

English Language Anxiety and Proficiency among Peruvian University Students: A Cross-Sectional Comparison across Five Years of Study

Gabriela Manzur-Vera, Pilar Valeria Zapana-Aguilar, Cynthia Karín Rodríguez-Palumbo, Miriam Estefani Condori-Chacolli, Miliam Quispe-Vargas, Ruthy Merla Pilco-Velasquez, Gina Berenice Urquizo-Tarqui

Manzur-Vera, G., Zapana-Aguilar, P. V., Rodríguez-Palumbo, C. K., Condori-Chacolli, M. E., Quispe-Vargas, M., Pilco-Velasquez, R. M., & Urquizo-Tarqui, G. B. (2026). English Language Anxiety and Proficiency among Peruvian University Students: A Cross-Sectional Comparison across Five Years of Study. En R. Simbaña Q. (Coord). *Educación, sociedad y conocimiento. Miradas transdisciplinarias para un mundo en transformación (Volumen I)*. (pp. 141-162). Religación Press. <http://doi.org/10.46652/religacionpress.492.c1016>



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Abstract

This chapter examines anxiety as an educational and mental-health factor in English language learning among undergraduate students enrolled in a foreign-language teacher education program at a public university in southern Peru. The discussion is organized around the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the four communicative skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. It presents the conceptual relationship between somatic and affective manifestations of anxiety and language performance, then describes a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational study conducted with students from the first through fifth years of the program. The chapter explains the participant profile, the use of a Zung-based anxiety questionnaire, the administration of an internationally aligned English sample test, and the nonparametric analytical strategy used to examine associations. Descriptive evidence is consolidated to compare anxiety levels, overall English proficiency, skill-specific profiles, and differences across years of study. The inferential section focuses on the associations between English proficiency and overall, somatic, and affective anxiety. The final sections interpret the findings in relation to language-learning research, identify implications for emotionally supportive instruction and institutional services, and clarify the limitations of a single-site, convenience-sample, cross-sectional design. The chapter is intended to support university teachers, program directors, researchers, and student-support professionals seeking to integrate language development with attention to learners' emotional well-being.

Keywords: Anxiety; English as a foreign language; Language proficiency; University students; Mental health.

Introduction

English fluency is essential to academic mobility, professional engagement and access to international information. Language acquisition is not an optional curricular component but a defining feature of the academic identity of university students who prepare to teach or use English professionally. But the growth is more than a result of exposure to grammar and vocabulary. Learners are to read, write, listen and talk and to tolerate ambiguity, public review, correction and potential of error. Such expectations set the emotional circumstances of learning on the same level as the cognitive and linguistic demands of the curriculum.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) provides a common framework for describing proficiency in terms of observable communicative performance. Its levels offer institutions a way to interpret what learners can achieve throughout reception, production, interaction and mediation, rather than reporting competency as a single, homogeneous score (Council of Europe, 2020). The framework is of particular use when considering teacher education, as students need to go from simple use of language to independent performance and to gain confidence to speak the target language in public.

Anxiety may interfere with that trajectory. Foreign language anxiety has been described as a situation-specific response connected with communication apprehension, test pressure, and fear of unfavorable assessment (Horwitz et al., 1986). In higher education, anxiety may also mirror larger academic, social, economic and personal demands. Studies on university students have reported that anxiety is related to academic stress, perceived self-efficacy, and mental-health vulnerability (Castillo Pimienta et al., 2016; Chávez Márquez, 2021; Gutiérrez-García & Landeros-Velázquez, 2018). When these pressures arise during language activities they might lower motivation to engage, limit attention, increase self-monitoring and make retrieval more difficult.

The research was carried out in 2024 with students of a professional Foreign Language program at Universidad Nacional Jorge Basadre Grohmann in Tacna, Peru. The aim was to investigate if anxiety was connected with English competence and if somatic and affective anxiety had comparable correlations with performance. Due to the cross-sectional methodology, the data are viewed as associations rather than evidence that worry causes low proficiency. Anxiety may also work in both directions – anxiety may inhibit performance, and recurrent difficulties or poor perceived competence can increase anxiety.

