RESEARCH ARTICLE

LEVEL OF PROFICIENCY AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY: A STUDY OF ANXIETY AMONG CHAMRAN UNIVERSITY'S EFL SOPHOMORE AND SENIOR STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The symptoms and consequences of foreign language anxiety should become readily identifiable to those concerned with language learning and teaching in order to achieve their goals.The present study aims to investigate the relationship between the level of proficiency and anxiety among the EFL Iranian sophomore and senior students. To this aim, 20 sophomore students and 20 senior students at the faculty of Literature and Humanities of ShahidChamran University of Ahvaz served as the participants of the study. The statistical analysis of the students' responses to the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) showed that there is a significant relationship between anxiety and level of proficiency in the learning English as a foreign language. These results suggested that sophomore students and senior students studying English as a foreign language show different levels of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale.

INTRODUCTION

Anxiety plays an important affective role in second or foreign language acquisition. Even though everybody has experienced feelings of anxiousness, anxiety cannot be defined easily in a simple sentence.

The research on anxiety puts forward the idea that anxiety can be experienced at different levels (Horwitz, 2001; Oxford, 1999). Horwitz and Cope (1986) described foreign language anxiety as a distinct complex phenomenon of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning mainly resulting from the uniqueness of the language learning process. In addition, Macintyre (1995) noted that anxiety plays different roles in the learning process. It may facilitate or debilitate performance of the learners.Facilitating anxiety motivates the learners to confront the new learning task without reluctance. Debilitating anxiety motivates learners

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to select an avoidance attitude and therefore tends to escape from the learning task.Oxford (1999) uses the terms "harmful" and "helpful"(as cited in Brown, 2007) anxiety for debilitative and facilitative anxiety, respectively. Both facilitative anxiety and debilitative anxiety are connected to one's academic performance. Sometimes anxiety helps students to increase their motivation for harder studying. Therefore, a little anxiety can have positive effects on students' performance. But, according to Brown (2007, p. 163) "too much and too little anxiety may hinder the process of successful second learning".

Many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students who seek admittance to a university where the foreign language, here English, is the medium of instruction do not have sufficient language skills to understand lectures, comprehend textbooks, participate in class discussions, or generate satisfactory written work. Oftentimes, they have only experienced teacher centered instruction, where they were passive learners or mere memorizers of rules. Thus, EFL students need support in more than just language skills because in the university environment they are expected to think, to reason, to communicate, and to continue their learning outside the classroom. As the level of proficiency and improved skill in the foreign language increase, the foreign language learners are expected to become less anxious in the language classes. Therefore, senior students due to gradual accumulation of skills and proficiency should experience less anxiety compared with their sophomore counterparts.

However, some factors can affect the relationship between the level of proficiency and anxiety in a way that senior students with a higher level of proficiency may show more anxiety than sophomore students with a lower level of proficiency. Senior students experience stressful moments as they get closer to their final exams. Sometimes the senior course materials are relatively more difficult than those of sophomores'. Hence, the relatively more difficult contents of course books provoke anxiety for seniors. So, such factors strongly affect the relationship between proficiency level and anxiety.

The term "foreign" language anxiety was coined by Horwitz and Cope (1986) as a specific anxiety, affecting the learning of second or foreign language.

Second language anxiety is generally considered as a type of situational orcontextual anxiety that is specifically associated with second or foreign language situation.

Students, when attending lessons of the foreign language, feel less successful and may experience extensive nervousness while having to speak, write, read, and listen in the classrooms. Foreign language instructors concede this phenomenon when they try to speak with the students or ask them to write a sentence in foreign language or require them to solve a problem with the foreign language. One way to decrease anxiety is to conduct workshops and discussions during which students are given the opportunity to talk about situations where they experienced anxiety. Through discussing and dealing with their language anxiety, students are able to manage their anxiety levels and develop performance strategies for future use.

Krashen's affective filter (1982) hypothesis claims that a stressful classroom environment contributes to a "filter" blocking easy acquisition of the target language. Krashen (1982) hypothesized that anxiety contributed negatively to an "affective filter", which made an individual less responsive to language input. Students feel more comfortable with those educational subjects that are written in their native language and require them to perform and practice with their mother tongue rather than a foreign language. Learning a foreign language for students often means entering into a gray area that they have little knowledge about it. Therefore, unfamiliarity and uncertainty with the new area cause anxiety.

