

# **Moving From the ESL Classroom into the Mainstream: An Investigation of English Language Anxiety in Mexican Girls**

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## **Abstract**

Using a recently developed instrument, the ELAS (English Language Anxiety Scale) based on the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, this study examines English language anxiety in Mexican middle school girls. Of 178 middle school students (91 boys and 87 girls), it was shown that while there is no gender difference in ESL classes, girls are significantly more anxious about using English in their mainstream classes. This difference is partially explained by the different types of English language anxiety that manifest in ESL and mainstream classes. Various statistical procedures including ANCOVA and factor analysis support the conclusion that as ESL students move from ESL to mainstream classes their English language anxieties shift from academic types of worry to peer interactional concerns in which female students seem to feel more stress. Recommendations for teachers include the use of affective assessments, such as the ELAS, prior to complete mainstreaming and the development of safer group activities in which girls feel more comfortable.

## **Introduction**

The process of moving from an English as a second language (ESL) class to a mainstream class with no supplementary English support can be very traumatic for many ESL students. Even though many have good English skills in terms of social proficiency (BICS), many are still struggling with the type of cognitive academic language (CALP) necessary for success in the mainstream classroom (Cummins, 1978, 2000). Add to this situation pressure associated with interactions with native speakers of English and one can easily see where the process of moving from the ESL class to the mainstream environment would be anxiety provoking. Yet, surprisingly little research has been done on

the affective stress of moving from one environment to the other, especially in terms of gender differences. The following article describes the results of a recent study that show how Mexican adolescent girls often experience more anxiety in the mainstream classroom than boys due to differing types of English language anxiety associated with the two different learning environments.

In a variety of academic situations from foreign language learning to test anxiety, researchers have found that frequently female students are more worried and anxious than are male students (Chang, 1997; Daly, Kreiser, & Rogharr, 1994; Felson & Trudeau, 1991; Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley 1997). In addition, as evidenced in an article by Berger and Shechter (1996), there is enough of a difference in the way that the two genders handle stress to warrant the differentiated treatment given to adolescent girls. For many reasons, male and female students can react differently to similar settings. In the simplest terms, what is often seen as a source of pressure and discomfort for female students may not be as nerve-wracking for male students.

Just as these pressures may differ, reactions to them can differ according to changes in environment. Wigfield and Eccles (1989) note that transitions, such as a change from one grade level to another, can increase feelings of anxiety and worry. These pressures can be aggravated by challenges to a student's identity as they move from one environment to another. The shift from a mostly ESL environment to a mainstream class can be just as traumatic to students, increasing anxiety as they move from a relatively safe setting into one of new challenges and pressures. Additionally, as has been found in other studies that investigate such matters, gender often does make a difference.

As will be shown in this article, specifically in mainstream classes, gender does seem to be a mitigating factor for English language anxiety, and it would seem that male and female students are responding differently to the pressures associated with using English in this setting. Yet, in a different setting, such as an ESL classroom, when faced with similar pressures, gender does not seem to make such a difference.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Subjects in this study consisted of 178 middle school students (91 boys and 87 girls) from Mexico residing in the southwestern part of the United States and attending school in a medium-sized urban area. All the participants had been in the United States for at least one year with a mean time of residence of 2.47 years. All participants were enrolled in ESL classes and spent at least a portion of their school day in mainstream classes. Students were all at an intermediate level of English as identified by their teachers and placement in ESL classes.

## Instrument

During class time, participants responded to a recently developed English language anxiety scale (hereafter ELAS). At the time of this study, the ELAS was a 47-item Likert-type scale in English and Spanish that prompts participants to respond to statements concerning their feelings using the English language (the ELAS has since been reduced to 20 items). Responses range from strongly agree to strongly disagree with a neutral option. The ELAS has been tested for validity and internal consistency reliability and is based on the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986).

An important aspect of the ELAS that differentiates it from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale is that it asks participants to respond to two scenarios, within the ESL classroom and within the mainstream classroom, thus providing information about the different settings in which non-native speakers of English use the language. This characteristic is an important distinction since other data show a significant difference between the level of English language anxiety felt in the ESL classroom and in the mainstream classroom.