The synthesis covers general and skill-specific competence distributions, anxiety profiles, cohort comparisons, effect direction, amplitude and uncertainty. Longitudinal progress is distinguishable from descriptive variations among years of research since one point in time was observed for distinct cohorts. The sampled groups are thus characterized by cross-year tendencies, but cannot inform us about how the same pupils evolved throughout the five years.

Anxiety and language learning

Anxiety is the cognitive, emotional and physiological response to perceived threat. Affective expressions in an academic situation might include concern, apprehension, fear or continuous negative anticipation. Somatic symptoms may include tension, tremor, palpitations, exhaustion, perspiration, gastrointestinal upset, sleep disturbance or other physical feelings. These aspects are analytically separable yet may be mutually reinforcing. The anxious learner may sense bodily arousal, perceive this arousal as an indication of probable failure, and disengage from the work.

This cycle is especially pertinent to language acquisition since performance is usually immediate and observable. Speaking involves such real-time processes as content formulation, vocabulary retrieval, pronunciation management, interlocutor interpretation, and accuracy monitoring. Listening requires sustained concentration when time is short. Reading and writing need more time for processing but also make their own demands on fresh language, content organization and

standards of assessment. Thus, the emotional components define not only the perseverance of the students, but also the efficiency in the distribution of attention and the use of strategies over skills (López & Maya Retamar, 2022).

Anxiety's instructional impact is a function of its severity, context and duration. Preparation and focused effort may result in moderate activation but persistent or severe symptomatology may interfere with concentration, sleep, attendance, involvement and confidence. University data, also indicates that anxiety is not evenly distributed and may be affected by workload, transition needs, social support and perceived control (Arrieta Vergara et al., 2014; Pinilla et al., 2020). So the proper institutional response is not to pathologize all suffering, or to ignore sorrow. Programs require methods to identify children that need professional support and set regular classroom routines that reduce needless harm.

Another performance lens is the Common European Framework. A1 and A2 = basic proficiency B1 Grade C and B1 Grade B = independent performance at a higher level B2 Grade A = greatest outcome available on the sample exam mapped to B1. Reading, writing, listening and speaking were scored separately and interpreted using these bands. This structure allows to analyze the relationship between the emotional pattern and general competency and lets to determine which abilities are comparatively stronger and weaker in the sample.

Method

Design and participants

The investigation used a quantitative, basic-research approach with a nonexperimental, cross-sectional correlational design. Data were collected during the second academic semester of 2024. The target group consisted of students from the first through fifth years of the Foreign Language professional program at a public university in Tacna. The intended convenience sample comprised 135 students, while the final analyzable dataset contained 101 participants. Recruitment and nonparticipation were not documented in sufficient detail; conse-

quently, the analysis is limited to the 101 complete cases without assuming reasons for the difference.

The final sample included 18 first-year, 24 second-year, 21 third-year, 20 fourth-year, and 18 fifth-year students. This distribution allowed descriptive comparisons across all years of the program, but the nonprobability procedure limits generalization beyond the participating students.

Table 1.
Distribution of the analyzed sample by year of study

Year of study	n	%
First	18	17.8
Second	24	23.8
Third	21	20.8
Fourth	20	19.8
Fifth	18	17.8
Total	101	100.0

Note: prepared by the author.

Measures and procedure

Anxiety was evaluated using the 20-item Zung questionnaire. The scoring algorithm identified 13 items as somatic symptoms and 7 items as affective symptoms. Responses were recorded using a five-point frequency scale from never to always. Total scores were grouped as no anxiety, moderate anxiety and severe anxiety. Administration of the device took roughly 15 minutes.

The English proficiency was tested via a sample test of an international B1 examination. It consisted of reading, writing, listening and speaking assignments and took roughly 120 minutes. Outcomes reported were classed as A1, A2, B1 Grade C, B1 Grade B, or B2 Grade A. Institutional approval was acquired from the academic unit and the students were made aware of the study and the assessment method. Authors should add any appropriate ethical approval identifier and

informed-consent data to the final submission record before submission for external publishing.