Second language researchers and theorists have long been aware that anxiety is often associated with language learning. Teachers and students generally feel strongly that anxiety is a major problem to be tackled in learning a foreign language and several humanistic approaches to foreign language teaching and learning, such as Community Language Learning (SLL), Suggestopedia, and Silent Way are explicitly directed at reducing learner anxiety and providing situations in which learners feel more secure. Humanism is originally a psychological term. It emphasizes the importance of the inner world of the human being and places the individual's thoughts, feelings and emotions at the heart of all human developments.

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Research has tried to find the causes of foreign language learning anxiety. One area of research has examined situational variables, for example, courseactivities, course level, course organization, and instructor behavior (Jackson, 2002; Oh, 1992; Oxford, 1999; Powell, 1991; Samimy, 1989; Spielmann and Radnofsky,2001; Young, 1991).
The aim of this research is to investigate the level of proficiency and anxiety among EFL sophomore and senior university students and probing the reasons of their anxiety in the foreign language classrooms.

Literature review

There have been great deals of research into foreign language anxiety. This research proves the fact that anxiety has a debilitating effect on foreign language learners' success. There is evidence that foreign language anxiety differs from other kinds of anxiety. Literature usually classifies anxiety into three types:

- Trait anxiety – which is a personality trait
- State anxiety – which is apprehension experienced at a particular moment in time
- Situational anxiety – which is anxiety experienced in a well-defined situation.

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) is regarded to be a situational anxiety experienced in the situation of the foreign language classroom (MacIntyre& Gardner, 1991a, 1991b, 1994). As such, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1991) view FLCA as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (in Horwitz& Young, 1991, p.31). In all of these specifications, the context or situation dependent nature of foreign language anxiety is emphasized.

Research into language learning anxiety has shown that language learning be classed as situation specific (MacIntyre and Gardner 1991; Horwitz 2001). That is, a trait which takes place in language learning situations, namely classrooms. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) made a very positive contribution to theorizing and measurement in language learning anxiety. They considered anxiety to have three components: communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Horwitz and colleagues viewed the construct of foreign language anxiety as more than a

sum of its parts. They believed that communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation are useful factors to describe foreign language anxiety but foreign language anxiety is not just these factors which transfer to learning of a foreign language. They define foreign language anxiety as 'a distinct complex of self-perception, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process' (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope 1986; Horwitz 1986).

Because of the possibility that some individuals are more susceptible to anxiety than others, it is necessary to differentiate between individuals who are often anxious and those who are not. Spielberger (1983) describes this differentiation as the state\ trait dichotomy. Individuals who are more anxious and more likely to become anxious without regard to the situation are referred to as having trait anxiety; that is, anxiety is a characteristic of their personality. However, those who are able to evaluate situations accurately and in an exact way as being threatening or not are said to have state anxiety, a social type of anxiety that occurs under certain conditions, for example at the time of assessment.

Bandura (1991) under the theory of Social Cognitive theory (SLT) introduced the theory of self-efficacy. SLT explains that behavior is composed of three related things: dynamic and reciprocal interaction of the environment, personal factors, and behavior. The SCT recognizes that some sources of influence are stronger than others and that they do not all occur simultaneously. The theory of self-efficacy states that when a situation is perceived as threatening, the resultant anxiety is dependent on an individual's perception of his/her ability to deal positively with that threat. Bandura furthermore claims that self-esteem has a role of a mitigating factor in anxiety-producing circumstances. When learners perceive situations as threatening, there can be an adverse effect on learning.

Some researchers additionally divide anxiety into two parts: cognitive (worry) and emotional (affective) (Deffenbacher, 1980; Schwarzer, 1986). According to Deffenbacher, anxiety has some connection with cognitive interference (e.g., learning challenges) is due to extreme instances of

worry, not the arousal element of anxiety. Thus the cognitive type of anxiety related to classroom learning is not often facilitative (as cited inPappamihiel, 2002).

Young (1991) mentioned that prior language experience, learner personality, and classroom circumstances influence the way n which language anxiety reveals self. It would seem reasonable to conclude that as much as the construct itself is complex, the factors that related to language anxiety are multi-dimensional.

