions a learner might be going through at the moment of speaking; for example, a learner might be experiencing some difficulties that burden his or her mind, which exacerbate his or her anxiety. Speech impediments and speech disorders would belong to the group of physiological factors that cause anxiety. If a person stutters, it is probable he or she will be anxious about any kind of speaking task, especially if that stutter is present only when speaking a foreign language. Another possibility is having a different anatomy of the oral cavity which inhibits a person from pronouncing certain sounds that exist in a foreign language, but not in his or her mother tongue. When it comes to cultural factors, it is often related to the issue of gender relations. To clarify, in some communities women are still not given the same rights as men, so they can become anxious when they are asked to express their opinion (Bensalem, 2018, 49).

Environment in which a language is being learned also plays an important role and can also be subsumed under cultural factors. "[E]nvironment in which a language is learned dictates pedagogical practice", which sometimes results in rigid power relations between teachers and students (Hanifa, 2018, 235). This leads to the teacher being a figure that provokes fear and, consequently, speaking in front of such a figure would cause anxiety. Saputra Mahmud mentions another problem that might be the result of a pedagogical practice of an institution: sometimes teachers neglect practicing speaking skill with their students and put more emphasis on acquiring grammar rules and vocabulary (2018, 131). Moreover, a teacher's approach to corrective feedback can be crucial for triggering speaking anxiety. Overall atmosphere in the classroom is also of big importance; if it is dominated by competitiveness and success-oriented, some learners might feel pressure if they cannot keep up with their colleagues. The role of the teacher is to reduce learners' levels of anxiety through promotion of a more relaxed, collaborative atmosphere, but also through adjusting their approach to the learners.

It has to be emphasized that foreign language speaking anxiety is a problem for teachers as much as it is for learners (Hanifa, 2018, 236). Teachers have to find a way to ease this anxiety in order to develop all learners' skills. In order to help learners who are experiencing speaking anxiety, the teacher must first identify them, that is, recognize their behavior. Normally, these learners will be less fluent while talking, sit in the back row, remain silent during speaking activities, and avoid eye contact with the teacher (Dawala Wilang & Duy Vo, 2018, 695; Shaukat Ansari, 2015, 42). These behaviors can be most easily noticed during some discussions, for example, during a pre-task activity. Usually those that experience speaking anxiety will not participate, unless being directly asked by the teacher. Even then, they will probably fidget and their speech will not be fluent; they will stop and search for words, or begin a sentence without finishing it, etc. However, it is crucial to try and include them in speaking activities because, by refusing to participate, they will not improve their speaking skills and probably continue experiencing anxiety (Jin et al., 2015, 57). It could be concluded that their speaking anxiety will increase, given that their colleagues will constantly show progress in their speaking skills, whereas they will remain stagnant in that aspect.

Foreign language speaking anxiety, as well as foreign language anxiety, can be measured by a questionnaire designed especially for these purposes. In 2004, Huang developed Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS) that consists of 24 items in a five-point Likert scale. The difference between the aforementioned FLCAS and FLSAS lies in the fact that FLSAS is more focused on speaking anxiety, so some statements concerning language in general were cut out. Furthermore, some statements that concern speaking were added. The scale can be further modified for specific research purposes. Balemir (2009), for instance, adjusted FLSAS to Turkish university learners of English as a foreign language. One disadvantage that was noticed by Piniel and Csizér is the focus on debilitating effects of anxiety, both in FLSAS and in FLCAS (2013, 528). Nonetheless, given the adjustable nature of FLSAS, this could be easily remedied by adding some statements that are centered around facilitative effects of anxiety as well.

2.2. Relationship between foreign language speaking anxiety and other factors

Foreign language speaking anxiety never appears in isolation, independently of other elements characteristic of the language-learning process, commonly known as individual

differences. It can be said that the relationship between the two is bi-directional; that is, anxiety is at the same time affected by them and they are affected by anxiety.

One of the most popular concepts connected to foreign language speaking anxiety is the construct of self-efficacy. Bandura (1986) defines self-efficacy as "individuals' judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (qtd. in Bensalem, 2018, 40). This kind of self-confidence is important in language learning, given that the process consists of completion of different tasks. Low self-efficacy can account for bad performance, which only exacerbates speaking anxiety (ibid.). However, self-efficacy is not reliable, that is, it does not have to reflect the reality of a learner's knowledge and capabilities. What is more, anxiety can, in fact, be the cause of low self-efficacy.

A bi-directional relationship is also characteristic of speaking anxiety and motivation. Mihaljević Djigunović affirms that "they are both the cause and result of each other" (2005, 202). In other words, speaking anxiety can cause a lack of motivation to engage in any kind of activities, not just the speaking ones; simultaneously, a lack of motivation to learn a language can cause speaking anxiety. Low levels of motivation mean that a learner will not give his or her best to learn a language, hence, his or her linguistic knowledge will not be on the same level as that of his or her colleagues. Reasonably, this will cause speaking anxiety.

Another factor that is closely related to speaking anxiety is (un)willingness to communicate. According to Liu and Jackson, speaking anxiety and unwillingness to communicate "share common predictors" (2008, 82). All factors that influence speaking anxiety will influence unwillingness to communicate as well. Moreover, lower levels of anxiety mean that a learner will be more willing to communicate, whereas higher levels of anxiety mean that a learner will be unwilling to communicate.

2.2.1. Relationship between foreign language speaking anxiety and level of proficiency

The relationship between foreign language speaking anxiety and the level of proficiency has captured the most attention among the scholars that conducted research on the relationship between anxiety and other affective factors. Studies on the topic are numerous, especially from the 1990s onwards. However, the results have been inconclusive and there is still no clear answer to the question of the nature of this relationship. Due to the complexity of

the issue, it can be observed from various perspectives, in various contexts and, consequently, it can be investigated using different methods and approaches.

Karatas et al. (2016) investigated Turkish university students' foreign language speaking anxiety with a hypothesis that proficiency level will influence levels of speaking anxiety. They were also interested in gender differences when it comes to this question. Their research showed that the level of proficiency did not have any effect on speaking anxiety. Moreover, it showed that female students were more anxious than the male ones. Çağatay's (2015) research was similar and the results were the same: there was no correlation between foreign language speaking anxiety and proficiency levels.

Liu (2006), on the other hand, conducted research that showed that there was a negative correlation between speaking anxiety and learners' proficiency. The study was longitudinal and it tracked the progress of its participants in terms of proficiency and speaking anxiety. The results showed that as the participants' proficiency level became higher, their anxiety levels decreased. However, the levels of anxiety between participants with different levels of proficiency did not differ significantly. Jin et al. (2015) also opted for a longitudinal study of the changes in learners' levels of speaking anxiety and the results they obtained were in accordance with the ones from Liu (2006). These studies corroborated the basic hypothesis that levels of anxiety will decrease as learners' proficiency improves.