Data analysis

SPSS version 25 was used to generate frequencies, percentages, cross-tabulations, normality tests, and bivariate correlations. Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests were statistically significant for anxiety, proficiency, and every reported dimension, supporting the use of a rank-based procedure for the inferential analysis. Spearman rank-order correlations were therefore used to examine English proficiency in relation to overall anxiety, somatic anxiety, and affective anxiety. Statistical significance was evaluated with two-sided tests at $\alpha = .05$.

Values exported as $p = .000$ are reported correctly as $p < .001$. Percentages and year labels were verified against the underlying frequency counts. Approximate 95% confidence intervals for Spearman coefficients were derived through Fisher z transformation to make the precision of the estimates explicit. The analysis remains correlational: rho values describe the direction and strength of monotonic association, not causal influence.

Results

Anxiety profile

Most of the students were categorized in the no-anxiety group on the overall scale: 81 out of 101 participants (80.2%). Seventeen (16.8%) pupils expressed mild anxiety and three (3.0%) experienced severe anxiety. Overall, 19.8% of the sample reported moderate or severe anxiety. This distribution does not mean that the other students were devoid of any situational discomfort, but just that their total ratings were not higher than the cut-off points utilized in the study.

In the somatic dimension, 85 students (84.2%) had no anxiety, 13 (12.9%) moderate anxiety and three (3.0%) severe anxiety. In terms of the affective

tive dimension, 81 pupils (80.2%) were without anxiety, 19 (18.8%) had moderate anxiety and one (1.0%) had severe anxiety. Thus, mild symptoms were more frequent in the emotional domain than in the somatic domain, although severe categories were rare in both.

Table 2.
Distribution of overall, somatic, and affective anxiety

Measure	No anxiety n (%)	Moderate n (%)	Severe n (%)
Overall anxiety	81 (80.2)	17 (16.8)	3 (3.0)
Somatic symptoms	85 (84.2)	13 (12.9)	3 (3.0)
Affective symptoms	81 (80.2)	19 (18.8)	1 (1.0)

Note: prepared by the author. N = 101. Percentages may not total 100 because of rounding.

Overall English proficiency and skill profiles

The most common overall classification was A2 obtained by 40 pupils (39.6%). There were 18 pupils (17.8%) at A1, 21 (20.8%) at B1 Grade C, 12 (11.9%) at B1 Grade B, and 10 (9.9%) at B2 Grade A. 58 pupils (57.4%) belonged to the combined A1-A2 band and 43 (42.6%) to B1 or B2.

The distributions of skills were different. A1-A2 65.3% in reading and 60.4% in listening B1-B2 66.3% in writing and 72.3% in speaking These are relative strengths in this evaluation profile, not proof that productive talents are intrinsically simpler. Other contributions might be due to task design, scoring, curricular focus, and rater circumstances.

Table 3.
English proficiency distributions overall and by skill

Domain	A1 n (%)	A2 n (%)	B1 C n (%)	B1 B n (%)	B2 A n (%)
Overall	18 (17.8)	40 (39.6)	21 (20.8)	12 (11.9)	10 (9.9)
Reading	30 (29.7)	36 (35.6)	15 (14.9)	10 (9.9)	10 (9.9)
Writing	20 (19.8)	14 (13.9)	33 (32.7)	19 (18.8)	15 (14.9)
Listening	38 (37.6)	23 (22.8)	15 (14.9)	9 (8.9)	16 (15.8)
Speaking	10 (9.9)	18 (17.8)	34 (33.7)	²¹ (20.8)	18 (17.8)

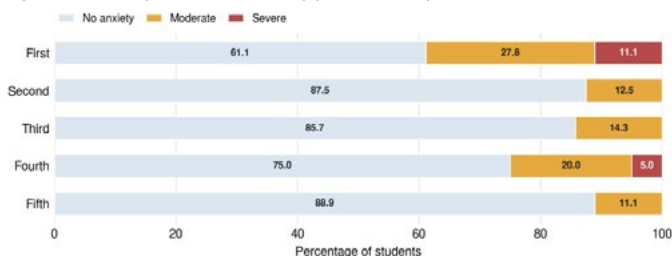
Note: prepared by the author. N = 101 for each domain. B1 C and B1 B denote Grades C and B; B2 A denotes the B2 outcome associated with Grade A on the B1-aligned sample test.