The aim of this study was to investigate to what extent anxiety could influence the performance of EFL sophomores and seniors regarding their level of proficiency. The researchers predicted that as the level of proficiency in EFL seniors is higher than that of EFL sophomores, the senior students experience less anxiety compared to sophomore students.

Research question

Does level of proficiency has a direct role on the level of anxiety between senior and sophomore EFL students?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The total number of 40 EFL students, 20 sophomores and 20 seniors, at Chamran university of Ahvaz served as the participants of the study.

Material

For the gathering of our data, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scaleor the FLCAS was selected as the tool in the present study.To suit the foreign language learning situation some modifications were made in the Foreign Language Classroom AnxietyScale (FLCAS).The words "language" and "foreign language" used in the original FLCAS were consistently replaced with "English". For example, the original FLCAS item "It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in a foreign language" was modified to be "It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in English".Horwitz*et al*.'s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scaleis a 33-item Likert-type scale with five possible responses ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". For the purpose of the current study the items modified to 20.

Procedure

The study was conducted during the first term of academic year 2010-2011. The Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (appendix B), which was devised by Hortwiz et al. (1986) and considered by many researchers as a valid and credible measuring instrument, was used as the data collection instrument for the research.

First, the researchers explained the purpose of the study for the two groups. And the participants were informed that the responses in the questionnaire would not influence their course evaluation. Then the FLCAS questionnaires distributed between the two groups of sophomore and senior students majoring in EFL. Explanations which were needed to clarify some of the items expressly given to the participants of the study by the researchers.

Next, in order to analyze variables that associated with anxiety, the items were classified into five main categories. The first category was named "anxiety due to teacher's presence or authority", the second category "anxiety due to fear of negative evaluation and uniqueness of English class", the third "anxiety due to lack of confidence or self-esteem" the fourth "anxiety due to lack of preparation or insufficient preparation for the English class", and the fifth "anxiety due to tests and final grades". According to the title of each category and according to the relevance of twenty items to each title, the first category was assigned two, the second category six, the third category six, the fourth category four, and the fifth category two questions (appendix C).

For ease of analysis, frequency of each option of questions calculated for each group, then the frequencies of question which are in the same category were added up to make a whole frequency for each category. Percentage was also needed for the analysis, therefore, it calculated from the total frequency of each group in the way that total frequency of each group multiplied by 100 then divided by the total number of respondents of that category. For example category number one contains two questions, total frequency of this category calculated for each option of Likert Scale, then multiplied by 100 after that divided by the number of respondents (n=40). For example, the

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formula for calculating "strongly agree" option of the first category obtained from sophomores is: $\frac{5 \times 100}{40} = 12.5\%$ (Appendix A).

Data Analysis

Tables 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 present the frequencies and the percentages of each group. The data analysis for each group is as follows:

Category A: Anxiety due to teacher's presence (authority):

12.5 percent of sophomore students strongly agree that the presence of the teacher makes them anxious. The percentage for senior students is 10. Thus, there is no significant difference between the two groups. 27.5 percent of sophomores and 17.5 percent of seniors reported that they agree the presence of teacher make them anxious. The 10 percent difference between the two groups is relatively significant. For 17.5 percent of sophomores and 12.5 percent of seniors the presence of the teacher makes no difference. Again, there is no significant difference between the two groups. The data suggest that 25 percent of sophomores and 42.5 percent of seniors disagree with the assumption that the presence of teacher causes anxiety for them. The difference for this option is significant. It can be concluded that as the level of proficiency increases, the amount of anxiety decreases. The same percent of sophomores and seniors, 17.5 percent, strongly disagree with the option number 5 that they feel anxious by the teacher's presence or authority.

Category B: Anxiety due to fear of negative evaluation and uniqueness of English class

For 15 percent of sophomores and 10 percent of seniors, negative evaluation and uniqueness of language class were serious problems; therefore, they strongly agreed with option number 1. 24.16 percent of sophomores and 15 percent of seniors believed that negative evaluation and uniqueness of language class make them anxious. Hence, the sophomores feel more anxious due to fear of negative evaluation and uniqueness of English class.14.16 percent of sophomores and 28.33 percent of seniors believed that negative evaluation has no specific effect for them.23.33 percent of sophomores and 30 percent of seniors were disagreed about the influence of negative evaluation on their performance.23.33 percent of sophomores

and 16.66 percent of seniors strongly disagreed about the effects of negative evaluation and uniqueness of English class on their performance. Again it shows that sophomores feel more uncomfortable and anxious about fear of negative evaluation than seniors.