Conversely, there was research that proved this hypothesis to be inaccurate. Mahmoodzadeh (2012) hypothesized that, due to greater linguistic awareness, learners with higher levels of proficiency will experience more speaking anxiety. The results proved that, indeed, there was a positive correlation between the two variables. This can be explained by the fact that, as proficiency levels increase, one is more aware of all mistakes that can be made. Moreover, people with higher proficiency are usually trusted with tasks that involve more responsibility and small mistakes can sometimes cause big problems. For example, if we think of language majors, students are aware that their speech is expected to be almost impeccable, both in accuracy and in fluency. Furthermore, Mihaljević Djigunović (2005) argues that learners with higher levels of proficiency tend to be more critical of their own performance. These great expectations can put a lot of pressure on them and cause speaking anxiety.

Bensalem (2018) introduced the notion of self-perceived proficiency, which refers not to the proficiency measured by standardized tests, but the proficiency level learners themselves think they possess. This concept is connected with the previously-mentioned self-efficacy. Self-perceived proficiency also showed a negative correlation with speaking anxiety. The beliefs learners had about their level of proficiency positively influenced their achievement and

lessened their speaking anxiety. Hanifa (2008) and Balemir (2009) claim that learners often evaluate their own skills by comparing themselves to others. Thus, it can be concluded that self-perceived proficiency is also related to this comparison. This can mean that, for example, if a learner is surrounded by a group of lower achievers, he or she may overestimate his or her own proficiency. Aside from the group of learners they belong to, Liu and Jackson consider that an important factor is the age at which they started learning English (2008, 80). It is probable that learners will think their proficiency level to be higher if they have been learning English for a longer period of time.

The variety of hypotheses and results can be explained by the fact that research had different purposes. Apart from different methods that were used (questionnaires, diaries, interviews, etc.), one must bear in mind that all research was conducted in different circumstances. Tercan and Dikilitaş emphasize the importance of the language itself; not all languages have the same status, especially within different countries (2015, 18). For instance, English has become the language of the world, we are constantly exposed to it and it is more probable we will learn English than Hindu with which we do not have as much contact. Consequently, we might feel less anxious speaking English than speaking Hindu. The results of research on these two languages and speaking anxiety they might provoke are likely to be different. Another circumstance that has to be taken into consideration is the country in which this language is learned. It is probable that research on English learners' speaking anxiety will yield different results in India and Croatia.

When testing learners' proficiency, the researcher has to be aware of the limitations of the tests being used. Brown warns about the fact that, due to time constraint, researchers often use multiple-choice tests to examine learners' proficiency (2001, 389). This may reflect only learners' ability to do a task or it may even be a result of a lucky guess. Moreover, they are not indicators of learners' speaking skill. Given that proficiency is a complex phenomenon, it can vary from skill to skill. It is especially common to find differences in proficiency levels between productive and receptive skills. Richards claims that "all language users have greater receptive competence [...] than productive competence" (2015, *Cambridge.org*) That is why more detailed and all-encompassing proficiency tests are necessary.

3. The study

3.1. Aims of the study

The relationship between foreign language speaking anxiety and proficiency attracted so much attention ever since SLA experienced an "affective turn". This research was centered around the same relationship, but in Croatian high school context. To this point there have been studies on different types of foreign language anxiety and their relationship to proficiency, but ,to the author's knowledge, none of them was focused solely on speaking anxiety. Moreover, there are not many studies of the relationship between speaking anxiety and proficiency among Croatian learners of English as a foreign language, especially when it comes to high school students. The aim of this study was to determine the level of speaking anxiety among Croatian high school learners of English as a foreign language, as well as which of the three types listed by Horwitz et al. (1986) was the most prominent one. Moreover, the study aimed at finding out whether there was any correlation between foreign language speaking anxiety and proficiency, and, if so, whether it was positive or negative. Finally, one of the objectives of this research was to investigate which of the indicators of learners' proficiency level (score on the proficiency test, self-perceived proficiency, GPA and teachers' evaluation of students' speaking skills) is related the most to speaking anxiety levels.

3.2. Hypotheses

In order to answer the above-mentioned questions, four hypotheses were formed. Hypothesis 1 (§H1) is related to the levels of speaking anxiety among Croatian high school EFL learners: it is expected that the levels of speaking anxiety will be moderate. Due to high exposure to the English language, Croatian high-school learners are not expected to experience high levels of anxiety. Furthermore, given that there has recently been a change within Croatian education system regarding the way languages were taught, it is probable that the learners have a lot of opportunities to practice their speaking skills, which should reduce their speaking anxiety, according to the available literature (Hanifa, 2008).

Furthermore, given that some of the statements from the questionnaire corresponded with the three types of performance anxiety mentioned previously, it is expected that some of these statements would result in more extreme answers (1 or 5 on the Likert scale) than others. More specifically, it is expected that the largest number of extreme answers will belong to the statements that refer to the fear of negative evaluation because their self-perceived proficiency is mostly based on comparison to other people (§H2). This means that they constantly evaluate others' proficiency levels and are aware that others evaluate their proficiency as well.

Hypothesis 3 (§H3) refers to the question of the type of the relationship between the levels of speaking anxiety and proficiency levels of Croatian high-school students. The correlation is expected to be negative, that is, it is expected that learners that scored higher on the proficiency test will experience lower levels of anxiety and vice versa (§H3). As proficiency level gets higher, learners' automaticity increases as well and the cognitive load is reduced, which, as seen previously in this paper, oftentimes results in lower levels of anxiety.

Regarding research question 3, one hypothesis was formed. It is expected that the highest correlation will be the one between the score on self-perceived proficiency test and foreign language speaking anxiety (§H4). This correlation is expected to be negative as well. In other words, it is expected that learners that score higher on self-perceived proficiency test will exhibit lower levels of anxiety, due to higher self-confidence.

3.3. Methodology

3.3.1. Participants

A total of 85 Croatian high-school EFL learners participated in this study. They were taken from two classes of tenth-graders and two classes of eleventh-graders. Moreover, they went to two schools with different programs, and one class of tenth-graders and one of eleventh-graders was selected from each of them. One school is focused on modern languages, whereas the other one was focused on arts and design. The reason participants were taken from two different schools, i.e. schools with different programs, lies in the fact that the school that is focused on languages dedicates more hours weekly to English. Furthermore, the high school focused on languages offers a bilingual program to its students. Consequently, it was expected that students from this school would score higher both on the proficiency test and self-perceived proficiency test. There were 43 participants from the language-focused high school and 42 participants from the school of arts and design.