Differences across years of study

Anxiety levels were highest among first-year students. Seven out of 18 first-year participants (38.9%) were found to have moderate or severe anxiety compared to 12.5%, 14.3%, 25.0%, and 11.1% in the second, third, fourth, and fifth years, respectively. Severe anxiety was noted in first year (two students, 11.1%) and fourth year (one student, 5.0%). The pattern shows that admittance to university may be a time of special susceptibility, while the fourth year finding demonstrates that heightened anxiety is not restricted to the first move.

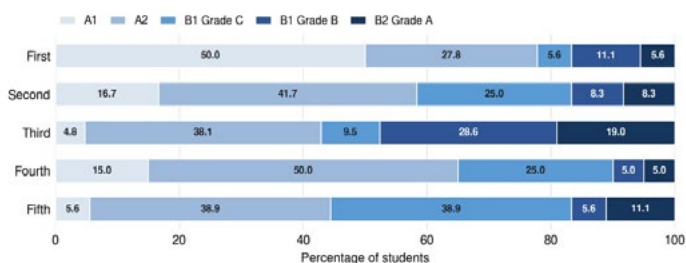
English levels also varied by cohort. In the first year half of the first year students were A1, whereas A1 was 4.8% to 16.7% in the other years. The proportion at B1 or B2 was 22.2% at the first year, 41.7% at the second year, 57.1% at the third year, 35.0% at the fourth year and 55.6% at the fifth year. The decline in the A1 proportion in advanced years is consistent with increasing proficiency in subsequent cohorts. The B1-or-higher percentages are not always monotonically increasing. These cohort differences are presented in Figure 1 and should be read with caution and not as continuous individual growth.

Figure 1. Anxiety classification by year of study



Note: prepared by the author.

Figure 2. Overall English proficiency by year of study



Note: prepared by the author.

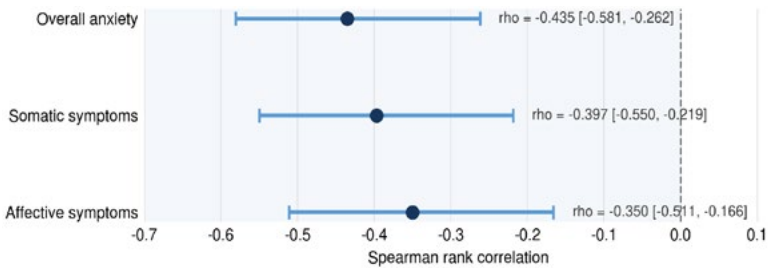
Associations between anxiety and English proficiency

There was a moderate and negative correlation between English proficiency and anxiety (Spearman $\rho = -.435$, 95% CI $[-.581, -.262]$, $p < .001$). Higher anxiety rankings were linked to poorer proficiency rankings. Proficiency was negatively correlated with somatic anxiety, $\rho = -.397$, 95% CI $[-.550, -.219]$, $p < .001$, as well as with affective anxiety, $\rho = -.350$, 95% CI $[-.511, -.166]$, $p < .001$. The confidence intervals do not include zero, which suggests that the negative pattern is robust, and the breadth of the intervals demonstrates the accuracy gained from 101 observations.

The whole scale showed the highest absolute coefficient, followed by somatic and emotional symptoms (Figure 2). But none of these estimates is large enough to make a case for anxiety as the sole explanation of proficiency. Other factors may include exposure to language, instructional history, learning styles, motivation, past schooling, socioeconomic situations, and experience with assessment. Moreover, simul-

taneous assessment of anxiety and competence prohibits identification of chronological order.

Figure 3. Associations between anxiety measures and overall English proficiency



Note: prepared by the author. Points represent Spearman rho estimates and horizontal lines represent approximate 95% confidence intervals. The dashed vertical line indicates no association. All coefficients were negative and statistically significant at $p < .001$. Table 4.

Spearman correlations with overall English proficiency

Anxiety measure	Spearman rho	Approx. 95% CI	p	N	Interpretation
Overall anxiety	-.435	[-.581, -.262]	< .001	101	Moderate negative
Somatic symptoms	-.397	[-.550, -.219]	< .001	101	Moderate negative
Affective symptoms	-.350	[-.511, -.166]	< .001	101	Moderate negative

Note: prepared by the author. Two-sided tests. Confidence intervals are approximate and were calculated through Fisher z transformation. Negative coefficients indicate that higher anxiety ranks were associated with lower English proficiency ranks.