Category C: Anxiety due to lack of confidence and self-esteem

13.33 percent of sophomores and 11.66 of seniors strongly agreed with the argument that speaking in front of more fluent students provokes anxiety. 26.66 of sophomores and 19.16 of seniors also agreed with the above mentioned claim. 16.66 percent of sophomores and 11.16 percent of seniors did not consider them as effective factors. 26.66 percent of sophomores and 42.5 percent of seniors disagreed with the notion that lack of confidence or self-esteem would affect their performance. The 15.84 percent difference between the two groups is significant. Therefore, the seniors are more confident in comparison to sophomores and they participate more comfortably in the class activities. 16.66 percent of sophomores and 15 percent of seniors strongly disagreed with the assumption that lack of confidence or self-esteem has significant impact on their performance.

Category D: Anxiety due to lack of preparation or insufficient preparation for the class

8.75 percent of sophomores and seniors similarly strongly agreed that lack of preparation provokes anxiety. The results show that there is no difference between the two groups. For 18.75 percent of sophomores and 22.5 percent of seniors lack of preparation causes anxiety. Again there is no significant difference between the two groups. 15 percent of sophomores and 12.5 percent of seniors believed that lack of preparation has no specific effect on their level of anxiety. 33.75 percent of sophomores and 27.5 percent of seniors disagreed with the claim that lack of preparation is the cause for anxiety. The result shows that sophomores are more impervious to be affected from the lack of preparation. 23.75 percent of sophomores and 28.75 percent of seniors strongly disagreed about the above mentioned claimed.

Category E: Anxiety due to test and final grade.

20 percent of sophomores and 7.5 percent of seniors strongly agreed to the claim that test causes

anxiety. The findings show that the test factor is a serious problem for sophomores. 30 percent of sophomores and 25 percent of seniors agreed with the claim that test is an anxiety provoking factor.

It shows that test is an important factor that causes anxiety for the two groups, especially for sophomores. 17.5 percent of sophomores and 20 percent of seniors did not have any special idea about the effect of test on their level of their anxiety. 25 percent of sophomores and 27.5 percent of seniors disagreed about the fact that anxiety arises from test. 22.5 percent of sophomores and 20 percent of seniors strongly disagreed about the effect of test as an anxiety provoking factor.

Table 1. Response frequencies and percentages for the "anxiety due to teacher's presence"

	1	2	3	4	5
sophomores					
Frequency	5	11	7	10	7
Percentage	12.5	27.5	17.5	25	17.5
Seniors					
Frequency	4	7	5	17	7
Percentage	10	17.5	12.5	42.5	17.5

Table 2. Response frequencies and percentages for the "anxiety due to fear of negative evaluation and uniqueness of English class"

	1	2	3	4	5
sophomores					
Frequency	18	29	17	28	28
Percentage	15	24.16	14.16	23.33	23.33
Seniors					
Frequency	12	18	34	36	20
Percentage	10	15	28.33	30	16.66

Table 3. Response frequencies and percentages for the "anxiety due to lack of confidence or self-esteem

	1	2	3	4	5
sophomores					
Frequency	16	32	20	32	20
Percentage	13.33	26.66	16.66	26.66	16.66
Seniors					
Frequency	14	23	14	51	18
Percentage	11.66	19.16	11.66	42.5	15

Table 4. Response frequencies and percentages for the "anxiety due to lack of preparation or insufficient preparation for class"

	1	2	3	4	5
sophomores					
Frequency	7	15	12	27	19
Percentage	8.75	18.75	15	33.75	23.75
Seniors					
Frequency	7	18	10	22	23
Percentage	8.75	22.5	12.5	27.5	28.75

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Table 5. Response frequencies and percentages for the "anxiety due to tests and final grades"

	A	B	C	D	E
sophomores					
Frequency	8	12	7	10	9
Percentage	20	30	17.5	25	22.5
Seniors					
Frequency	3	10	8	11	8
Percentage	7.5	25	20	27.5	20

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study revealed a variety of anxiety-provoking factors which affect the performance of sophomores and seniors. However, according to the findings and results of the study, as the level of proficiency increases the feeling of anxiety decreases. The most outstanding factors proved to play a major role in increasing anxiety between the two groups of this study are:

• Tests and final grades

• Teacher presence or authority

• Negative evaluation and uniqueness of Language class

• Lack of confidence and self-esteem.