When it comes to the number of participants according to their grade, there were 43 tenth-graders and 42 eleventh-graders. The reason for choosing this age group was the expected level of proficiency. The level of proficiency of students at this education level should be between intermediate (B1) and upper-intermediate (B2). These levels represent an intermediate stage, bridging the gap between beginner proficiency and complete mastery of a language. This characteristic allows the obtained results to offer a more insightful understanding of the relationship between foreign language speaking anxiety and proficiency.

All participants were told that participation is not obligatory, but on a voluntary basis, and that the data would be used only for the paper itself.

3.3.2. Instruments

In order to establish the level of proficiency of the participants a standardized multiple-choice test by MacMillan was used (Appendix A). The test consisted of 50 tasks and was divided into two parts; the first 40 tasks concerned grammar, whereas the last 10 were meant to examine their knowledge of vocabulary. The grammar part followed the CEFR when it comes to the complexity of tasks; to be more specific, the tasks were ordered from the easiest to the hardest. When it comes to grammar content, the focus was on tenses, but other elements were covered as well, such as articles and pronouns. To each of the questions four answers were offered and each of the tasks was worth one point. According to the number of points scored, participants were assigned a certain proficiency level. Possible proficiency levels were: Beginner, Pre-Intermediate, Intermediate and Upper-Intermediate. Advanced level was not included as this test was designed for learners whose proficiency level was estimated to be Upper-Intermediate at most.

The self-perceived proficiency was examined using a questionnaire devised especially for the purposes of this research (Appendix B). The questionnaire was a five-point Likert scale consisting of 12 statements. The answers to each statement ranged from 'I completely disagree' to 'I completely agree'. The statements focused on students' comparison of their knowledge of English to that of people in general, to the knowledge of their peers and their classmates. Items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 10 were positively-worded; only items 7, 8, 9, 11 and 12 were negatively-worded. Additionally, at the beginning of the questionnaire the participants were asked to write their last year English GPA, as GPA was another relevant variable in this research.

For the purposes of examining foreign language speaking anxiety, Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS) developed by Huang (2004) was used (Appendix C). The scale was translated to Croatian so that everybody would understand it equally. At the very beginning of the questionnaire, students were asked to write their name, school and class. This information was required for matching the results of each student to other variables. The original form of the questionnaire was otherwise intact. Each of the statements was followed by a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'I completely disagree' to 'I completely agree'. This questionnaire, too, consisted of some negatively-worded items (7, 17, 18 and 19).

Lastly, teachers were asked to put each student in a group they think they belong to according to their speaking skills. Possible groups were the following: 1) students who struggle a lot while speaking and aren't willing to communicate; 2) students who struggle a little, but are willing to communicate; 3) students who speak accurately, but not fluently; and 4) students who speak both fluently and accurately. This variable was introduced as it was the only one concerning proficiency regarding specifically learners' speaking skills.

Proficiency tests and the two questionnaires were distributed and collected by the researcher in person, while teachers' evaluation of participants' speaking proficiency was sent to the researcher via email.

3.3.3. Data analysis

While English GPA and teachers' evaluation were variables that requested no further categorization, not the same was true for the proficiency test, the self-perceived proficiency test and FLSAS. Thus, scores on these had to be assigned a category that would be more telling of the participant's proficiency, self-perceived proficiency and foreign language speaking anxiety levels.

The results of the proficiency test were directly linked to one of the four levels of proficiency (Beginner, Pre-Intermediate, Intermediate and Upper-Intermediate). Beginners scored ≤ 24, students at Pre-Intermediate level scored from 25 to 33 points, Intermediate-level students from 34 to 45 points, and Upper-Intermediate level ranged from 46 to 50 points.

On the other hand, the self-perceived proficiency questionnaire had to be analyzed differently. The participant's result was the mean value of the sum of his or her answers. To clarify, each statement was worth 1-5 points, depending on the number the participant had chosen. Negatively-worded items, however, had to be reverse-coded. Lower self-perceived proficiency was assigned to the mean value ≤ 2,49; average self-perceived proficiency encompassed the range of the mean value between 2,50 and 3,49; and high self-perceived proficiency corresponded with the mean value ≥ 3,50.

FLCAS was analyzed in the same way as the self-perceived proficiency questionnaire and with the same mean values for low, medium and high levels of speaking anxiety. Negatively-worded items also had to be reverse coded. Additionally, some of the statements with the most extreme responses (1: 'I completely disagree'; or 5: 'I completely agree') were analyzed separately. Each of these statements corresponded with a certain type of performance anxiety, defined previously by Horwitz et al. (1986). To be more specific, items 1, 2, 4, 7, 8,

13, 17, 19 and 24 corresponded to communication apprehension; items 5, 10, 12 and 21 to test anxiety; and items 6, 9, 18, 22 and 23 to the fear of negative evaluation.

In order to establish Pearson correlation coefficient, SPSS Statistics (version 21) was used.

3.4. Results

Before exploring correlations and testing the hypotheses, all variables were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Results of the proficiency test are shown in Table 1. First, it shows the results of all participants. Minimum number of points was 28, while maximum was 50, with the mean of 46,62 (SD±3,262). Secondly, the results of the students from the language-focused school are shown. The minimum number of points varied significantly from the minimum score of all participants; more specifically, the minimum score was 43. The maximum, on the other hand, was the same. The mean value was 47,49 (SD±1,502). The results of the students from the school of arts and design are shown last. There, the minimum score was 28, and the maximum 50, with the mean of 45,74 (SD±4,231). These results show that the average proficiency level is higher in the language-focused school than in the school of arts and design. The participants' proficiency level corresponds to the expectations for that age group: most of them are on upper-intermediate level (81%), while only a minority belong to intermediate level (18%) and one student's score corresponds to pre-intermediate level.

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. deviation
All participants	85	28	50	46,62	3,262
Language-focused school	43	43	50	47,49	1,502
School of arts and design	42	28	49	45,74	4,231

Table 1: Results of the proficiency test

Results of the questionnaire that was supposed to examine participants' self-perceived proficiency levels are shown in Table 2. While the results of all participants ranged from 2,00 to 4,83, the mean value was 3,94 (SD±0,680). When separated into two groups, according to the type of school they attend, we can see that the students from the school of arts and design have on average lower scores regarding the self-perceived proficiency than the students from the language-focused school. As expected, their self-perceived proficiency is lower than that

of the students from the language-focused school. However, it can also be noticed that their range of points is wider; it ranges from 2,00 to 4,83 (M: 3,80; SD±0,841), whereas the rest of the participants scored somewhere between 2,29 and 4,67 (M: 4,08; SD±0,438).