Discussion

The main finding is a consistent negative association between anxiety and English competence. The link was observed on the total scale and persisted when anxiety was split into physical and emotional aspects. This consistency is important, since it implies that the link was not limited to one type of symptom. Both physical arousal and negative emotional anticipation were associated with poorer performance scores. However, the study was unable to determine whether anxiety was a precursor to the problems, a consequence of the problems, or part of a reciprocal process.

This is congruent with the traditional explanation of anxiety in the foreign language classroom where anticipation, evaluative pressure and communication demands can interfere with performance (Horwitz et al., 1986). It also parallels other recent research that point to the relevance of emotional experience on motivation, perseverance and skill growth in university English learning (López & Maya Retamar, 2022; Tixi et al., 2023). A learner who feels humiliation may speak less, ask fewer questions, avoid challenging activities, or use their concentration on self-monitoring. With less practice, confidence and skill may decline with time.

The overall profile of preponderance calls for subtlety at the same time. Severe anxiety was infrequent and four in five pupils were in the no-anxiety group. Universal clinical anxiety is not the greatest way to express it. The institutional problem. Instead, the data suggest a smaller but educationally crucial group of students, with around one in five students feeling moderate or severe overall anxiety, with the first-year cohort most highly represented. Universal low-threat instructional techniques are useful to the entire class, while screening, counseling and referral systems offer more substantive aid to children with persistent or severe issues. The skill profile adds another dimension. Reading and listening were mostly at A1-A2, but writing and speaking had larger proportions at B1-B2. One explanation is that the curricula incorporated practice in productive skills or the assessment issues enabled pupils to utilize rehearsed forms. Another is that the receptive regions placed

additional lexical or processing demands on participants. As the study did not examine task difficulty, rater reliability or hours of training by competence, the trend should be seen as a suggestion to research rather than definitive explanation. The program assessment may also consider if enough emphasis is being placed on hearing input, substantial reading, vocabulary development, and familiarity with the test format. Cross-year comparison is also aided by restriction. The steep fall in A1 after the first year is positive and following cohorts tended to have more students at B1 or B2. However, fourth-year students had lower B1-or-higher rates than third- and fifth-year students. This may be a reflection of cohort makeup, sequencing of the curriculum, unequal prior exposure, sampling variability or assessment settings. The cross-sectional sample cannot reveal the pace of movement forward. A longitudinal strategy tracking one group, with repeated evaluations of proficiency and anxiety, would give greater evidence of change and chronological sequence.

First year anxiety demands special attention since the move to university involves new academic expectations, unexpected social groups, public language performance and adjustment to institutional norms. The trend of first-year students aligns with studies that has demonstrated university anxiety might be connected to academic demands and perceived self-efficacy (Chávez Márquez, 2021; Gutiérrez-García & Landeros-Velázquez, 2018). But the fourth-year moderate and severe cases indicate that assistance should not terminate after induction. Later in the program, several types of pressure may arise, such as advanced curriculum, teaching practice, certification demands, and concerns about graduation and employment.

The size of the correlations matters in practice but is not deterministic. greater anxiety explained an ordering tendency, not a definite outcome: Some greater anxiety students can still do well, while some low anxiety students can still be at basic proficiency. The data should consequently influence a tiered educational response. Language development involves emotional support, but this should not replace specific teaching, practice, feedback, and equal access to learning materials.