There is a great deal of students who experience test anxiety. Anxiety is produced when students feel that the prime criteria upon which their success will be judged is final exams and the final grades. The results of the study suggest the sophomores' level of test anxiety is higher than the seniors. Thus, the conclusion is that because of higher level of proficiency seniors experience lower level of anxiety. Fear of test and anxiety could lead to studying avoidance. Horwitz et al. (1986) claim that, "Anxious students may avoid studying and in some cases skip class entirely in an effort alleviate their anxiety" (p. 127) (as cited in Conway, 2007).language teachers should accept the fact that fears of exams is common among many students. They should find ways to evaluate students without inducing high levels of anxiety. Sometimes a warm and encouraging smile before the test begins reduces the level of anxiety among students Namely, good communication and feedback before and after tests is beneficial to decrease test anxiety of learners. Good communication between teachers and learners and allowing students to express their feelings and thoughts about test can influence the anxiety level.

Other factor which proved to be an effective factor on anxiety is teacher presence. The results of the study state that the sophomores experience higher level of anxiety toward the presence or the authority of the teacher than seniors. One possible reason for this kind of anxiety is that seniors are more familiar with the teacher and know him or her better. Therefore, they are comfortable with the teacher. Some teachers think that frightening and threatening their students will cause them to become motivated to learn the foreign language. These kinds of teacher can help their student to achieve their potential by revising their beliefs and allowing students to enjoy mutual positive relationship.

Fear of negative evaluation and the uniqueness of the Language class are other elements that contribute to anxiety. The results show that the sophomores are more impacted by these factors in comparison to the seniors. Being constantly evaluated and being obliged to perform in front other students are crucial for sophomores. Knowing each other for a longer time, the seniors feel more relaxed with other members of the class. Hence, their level of anxiety is lower than the sophomores'.