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. deviation
All participants	85	2,00	4,83	3,94	,680
Language-focused school	43	2,29	4,67	4,08	,438
School of arts and design	42	2,00	4,83	3,80	,841

Table 2: Results of the self-perceived proficiency questionnaire

From these results it can be inferred that both groups of students have on average a high self-perceived proficiency level; to put it differently, both groups believe their proficiency level to be above average. Nonetheless, it is evident that students from the language-focused school are significantly more confident in their knowledge of English, given that their mean value is 4,08. But, when looked at individually, some participants from the school of arts and design scored even higher than their colleagues from the other school.

When it comes to English GPA, the mean value of all participants was 4,42 (SD±0,764). The mean of the students from the language-focused school was 4,53 (SD±0,702), while the mean of those from the school of arts and design was 4,29 (SD±0,814). These results indicate that, when taking into consideration grades as the measure of proficiency level, the latter have higher proficiency than the former.

The last variable concerning proficiency was teachers' evaluation of students' speaking skills (Table 3). According to their evaluation 53 students (62%) speak both fluently and accurately, exhibiting a high level of proficiency. There were 15 students (18%) that speak only accurately, but not fluently; 12 students (14%) that struggle a little while speaking; and only 5 students (6%) that struggle a lot. However, it has to be stressed that there are no students that belong to group 1 in the language-focused school; 30 of them (70%) belong to group 4, 9 (21%) to group 3 and 4 (9%) to group 2.

	N	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
All participants	85	5	12	15	53
Language-focused school	43	/	4	9	30

School of arts and design	42	5	8	6	23

Table 3: Teacher's evaluation of students' speaking proficiency

In order to test §H1, the results of FLSAS had to be analyzed (Table 4). The minimum score of all participants was 1,17, and the maximum was 4,42, while the mean value was 2,82 (SD±0,795). These results corroborated §H1; participants indeed exhibited moderate levels of speaking anxiety. Moreover, when taking the mean value into consideration, it can be seen that the result is closer to lower levels than to higher levels of anxiety. If we look at participants from different schools separately, it can be seen that the minimum score of the students from the language-focused school (1,17) was significantly lower than that of the students from the school of arts and design (1,88). The same is true for the maximum score: while for the language-focused school it was 4,33, for the school of arts and design it was 4,42. These results are in line with the expectations that, due to higher self-efficacy and self-perceived proficiency, the students from the language-focused school would experience lower levels of anxiety.

	N	**Min**	**Max**	**Mean**	**Std. deviation**
All participants	85	1,17	4,42	2,82	,795
Language-focused school	43	1,17	4,33	2,50	,747
School of arts and design	42	1,88	4,42	3,16	,712

Table 4: FLSAS results

Another component that was considered relevant for this research was the type of performance anxiety that would be the most prominent. In other words, the researcher wanted to find out which of the items of FLSAS would have the largest number of extreme answers (1 or 5). This data can be observed in Table 5. Regarding the items that refer to communication apprehension, answer 1 (‘I completely disagree’) was most frequently chosen for items 1 (37,6%), 4 (38,8%), 8 (30,6%), 13 (45,9%) and 24 (52,9%). On the other hand, answer 5 (‘I completely agree’) was most frequently chosen for item 2 (43,5 %). Items that refer to test anxiety seem to indicate that this type of anxiety is not that present in these students. While answer 5 was not chosen even by one third of them, answer 1 was far more frequent. What is more, for item 10, which refers to oral exams, as much as 61,2% of participants stated that they do not experience any trembling during oral exams. Finally, the results of the third group of items, which is centered around the fear of negative evaluation, can be observed. Surprisingly,

and contrary to §H2, as much as 63,5% of participants chose answer 1 for item 9 which refers to receiving corrective feedback. For items 6 and 18, answer 5 was chosen only by 29,4% and 27,1% of participants. When looking at these results, it can be seen that §H2 was proven wrong. Furthermore, it can be concluded that out of the three types of performance anxiety, communication apprehension seems to be the most present.

Statement	Answer	Frequency	Percent
1 *I would feel anxious while speaking English in class.*	1	32	37,6
	5	11	12,9
2 *I would feel nervous about speaking English in front of others when I know them.*	1	11	12,9
	5	37	43,5
4 *I am anxious in class when I am the only person answering the question advanced by my teacher in my English class.*	1	33	38,8
	5	13	15,3
8 *I feel shy when I speak in English on the stage in front of the class.*	1	26	30,6
	5	24	28,2
13 *I would feel better about speaking in English if the class were smaller.*	1	39	45,9
	5	15	17,6
24 *Going to English conversation classes makes me more nervous than going to other classes.*	1	45	52,9
	5	8	9,4
5 *I start to panic when I know I will be graded in English class.*	1	31	36,5
	5	16	18,8
10 *I am so nervous that I tremble when I am going to attend English oral tests.*	1	52	61,2
	5	16	18,8
12 *I worry about the oral test in English class.*	1	32	37,6
	5	14	16,5
21 *I don't feel tense in* oral tests *if I get more practice speaking in class.*	1	14	16,5
	5	25	29,4
6 *I fear giving a wrong answer while answering questions in English class.*	1	20	23,5
	5	25	29,4

9 *When it comes to being corrected by my teacher, I am afraid of taking English class.*	1	54	63,5
	5	2	2,4
18 *I know that everyone makes mistakes while speaking English, so I am not afraid of being laughed at by others.*	1	10	11,8
	5	23	27,1

Table 5: Statements grouped according to the type of performance anxiety they refer to

In order to establish the relationship between different variables related to proficiency and foreign language speaking anxiety, Pearson correlation coefficient was established for each of these relationships. First, the relationship between proficiency test results and FLSAS results was analyzed (Table 6). It can be seen that a moderate negative correlation was found between the two variables. In other words, the higher the result on the proficiency test, the lower the result on FLSAS, and vice versa (r = -.340; p = ,001). The correlation between the proficiency test and the FLSAS turned out to be the highest of all the other correlations between FLSAS and other proficiency-measuring elements.

		Proficiency test score	**FLSAS score**
Proficiency test score	Pearson Correlation	1	-.340**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,001
	N	85	85
FLSAS score	Pearson Correlation	-.340**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,001	
	N	85	85

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 6: Correlation between proficiency test results and FLSAS results

However, when we divide the students according to the group they belong to, no correlation can be established between the number of points on the proficiency test and FLSAS ($p > 0.05$). Regarding the score on FLSAS, the highest score can be found among the students whose knowledge of English corresponds with intermediate level, while the second highest score belongs to one of the students that is at upper-intermediate level. Most of the participants that are at upper-intermediate level are low-anxious (48%), while only 19% of them are highly-

anxious. Interestingly, when it comes to intermediate-level students, most of them (47%) are highly-anxious, while 33% are moderately-anxious and 9% are low-anxious. The one student whose level is pre-intermediate turned out to be highly-anxious, in line with the hypothesis that low proficiency entails higher levels of speaking anxiety. When looking at the mean value of each level of proficiency, both intermediate and upper-intermediate level students exhibited moderate levels of anxiety, with a significant score difference (3,24 intermediate, and 2,72 upper-intermediate).