Pedagogical and institutional implications

The study supports an integrated response in which language instruction and student well-being are planned together. The following actions are consistent with the evidence while remaining proportionate to a correlational design:

- Provide a low danger environment for participation. Teachers can normalize mistake as part of language development, provide a little preparation period before an oral response, employ pair rehearsal before whole-class speaking, and provide feedback that distinguishes communicative success from correctable form.
- Enhance first-year transition help. Early diagnostic evaluation, orientation on proficiency requirements, peer mentorship and brief seminars on study routines and anxiety control may lessen ambiguity before avoidance tendencies become established.
- Use a variety of assessment forms. to lessen the strain of one high stakes event while preserving clear standards through the use of formative activities, tiered assignments, portfolios and guided oral practice.
- Receptive skills improvement. The A1-A2 concentration of reading and listening emphasizes the requirement for graded input, intensive reading, repetitive hearing, vocabulary recycling and specific comprehension tactics.
- Establish a clear referral channel Faculty require training in recognizing the signs of chronic suffering, in expressing concern without making diagnoses, and in referring students to appropriate psychological or psychiatric care when necessary.
- Monitor progress over time. Programs can administer brief anxiety and proficiency tests at predetermined intervals and use aggregate data to evaluate whether curricular and support activities increase both performance and well-being.

These practices are compatible with active and inclusive language teaching. They do not lower academic expectations; they reduce avoidable

threat so that assessment more accurately reflects what students know and can do. Innovative methodology is most useful when it combines meaningful communication, scaffolded challenge, and attention to emotional conditions (Palacios Terán & Zambrano Rosero, 2024).

Limitations and directions for future research

The extent of the findings is limited by many restrictions. The results should not be applied to all Peruvian university students, as the convenience sample was taken from a single professional program at one public institution. The final data set of 101 was lower than the expected sample of 135. Participant flow, nonparticipation, and missing-data management were not documented in a reproducible manner. Future research should include data on participant flow and compare respondents with nonrespondents when available.

The cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences or individual advancement. Self-reported anxiety may be affected by response style and unwillingness to express suffering. The published methodological record did not give enough detail to independently examine internal consistency in the sample analyzed, inter-rater reliability for productive abilities, or the entire validity argument for converting section scores into proficiency bands. Future studies should describe these qualities, as well as the use of validated measures of language anxiety, and multivariable models that account past exposure to English, age, gender, socioeconomic circumstances, motivation, self-efficacy and instructional factors.

A longitudinal mixed methods design would be particularly useful. Repeated measures of proficiency might determine if changes in anxiety precede changes in performance. Interviews or observations of classroom activity could reveal whether anxiety is facilitative, disruptive, or skill-specific. Intervention studies might then evaluate if low-threat education, counseling, peer support, mindfulness or cognitive-behavioural methods increase results relative to ordinary practice.

Conclusion

Among the 101 students studied, higher overall, somatic, and affective anxiety was consistently associated with lower English proficiency. The correlations were negative and modest, indicating an educationally important pattern, but not a causative assertion. Most students did not reach the research thresholds for moderate or severe anxiety, but the minority impacted, especially in the first year, need targeted care.

The profile in English showed that more than half the respondents were still in overall A1 or A2, with reading and hearing as the respective weak regions. Later-year cohorts tended to have higher competency than first-year learners but differences were not linear and should not be regarded as longitudinal growth. The takeaway here is that effective language programs demand intense teaching and affectively sensitive learning environments. The combination of planned skill development, formative evaluation, low-threat involvement, early transition help, and professional referral channels may better protect student well-being while growing communicative competence.

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Gabriela Manzur-Vera

Universidad Nacional Jorge Basadre Grohmann | Tacna | Perú

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6352-3015>

gmanzurv@unjbg.edu.pe

Docente de inglés con experiencia en la enseñanza de jóvenes y adultos. Se especializa en la creación de materiales educativos y en el desarrollo de actividades dinámicas para el aprendizaje del idioma. Actualmente continúa fortaleciendo su práctica profesional en el ámbito educativo.

Pilar Valeria Zapana-Aguilar

Universidad Nacional Jorge Basadre Grohmann | Tacna | Perú

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5882-7412>

pzapanaagu@unjbg.edu.pe

Estudiante de la Carrera Profesional de Idioma Extranjero de la Universidad Nacional Jorge Basadre Grohmann. Actividad académica orientada a la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera, la didáctica del idioma y la investigación educativa en contextos de Educación Básica Regular (EBR) y educación superior. Desarrollo de producción científica en el área de educación, con énfasis en el aprendizaje del idioma inglés, el fortalecimiento de las habilidades lingüísticas y el análisis de factores cognitivos y socioemocionales que influyen en el proceso de adquisición de lenguas extranjeras.