Another source of anxiety is lack of confidence and self-esteem. Although the results of the research indicate no significant difference between the two groups, the sophomores suffer more lack of confidence comparing with the seniors. Again the findings prove that the level of proficiency is effective factor for anxiety.
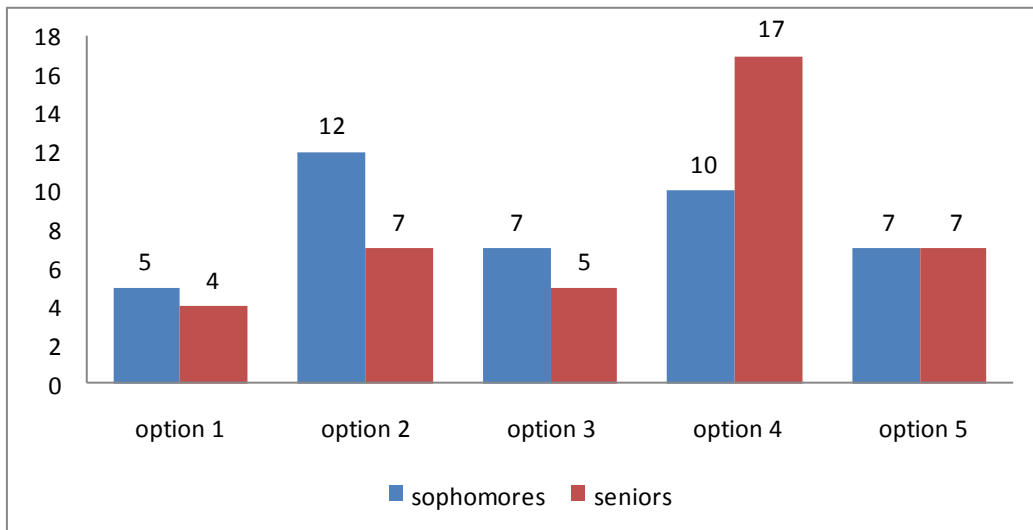
The findings of this study are important for researchers, university teaching staff, and the students themselves. It is hoped that increasing and extensive knowledge about the effects of foreign language anxiety will guide foreign language teachers sand researchers.
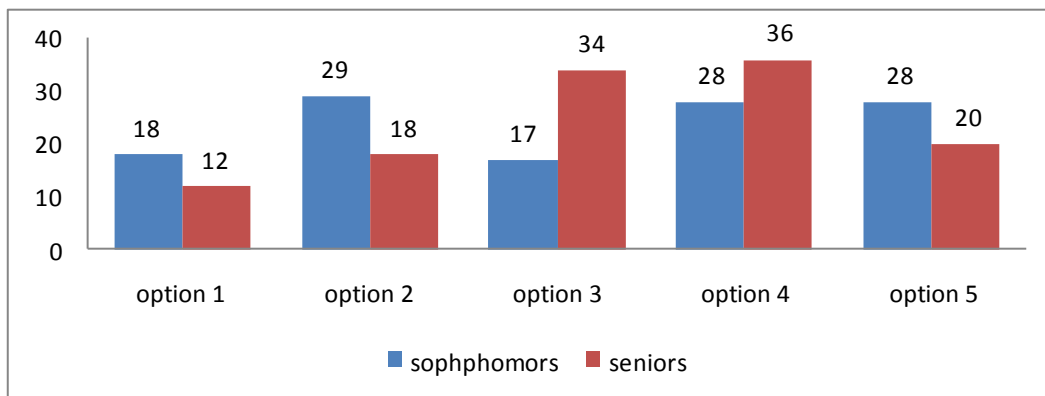
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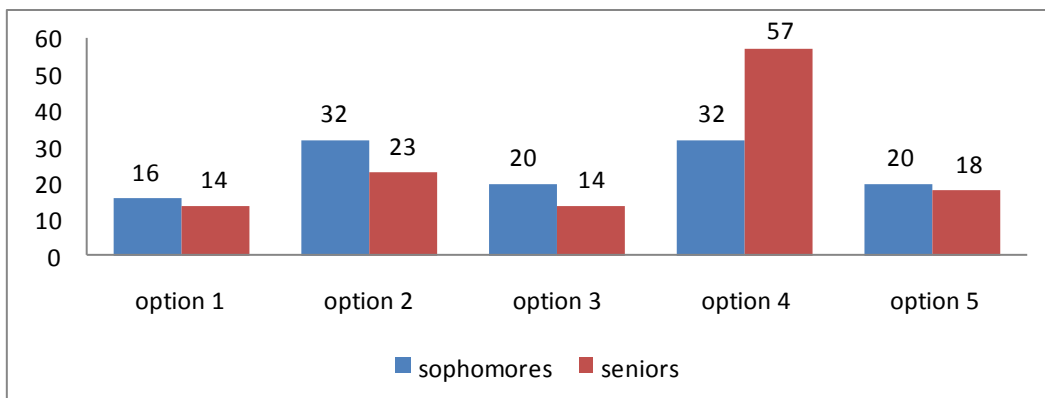
APPENDIX A

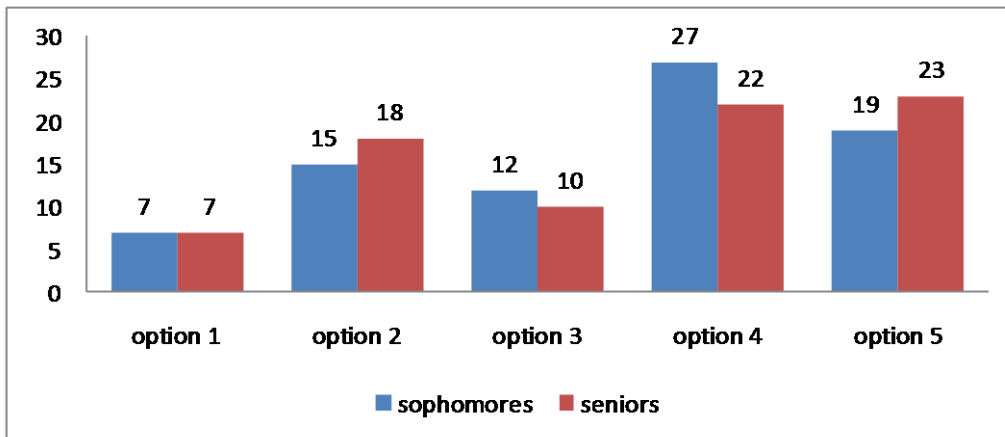Frequencies and percentages obtained from five options of the category A