A moderate negative correlation was also established between the results of the self-perceived proficiency questionnaire and FLSAS results (r = -.315; p = ,003), which can be seen in Table 7. When it comes to the students with a high score on self-perceived proficiency test, 48% of them are low-anxious, 32% moderately-anxious and 20% highly-anxious. Participants with a score between 2,5 and 3,49 are mostly highly-anxious (43%) and moderately-anxious (43%), while only 14% are low-anxious. Participants with a low score showed mostly high levels of anxiety (57%). What stood out in this section is the fact that students that scored low on self-perceived proficiency test were not the ones that exhibited the highest level of speaking anxiety; one of the participants that were moderately self-confident scored the highest on FLSAS (4,42). When taking into consideration the mean value of each group, it can be seen that they all fall into the category of moderate anxiety levels.

		Self-perceived proficiency	**FLSAS score**
Self-perceived proficiency	Pearson Correlation	1	-.315**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,003
	N	85	85
FLSAS score	Pearson Correlation	-.315**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,003	
	N	85	85

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 7: Correlation between self-perceived proficiency and foreign language speaking anxiety

The relationship between the results of the proficiency test and the self-perceived proficiency questionnaire was analyzed as well (Table 8). Given that the test is quite objective,

and the questionnaire is quite subjective, it was interesting to see how these two correlate. In other words, the Pearson coefficient should indicate whether the results of the two coincide. It appears that there is a moderate positive correlation between these variables (r = .562; p = .000). The higher the results on the proficiency test, the higher the level of the self-perceived proficiency. Even if we look at the two groups of students (intermediate and upper-intermediate) separately, positive correlations can be noticed. In both groups the students exhibited high self-perceived proficiency (73% and 87% respectively).

		Proficiency test score	**Self-perceived proficiency**
Proficiency test score	Pearson Correlation	1	.562**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,000
	N	85	85
Self-perceived proficiency	Pearson Correlation	.562**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	
	N	85	85

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 8: Correlation between self-perceived and actual proficiency

Additionally, a low negative correlation was found between the teachers' evaluation and FLSAS score (r = -.236; p = ,030). The higher the number the teacher assigned to a student (regarding his or her speaking skill), the lower the levels of speaking anxiety. In other words, students that were regarded as more proficient regarding their speaking skill were less anxious about speaking. Almost half of the participants from group 4 (the ones with good fluency and accuracy) were low-anxious (49%), while as much as 64% of the students from group 2 (the ones that struggle a little) exhibited high anxiety levels. The students from group 1 (the ones that struggle a lot) equally exhibited high and moderate levels of anxiety (40%), while 20% of them exhibited low anxiety levels. However, if we consider the mean values of each group,

they all fall within the range of moderate anxiety levels, but they decrease as the evaluation of students' speaking proficiency increases.

On the other hand, no correlation was established between English GPA and FLSAS results ($p > 0,05$). Students whose GPA was 5 were mostly low-anxious (51%), while only 16% were highly-anxious. However, students whose GPA was 4 were mostly moderately- and highly-anxious (76%). Moreover, students whose GPA was 3 exhibited more low levels of anxiety (45%). Even when we look at the mean values of each group, they cannot be put in ascending or descending order by their FLSAS score. The students with GPA 2 experience high levels of anxiety (3,92) followed by the students with GPA 4 (3,09), then the students with GPA 3 (2,84) and finally the ones with GPA 5 (2,67).

4. Discussion

4.1. Levels of foreign language speaking anxiety in Croatian EFL learners

The descriptive analysis of the research results indicates that §H1 is true: Croatian EFL high-school learners indeed exhibited moderate levels of foreign language speaking anxiety. These findings corroborate Price's claim that speaking is the most anxiety-producing activity for a lot of students (qtd. in Karatas et al., 2016, 383). Thus, it should not be surprising that Croatian EFL learners experience foreign language speaking anxiety as well, especially now that the Croatian curriculum has put more emphasis on the communicative aspect and, consequently, on the speaking skill itself. Moreover, these results are in line with the ones obtained by Mihaljević Djiguović (2006), who noticed that affective factors, including anxiety, "strongly [correlate] with productive skills [...] especially with the speaking skill" (21). However, Alnahidh and Altalhab underline that, although moderate levels of speaking anxiety may not seem problematic, something should be done to alleviate this (2020, 61). This is especially true if one remembers that Croatian EFL learners experience moderate levels of speaking anxiety on average, but there were still some students (24% of them) whose score on FLSAS was between 3,50 and 5,00.

According to Liu (2006), speaking anxiety is more probable to occur in EFL contexts in which learners do not have the opportunity to use the language, or they use it rarely. Given

the importance of English around the world, and its wide-spread use, it could be said that there are almost no such EFL contexts. From communicating with people on social media, to playing online games, watching YouTube videos and giving directions to tourists, Croatian high school students certainly have a lot of opportunities to practice their English. Moreover, different speaking anxiety levels in various EFL contexts can be attributed to cultural specificities (Balemir, 2009, 70). For instance, while some studies in Taiwan (Huang, 2004) reported high levels of speaking anxiety among Taiwanese students, it could be explained by the fact that those students gave more importance to the opinion of their peers and teachers. As a result, their levels of anxiety were high on average. Conversely, Croatian students do not seem to respond to speaking situations in the same way as the participants from Taiwan. To be more precise, Croatian EFL learners do not seem to be bothered with this aspect of language learning; their levels of fear of negative evaluation are relatively low. What is more, cultural characteristics are often related to the teaching methods, classroom atmosphere, type of tasks, etc (Hanifa, 2018). In another research conducted by Suleimenova (2013), the participants mentioned Kazakh teaching style as one of the factors that exacerbate their speaking anxiety. Whereas some countries still prefer teacher-centered style, where the teacher talks most of the time, Croatia has turned to the type of education where students are encouraged to talk as much as possible in order to practice their language skills.

When it comes to the type of anxiety that took most prominence in this research, the results have shown that the students scored the highest number of points on items related to communication apprehension. Contrary to §H2, which speculated that fear of negative evaluation would stand out, the participants expressed their anxiety about communicating in a foreign language in general. This supports the claim that "language use anxiety is correlated with communication apprehension" (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2005, 207). Furthermore, the participants stressed that oral examinations are usually not a trigger for their anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation even less so. On the other hand, Balemir (2009), for example, found that Turkish students identified test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation as major sources of their speaking anxiety. The difference in these results further illustrates the importance of the learning environment. A possible explanation for the lack of fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety in Croatian students can be found in a classroom atmosphere where tolerance and support are promoted.