## Analysis

Statistical procedures in this investigation included a check of the internal consistency reliability of the ELAS and paired t-test to assess differences between ESL and mainstream environments, among other descriptive measures. Analysis of covariance was also used to examine significant differences among the variables. Additionally, factor analysis was used to target different indicators of anxiety within ESL and mainstream classes. Participants identified as being highly anxious also participated in focus groups in which they discussed their attitudes about using English in ESL and mainstream classrooms.

## Results

Using a paired t-test, significant differences were found between anxiety levels in ESL and mainstream classes. A main effect for gender was also found, with the ELAS showing a significant difference ( $\alpha = .001, p < .05$ ) in the attitudes of female students when using English in mainstream classes. In looking at the descriptive statistics, female students showed an overall mean ELAS score of almost 10 points higher than male students did with a standard error of 1.9. This significant finding was apparent in mainstream classes but did not occur in the ESL class.

Factor analysis with promax rotation was used to investigate English language anxiety factors in mainstream and ESL classes. These data suggest that there are several different types of anxiety that can affect Mexican ESL students in different learning environments. Not surprisingly, the main factor for English language anxiety in the mainstream classroom is a type of performance anxiety more related to interactions with peers (accounting for

24% of the total variance). In ESL classes, the main source of anxiety is more related to academic anxiety and worries about achievement (accounting for 26% of the total variance).

## Discussion

In mainstream classes, gender does influence the anxiety levels of Mexican boys and girls differently. This gender main effect is consistent with Padilla, Cervantes, Maldonado, and García (1988) who found that, overall, female students are more concerned about language difficulties than male students. This result is also not surprising considering other anxiety research indicating that female students tend to be more anxious and worry oriented than male students (Bernstein, Garfinkel, & Hoberman, 1989; Gierl & Rogers, 1996; Plancherel & Bolognini, 1995).

Bearing this apparent gender difference in mind, if girls are more anxious than boys, why does this result not show up in ESL classes? While there is prior research supporting the conclusion that girls are more anxious than boys, there is also evidence to show that girls tend to have closer interpersonal relationships with teachers (Bracken & Crain, 1994) that helps alleviate anxiety in the ESL classroom. Since the factor analysis tends to point to a more academic-related anxiety in the ESL classroom (English achievement anxiety), female students may be taking advantage of closer interpersonal relationships with teachers to offset English language achievement anxiety in the ESL classroom, thus, reducing any differences in English language anxiety between male and female students.

However, in the mainstream classroom, where the factor analysis indicates a more peer-related anxiety (English performance anxiety), female students do not have any adequate coping strategy, and they tend to be more anxious. Bracken and Crain (1994) also write that adolescence is also a time for fluctuating interpersonal relationships, with peers becoming more important and teachers less so. Therefore, it is likely that girls are in the process of transitioning from important teacher relationships to important peer relationships in their mainstream classes where they depend more on their peers and social relationships in order to cope with anxiety (Plancherel & Bolognini, 1995). Yet, as female students move into mainstream classes, their peer groups often change. These new relationships are in the process of developing, and female students are dealing more closely with peers from different cultural groups, including Chicanas (those of Mexican descent but born and raised in the United States). In these situations, they may not have fully developed successful coping strategies, resulting in higher English anxiety levels in mainstream classrooms. In addition, anecdotal information from ESL teachers

suggests that old relationships established in ESL classes can be jeopardized when female students are mainstreamed. At times, female students who leave ESL classes and are completely mainstreamed lose their in-group status with female students who remain in ESL classes.

It is not very surprising that anxiety levels concerning interactions with peers would be lower in ESL classes where students often feel a stronger sense of camaraderie and support. Due to the nature of the ESL classes involved in this study (consisting of mostly Spanish speakers), students had no trouble falling back on Spanish as a means of communication with peers. Hence, students were not so distracted by the need to communicate with peers in English and were more concerned about the academic aspects of English as opposed to social performance. As these pressures change and female students begin to use English in more anxiety provoking settings, there are some ways that teachers can help.