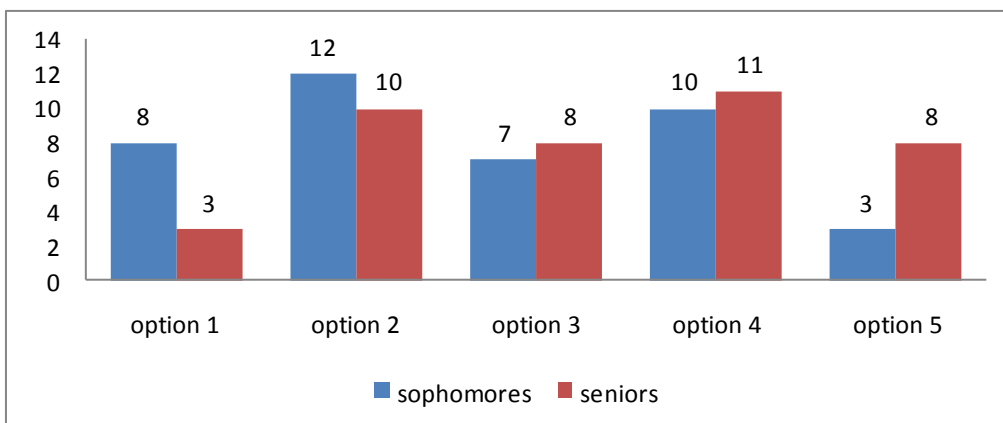Frequencies and percentages obtained from five options of the category B

Frequencies and percentages obtained from five options of the category C

Frequencies and percentages obtained from five options of the category D

Frequencies and percentages obtained from five options of the category E

APPENDIX B

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale

1 = I strongly agree; 2 = I agree; 3 = No comment; 4 = I disagree; 5 = I strongly disagree

	How do I feel in class?	1	2	3	4	5
1	I am nervous when the teacher speaks to me in English class.					
2	I am embarrassed when I answer the teacher in English class.					
3	I worry about making mistakes in English class.					
4	I get nervous when speaking in English in class.					
5	My heart pounds when I do something in class.					

6	I feel self-conscious when speaking in English with my classmates.					
7	I am afraid that others will laugh at me when I speak English.					
8	I feel that the other students are better than me at speaking English.					
9	I get so nervous in class that I forget everything.					
10	I get nervous if I haven't prepared for English class.					
11	I feel anxious even if I have prepared for English class.					
12	I worry if the teacher corrects me in class.					
13	The more I study English, the more I get confused.					
14	I worry if I can't understand every word the teacher says.					
15	In pair-work, I worry if my partner is better than me at English.					
16	In pair-work, I worry if my partner is worse than me at English.					
17	I worry about English tests.					
18	I worry about failing English class.					
19	The English class makes me most nervous (more than other classes).					
20	I often daydream in English class.					

APPENDIX C

Statements included in Category A

1. I am nervous when the teacher speaks to me In English class.

2. I am embarrassed when I answer the teacher in English class.

Statements included in Category B

1. I worry about making mistakes in English class.

2. I feel self-conscious when speaking in English with my classmates.

3. I am afraid that others will laugh at me when I speak English.

4. I worry if the teacher corrects me in class.

5. The English class makes me most nervous (more than other classes).

6. I often daydream in English class.

Statement included in Category C

1. I get nervous when speaking in English class.

2. My heart pounds when I do something in class.

3. I feel that the other students are better than me at speaking English.

4. I get so nervous in class that I forget everything.

5. I feel anxious even if I have prepared for English class.

6. In pair-work, I worry if my partner is better than me at English.

Statements included in Category D

1. I get nervous if I haven't prepared for English class.

2. The more I study English, the more I get confused.

3. I worry if I can't understand every word the teacher says.

4. In pair-work, I worry if my partner is worse than me at English.

Statements included in Category E

1. I worry about English tests.

2. I worry about failing English class.