It has to be emphasized, however, that the prevalence of communication apprehension could not be tied solely to English, but it could also be related to L1, i.e. Croatian. Yoon Jung and McCroskey found that there was a strong relationship between participants'

communication apprehension in L1 and L2 (2009). In other words, EFL learners that exhibited high levels of communication apprehension also experienced this type of anxiety when communicating in their native language. Thus, it could be speculated that the participants in this study also experience communication apprehension in their native language as well, and that this is not related exclusively to speaking English.

4.2. The relationship between foreign language speaking anxiety and proficiency

Foreign language speaking anxiety cannot be studied in isolation. Some researchers suggest that anxiety needs to be contextualized, observed in interaction with other factors (Amouna, 2021, 3). To put it differently, speaking anxiety never appears on its own, and there are always other factors that affect it or that are affected by it. This research attempted to investigate the relationship between speaking anxiety and one factor that is believed to influence it - proficiency. One of the hypotheses suggested that there would be a correlation between foreign language speaking anxiety and the level of proficiency, and that this correlation would be negative. As it can be seen from the results, there was indeed a negative correlation between proficiency levels and foreign language speaking anxiety. The results, thus, refute the argument that students with higher proficiency will experience higher levels of anxiety (Saito & Samimi, 1996; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2005). The results of this research are in line with the findings of Bensalem (2018), Balemir (2009), Liu (2006), Liu and Jackson (2008) and Jin et al. (2015). While Bensalem, Balemir and Liu and Jackson investigated the relationship between speaking anxiety and proficiency levels at a given point in time, Liu and Jin et al. conducted a longitudinal study, in which they explored how anxiety levels changed with the increase of proficiency.

In this study, different variables were used in order to establish the levels of proficiency of the participants, given the complexity of the concept. Harsch argues that proficiency is a complex phenomenon that can be defined as "the intertwinedness of pragmatic, textual, strategic and grammatical competences and their mutual dependence on context, persons and purpose" (2017, 251). According to this definition, it can be understood why measuring proficiency cannot be boiled down to conducting standardized tests. Hence, this research relied on four variables that helped define more closely the participants' proficiency levels. When taking all of these variables into consideration, a general conclusion that proficiency levels affect speaking anxiety can be drawn. However, if we want to gain a deeper and more complete

insight into what it is that especially correlates with speaking anxiety, we must analyze the results of all variables separately.

4.3. Foreign language speaking anxiety and factors determining proficiency

The first and most objective indicator of the level of proficiency was the standardized proficiency test. According to the results, participants with a higher score on the proficiency test exhibited lower levels of speaking anxiety, which corroborated §H3. This proficiency test was the variable with the highest correlation with foreign language speaking anxiety (r = -.340), contrary to §H4, which predicted that the highest correlation would be established between self-perceived proficiency and speaking anxiety. MacIntyre et al. highlight that self-perceived and actual proficiency can sometimes be at odds, especially when anxiety influences self-perception (1997, 267). This means that language learners will either overestimate or underestimate their real knowledge and skills. Underestimation is, naturally, more probable in learners that experience foreign language anxiety. Dewaele and Dewaele (2021) also investigated this relationship and saw that the two proficiencies are mostly in accordance with each other. However, their study did not involve any investigation of foreign language anxiety, so their participants might have been for the most part low-anxious.

This research yielded similar results to the ones obtained by Dewaele and Dewaele (2021); a moderate positive correlation that was found between the scores on the proficiency test and the self-perceived proficiency questionnaire indicates that the participants were quite objective in estimating their English proficiency. Furthermore, it appears that their foreign language anxiety did not influence their self-perception. This corresponds with the results of FLSAS that indicate moderate levels of foreign language speaking anxiety. Nonetheless, in another study, MacIntyre (1992) found "a stronger canonical correlation between language anxiety and subjective proficiency than between language anxiety and objective proficiency measures" (qtd. in MacIntyre et al., 1997, 267 - 268). This research, on the other hand, proved the opposite to be true, and the difference in correlation coefficients turned out to be significant. Hence, it could be interpreted that the use of a standardized proficiency test instead of a subjective questionnaire is more reliable for investigating the relationship between proficiency and foreign language speaking anxiety.

When it comes to another objective measure of proficiency - English GPA - and speaking anxiety levels, no correlation was established. However, this does not imply that there

is no relationship of any kind between the two. A possible interpretation is that the relationship between these constructs is not linear. It is also important to keep in mind that grades might not always reflect actual students' proficiency, as suggested by Waluyo and Panmei (2021) and Meadows et al. (2019). Grades sometimes reflect an ability to complete a task, or topical knowledge of some sort. To sum it up, they cannot be taken as the only predictor of proficiency, but can serve as an additional indicator, combined with other elements.

The weakest correlation was found between speaking anxiety and the teachers' evaluation of the students' speaking skills. Rather than expressing the students' abilities in grades, they were offered four groups in which to put each student according to his or her speaking skills. While in some research (Duque-Aguilar, 2021) teachers focused on pronunciation as well, in this one, the focus was on fluency and accuracy as the two main indicators of the students' speaking proficiency. The negative correlation established between their assessment and FLSAS score further supports the claim that learners' proficiency levels influence foreign language speaking anxiety. These findings are in keeping with the results of the study conducted by Sparks et al. (2008): they found that the higher score on the proficiency test was connected with a better evaluation by the teacher and lower levels of anxiety. However, given the size of the class and the time teachers have to evaluate their students' speaking skills, it could be argued that this way of measuring students' proficiency is not the most reliable method.

As it can be seen, taking into consideration various methods of measuring students' proficiency provides us with a more detailed insight into the phenomenon. The negative correlation between the participants' proficiency levels and their foreign language speaking anxiety levels cannot be ignored, but it must be stressed that it matters which method of measuring proficiency one chooses for conducting his research.

4.4. Limitations to the study and implications for further research

This study tried to elucidate the issue of speaking anxiety and its relationship to proficiency level, and it has provided some new insight into the issue. However, there are some limitations that have to be taken into consideration and that could possibly serve future researchers as guidelines.

Due to time constraints, a standardized proficiency test with multiple choice tasks was used. Nonetheless, this test could have been more detailed and skills-oriented. In other words, it could have been more similar to Cambridge Proficiency Test or TOEFL and IELTS. These

tests encompass different skills, which then provides us with a deeper understanding of the real proficiency level and of the difference between receptive and productive skills. Furthermore, the fact that this test was multiple-choice means that some of the answers could have been a result of a lucky guess.

Because of this test, more variables that would indicate participants' proficiency were introduced. Other methods that could have been used are interviews, journals and observation. All of these, however, require a longer period of time to be applied. Interviews would perhaps be the most revealing when it comes to sources of speaking anxiety and type of activities that are most anxiety-provoking. Journals would also be useful for gaining an insight into participants' thoughts and emotions. Observation could provide the researcher with a more complete overview of the symptoms of speaking anxiety.