### **Classroom Implications**

Perhaps the most important implication of this research involves the mainstreaming process itself. As teachers, administrators, and parents make the decision to completely mainstream female students, they should understand that certain considerations should be made when dealing with these students. Because of the different environments and social demands in the two situations, mainstream classrooms can be more intimidating to female students.

While Green and Oxford (1995) found that female students tended to use more affective strategies for language learning specifically, it seems that the adolescent girls in this study need more help developing affective strategies to deal with social interactions with other students. Specifically, when asked about their interactions with other non-ESL students, in focus groups female participants often mentioned that they disliked speaking English with native English speakers because they were afraid of being laughed at or socially rejected. This concern was especially true in their dealings with Chicanas who would taunt and tease them in English and Spanish.

With the Chicanas, the female students reported they often felt inadequate and would retreat from these interactions. This avoidance strategy could be costly at times since they were often placed in groups with Chicanas by well-meaning teachers. At other times, female students reported that when they were nervous they would ask other girlfriends to translate for them or answer for them. Many times, this strategy was very successful for them, but at other times it brought down the wrath of an irate teacher who thought they were off-task. To counter this reaction, teachers should be carefully attuned to students' behavior in class so they can differentiate between students who are trying to get help and those who are truly off-task. Incorporating safer group work can also provide an appropriate outlet for this type of coping strategy.

By incorporating more cooperative learning groups, students will have more opportunities to interact positively with each other and reduce anxiety. However, these groups must be safe environments. As mentioned previously, one of the more significant factors in mainstream anxiety for ESL students is the fear of being laughed at or rebuked socially by their peers. Therefore, it is critical that any group formation be done with an eye to the affective safety of all the participants. In addition, native speaking students and other Chicanos should be sensitized to the harm that teasing could cause. Of course, in the adolescent years this type of concern is difficult to engender, but by personalizing the mainstream ESL students, teachers can reduce the amount of dehumanization that fuels teasing and other negative behaviors, reducing the withdrawal and subsequent silence that can hamper class interactions and learning.

Losey (1995) has found that Mexican women are often silent in class, withdrawing from the interaction and giving the floor to other, more aggressive (often male) speakers. In her study, she found that the women wanted to interact in class but were frustrated by interruptions by the teacher and the fast pace of the class. As she notes, these women were “double minorities,” marginalized by both their gender and their ethnicity. Since avoidance is used as a major coping strategy in instances of anxiety, it is possible that the adolescent female students in the current study are caught in the same web as Losey’s Mexican women, wanting to participate but left out of the interaction in part through their own fears and feelings of intimidation.

Teachers can battle this avoidance by providing more opportunities for female students to interact in safe groups in which they feel comfortable. Also, teachers must make a conscious effort to ensure that all students have the opportunity to participate in class, not just the ones who take the initiative. Wait-times for all mainstreamed ESL students should be critically analyzed to ensure that teachers are giving these students enough time to respond without interruption. Additionally, mainstream teachers should have a carefully planned strategy for including ESL students in authentic learning opportunities. Above all else, linguistic and affective accommodations must continued to be made even after the mainstreaming process has occurred.

## **Conclusion**

The mainstreaming process can also be stressful to female students because of the implicit evaluation of their English. In the state in which this study was conducted, students are given approximately three years before they are encouraged to be completely mainstreamed. This time limit implicitly indicates that students are ready for non-sheltered English, both to the mainstream teacher and the students themselves. As researchers and ESL teachers, we know that CALP usually takes anywhere from 5-7 years. Yet, are we making this distinction clear to ESL students, mainstream teachers and

parents? It is quite possible that ESL students are leaving the ESL classroom with false expectations of their own abilities, and when they cannot live up to these expectations, anxieties increase, resulting in withdrawal from interactions with others.

Looking back on the implications of this and other research, it is clear that affective evaluations must be taken into consideration when mainstreaming ESL students, especially when dealing with female students. By looking at social competence along with academic and linguistic competence, we provide a more complete picture of a student's ability to enter the mainstream, especially concerning female students. In our rush to be equal, we must be fair.

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