Regarding the self-perceived proficiency questionnaire, Bensalem claims that "anxiety may bias learners' perception of their true proficiency" (2018, 40). That is why introducing some activities that directly test participants' proficiency could be practical.

5. Conclusion

As the field of SLA has been developing, the focus shifted from solely cognitive to affective factors, too. Among these, anxiety seems to have gained the most prominence. This research as well focused on investigating the relationship between Croatian EFL learners' proficiency and foreign language speaking anxiety, more specifically, the way in which proficiency levels influence speaking anxiety. In order to test this, different variables that act as indicators of participants' proficiency were used, such as proficiency established by a standardized test, self-perceived proficiency investigated through a questionnaire designed for this purpose, teachers' evaluation of students' speaking skills, and students' English GPA.

Various hypotheses were formed concerning the issue. Hypothesis 1 concerned participants' speaking anxiety levels and the results proved it right: Croatian EFL learners experience moderate levels of anxiety. Furthermore, the type of anxiety that is present the most turned out to be communication apprehension, contrary to hypothesis 2 which predicted fear of negative evaluation as the type of anxiety that would stand out. When it comes to the relationship between proficiency and speaking anxiety, a negative correlation was expected. The results showed that, indeed, as proficiency level increased, speaking anxiety decreased. Another aspect that was investigated through this research was the relationship between different indicators of proficiency and speaking anxiety. Out of all factors, the strongest correlation was established between score on proficiency test and FLSAS score. The second highest correlation was noticed between self-perceived proficiency and speaking anxiety levels, and the lowest correlation could be seen between teacher's evaluation of students' speaking skills and the levels of anxiety. Moreover, English GPA turned out not to have any linear relationship with FLSAS score. To sum it up, three out of four hypotheses were proved right. When considering the results, it can be concluded that, overall, the level of proficiency plays an important role in increasing or decreasing Croatian EFL high school students' anxiety.

Although this research introduced some variables that were not used in previous research, it does not come without limitations. Due to time constraints, some aspects could be improved, such as the type of proficiency test, and some additional methods could be introduced.

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7. Appendices

7.1. Appendix A (Proficiency test)

Grammar

1. I _____ from France.

a) is
b) are
c) am
d) be

2. This is my friend. _____ name is Peter.

a) Her
b) Our
c) Yours
d) His

3. Mike is _____.

a) my sister's friend
b) friend my sister
c) friend from my sister
d) my sister friend's

4. My brother is _____ artist.
a) the
b) an
c) a
d) —

5. _____ 20 desks in the classroom.

a) This is
b) There is
c) They are
d) There are

6. Paul _____ romantic films.

a) likes not
b) don't like
c) doesn't like

d) isn’t likes

7. Sorry, I can’t talk. I _____ right now.

a) driving
b) ‘m driving
c) drives
d) drive

8. She _____ at school last week.

a) didn't be
b) weren’t
c) wasn’t
d) isn’t

9. I _____ the film last night.

a) like
b) likes
c) liking
d) liked

10. _____ a piece of cake? No, thank you.

a) Do you like
b) Would you like
c) Want you
d) Are you like

11. The living room is _____ than the bedroom.

a) more big
b) more bigger
c) biggest
d) bigger

12. The car is very old. We’re going _____ a new car soon.

a) to buy
b) buying
c) to will buy
d) buy

13. Jane is a vegetarian. She _____ meat.

a) sometimes eats
b) never eats
c) often eats
d) usually eats

14. There aren’t _____ buses late in the evening.

a) some
b) any
c) no
d) a

15. The car park is _____ to the restaurant.

a) next
b) opposite
c) behind
d) in front

16. Sue _____ shopping every day.

a) is going
b) go
c) going
d) goes

17. They _____ in the park when it started to rain heavily.

a) walked
b) were walking
c) were walk
d) are walking

18. _____ seen fireworks before?

a) Did you ever
b) Are you ever
c) Have you ever
d) Do you ever

19. We've been friends _____ many years.

a) since
b) from
c) during
d) for

20. You _____ pay for the tickets. They're free.

a) have to
b) don't have
c) don't need to

d) doesn’t have to

21. Jeff was ill last week and he _____ go out.

a) needn't
b) can’t
c) mustn’t
d) couldn’t

22. These are the photos _____ I took on holiday.

a) which
b) who
c) what
d) where

23. We’ll stay at home if it _____ this afternoon.

a) raining
b) rains
c) will rain
d) rain

24. He doesn’t smoke now, but he _____ a lot when he was young.

a) has smoked
b) smokes
c) used to smoke
d) was smoked

25. Mark plays football _____ anyone else I know.

a) more good than
b) as better as
c) best than
d) better than

26. I promise I _____ you as soon as I’ve finished this cleaning**.**

a) will help
b) am helping
c) going to help
d) have helped

27. This town _____ by lots of tourists during the summer.

a) visits
b) visited
c) is visiting
d) is visited

28. He said that his friends _____ to speak to him after they lost the football match.

a) not want
b) weren't
c) didn't want
d) aren't wanting

29. How about _____ to the cinema tonight?

a) going
b) go
c) to go
d) for going

30. Excuse me, can you _____ me the way to the station, please?

a) give
b) take
c) tell
d) say

31. I wasn't interested in the performance very much. _____.

a) I didn't, too.
b) Neither was I.
c) Nor I did.
d) So I wasn't.

32. Take a warm coat, _____ you might get very cold outside.

a) otherwise
b) in case
c) so that
d) in order to

33. _____ this great book and I can't wait to see how it ends.

a) I don't read

b) I've read
c) I've been reading
d) I read

34. What I like more than anything else _____ at weekends.

a) playing golf
b) to play golf
c) is playing golf
d) is play golf

35. She _____ for her cat for two days when she finally found it in the garage.

a) looked
b) had been looked
c) had been looking
d) were looking

36. We won't catch the plane _____ we leave home now! Please hurry up!

a) if
b) providing that
c) except
d) unless

37. If I hadn't replied to your email, I_____ here with you now.

a) can't be
b) wouldn't be
c) won't be
d) haven't been

38. Do you think you _____ with my mobile phone soon? I need to make a call.

a) finish
b) are finishing
c) will have finished
d) are finished

39. I don’t remember mentioning _____ dinner together tonight.

a) go for
b) you going to
c) to go for
d) going for

40. Was it Captain Cook _____ New Zealand?

a) who discovered
b) discovered
c) that discover
d) who was discovering

Vocabulary

41. You may not like the cold weather here, but you'll have to _____, I'm afraid.
a) tell it off
b) sort itself out
c) put up with it
d) put it off

42. It's cold so you should _____ on a warm jacket.
a) put
b) wear
c) dress
d) take

43. Paul will look _____ our dogs while we're on holiday.
a) at
b) for
c) into
d) after

44. She _____ a lot of her free time reading.
a) does
b) spends
c) has
d) makes

45. Hello, this is Simon. Could I _____ to Jane, please?
a) say
b) tell
c) call
d) speak

46. They're coming to our house _____ Saturday.
a) in
b) at
c) on
d) with

47. I think it's very easy to _____ debt these days.
a) go into
b) become
c) go down to
d) get into

48. Come on! Quick! Let's get _____!
a) highlight
b) cracking
c) massive
d) with immediate effect

49. I phoned her _____ I heard the news.
a) minute
b) during
c) by the time
d) the moment

50. I feel very _____. I'm going to go to bed!
a) nap
b) asleep
c) sleepy
d) sleeper

7.2. Appendix B (self-perceived proficiency questionnaire)

Ovaj upitnik koristit će se isključivo u svrhu pisanja diplomskog rada. Rezultate će vidjeti samo osoba koja provodi istraživanje, kao i Vaše osobne podatke (ime i prezime, škola, razred i zaključna ocjena). Vaši osobni podatci potrebni su samo za analizu rezultata, ali neće se pojaviti u samom radu.

Ime i prezime: _____

Škola: _____

Razred: _____

Zaključna ocjena (zadnja): ____

Molim Vas da pažljivo pročitate tvrdnje koje se odnose na Vaše znanje engleskog jezika te zaokružite u kojoj se mjeri s njima slažete ili ne slažete. **1 = nimalo se ne slažem; 2 = djelomično se ne slažem; 3 = niti se slažem niti se ne slažem; 4 = djelomično se slažem; 5 = u potpunosti se slažem**.

1. Mislim da je moje znanje engleskog jezika iznadprosječno.	1	2	3	4	5
2. U usporedbi s mojim vršnjacima mislim da znam engleski bolje od većine.	1	2	3	4	5
3. U usporedbi s učenicima iz mog razreda mislim da znam engleski bolje od većine.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Mislim da je moje znanje engleskog jezika prosječno.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Mislim da po znanju engleskog jezika ne odskačem od svojih vršnjaka niti zaostajem za njima.	1	2	3	4	5
6. Mislim da po znanju engleskog jezika ne odskačem od učenika iz	1	2	3	4	5

mog razreda niti zaostajem za njima.					
7. Mislim da je moje znanje engleskog jezika ispodprosječno.	1	2	3	4	5
8. U usporedbi s mojim vršnjacima mislim da znam engleski lošije od većine.	1	2	3	4	5
9. U usporedbi s učenicima iz mog razreda mislim da znam engleski lošije od većine.	1	2	3	4	5
10. Engleski jezik mi je lagan.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Potrebna mi je pomoć pri učenju engleskog jezika.	1	2	3	4	5
12. Engleski jezik mi ne ide.	1	2	3	4	5

Hvala na sudjelovanju!

7.3. Appendix C (FLSAS)

Ovaj upitnik koristit će se isključivo u svrhu pisanja diplomskog rada. Rezultate će vidjeti samo osoba koja provodi istraživanje, kao i Vaše osobne podatke (ime i prezime, škola, razred). Vaši osobni podatci potrebni su samo za analizu rezultata, ali neće se pojaviti u samom radu.

Ime i prezime: _____

Škola: _____

Razred: _____

Molim Vas da pažljivo pročitate tvrdnje koje se odnose na Vaše znanje engleskog jezika te zaokružite u kojoj se mjeri s njima slažete ili ne slažete. **1 = nimalo se ne slažem; 2 = djelomično se ne slažem; 3 = niti se slažem niti se ne slažem; 4 = djelomično se slažem; 5 = u potpunosti se slažem**.

1. Osjećam se tjeskobno dok govorim engleski na satu.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Osjećam se manje nervozno kada govorim engleski pred drugima ako ih poznajem.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Osjećam se jako opušteno na satu engleskog jezika kada sam unaprijed proučio/la predviđeni nastavni sadržaj.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Tjeskoban/tjeskobna sam na satu kada sam ja jedina osoba koja odgovara na pitanje koje mi je uputio/la moj/a profesor/ica engleskog jezika.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Počnem paničariti kada znam da ću biti ocjenjivan/a na satu engleskog jezika.	1	2	3	4	5
6. Bojim se davanja krivog odgovora dok odgovaram na pitanja na satu engleskog jezika.	1	2	3	4	5
7. Uživam na satu engleskog jezika kada znam da ćemo razgovarati na engleskom.	1	2	3	4	5
8. Osjećam se sramežljivo kada govorim engleski dok stojim ispred ploče pred cijelim razredom.	1	2	3	4	5
9. Strah me ići na sat engleskog jezika da me moj/a profesor/ica ne bi ispravio/la.	1	2	3	4	5

10. Toliko sam nervozan/nervozna da se tresem kada idem usmeno odgovarati na engleskom.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Frustriran/a sam kad se od mene traži da razgovaram s ostalim učenicima na engleskom u kratkom vremenskom periodu.	1	2	3	4	5
12. Brinem se oko usmenog ispita na satu engleskog jezika.	1	2	3	4	5
13. Osjećao/la bih se bolje dok govorim engleski kada bi razred bio manji.	1	2	3	4	5
14. Osjećam se opušteno na satu engleskog jezika kada se unaprijed dobro pripremim za gradivo koje ćemo obraditi.	1	2	3	4	5
15. Spremniji/a sam govoriti na satu engleskog jezika kada sam upoznat/a s predviđenim usmenim aktivnostima.	1	2	3	4	5
16. Zamuckujem kada odgovaram na pitanja na engleskom.	1	2	3	4	5
17. Volim ići na sat engleskog jezika kada znam da me čekaju usmeni zadaci.	1	2	3	4	5
18. Znam da svi griješe kada govore engleski pa me nije strah da će mi se drugi smijati.	1	2	3	4	5
19. Volim se sam/a javiti za odgovor na satu engleskog jezika.	1	2	3	4	5
20. Spremniji/a sam uključiti se u sat kada su teme zanimljive.	1	2	3	4	5

21. Ne osjećam se napeto na usmenom ispitivanju ako više vježbam govorenje na satu.	1	2	3	4	5
22. Osjećam se neugodno kada moj/a profesor/ica na satu zamoli druge učenike da isprave moje usmene greške.	1	2	3	4	5
23. Osjećam pritisak kada moj/a profesor/ica ispravlja moje usmene greške na satu.	1	2	3	4	5
24. Pohađanje sati engleskog jezika na kojima se razgovara čini me više nervoznim/om nego pohađanje ostalih sati engleskog jezika.	1	2	3	4	5

Hvala Vam na sudjelovanju!