Cynthia Karín Rodríguez-Palumbo

Universidad Nacional Jorge Basadre Grohmann | Tacna | Perú

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4724-0277>

crodriguezp@unjbg.edu.pe

Magíster en Psicología Educativa, Traductora e Intérprete, 20 años de experiencia docente universitaria. Investigadora en estrés y mentalidad en educación superior. Publicaciones en Technological Innovations Journal y artículos aprobados en Scopus. Especialista en estrategias metodológicas para enseñanza de idiomas y competencias socioemocionales.

Miriam Estefani Condori-Chacolli

Universidad Nacional Jorge Basadre Grohmann | Tacna | Perú

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5638-0303>

mecondoric.espg@unjbg.edu.pe

Licenciada en Educación, con especialidad en Idioma Extranjero, por la Universidad Nacional Jorge Basadre Grohmann de Tacna. Maestra en Ciencias (Magíster Scientiae) con mención en Tecnología Educativa. Docente universitaria en la Escuela de Posgrado NEWMAN S.A.C. Su labor académica e interés profesional se centran en el aprendizaje y desarrollo de las habilidades del idioma inglés, así como en la integración de herramientas tecnológicas y recursos digitales en los procesos de enseñanza-aprendizaje, con énfasis en la innovación pedagógica y el fortalecimiento de la práctica docente en el ámbito universitario.

Miliam Quispe-Vargas

Universidad Nacional Jorge Basadre Grohmann | Tacna | Perú

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5340-4314>

mquispev@unjbg.edu.pe

Docente con título de Licenciado en Educación, Especialidad en Idioma Extranjero, Traductor e Intérprete por la Universidad Nacional Jorge Basadre Grohmann. Tengo experiencia trabajando con niños de entre 2 a 5 años, con estudiantes de nivel primaria y secundaria, con jóvenes de nivel superior y adultos del Programa de Alfabetización. Realicé mis estudios de Maestría con mención en Enseñanza del Idioma Inglés como Lengua Extranjera por la Universidad de Piura. Así como el Doctorado en Ciencias: Educación por la Universidad Nacional de San Agustín de Arequipa.

Ruthy Merla Pilco-Velasquez

Universidad Nacional Jorge Basadre Grohmann | Tacna | Perú

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9352-6260>

mpilcov@unjbg.edu.pe

Docente e investigadora en el área de Educación e Idioma Extranjero, con formación en Educación con especialidad en Idioma Extranjero, Traductor e Intérprete, y una maestría en Docencia Universitaria y Gestión Educativa. Ha ejercido funciones de gestión académica como directora de la Escuela Profesional de Educación de la Universidad Nacional Jorge Basadre Grohmann y cuenta con experiencia en asesoría e investigación educativa.

Gina Berenice Urquiza-Tarqui

Universidad Nacional Jorge Basadre Grohmann | Tacna | Perú

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1205-317X>

gurquizot@unjbg.edu.pe

Docente universitaria y especialista en Psicopedagogía, con experiencia en el ámbito educativo y de la enseñanza del idioma inglés. Cuenta con una Maestría en Psicopedagogía por la Universidad Privada de Tacna y ha desarrollado investigación sobre desempeño académico y ansiedad ante los exámenes. Actualmente ha ejercido labores docentes en la Universidad Nacional Jorge Basadre Grohmann.

Ansiedad ante el idioma inglés y competencia lingüística en estudiantes universitarios peruanos: una comparación transversal a lo largo de cinco años de estudio

Resumen

Este capítulo examina la ansiedad como factor educativo y de salud mental en el aprendizaje del idioma inglés entre estudiantes de pregrado matriculados en un programa de formación docente en lenguas extranjeras de una universidad pública del sur del Perú. La discusión se organiza en torno al Marco Común Europeo de Referencia para las Lenguas y las cuatro destrezas comunicativas: lectura, escritura, comprensión auditiva y expresión oral. Se presenta la relación conceptual entre las manifestaciones somáticas y afectivas de la ansiedad y el desempeño lingüístico, y luego se describe un estudio correlacional cuantitativo y transversal realizado con estudiantes desde el primer hasta el quinto año del programa. El capítulo explica el perfil de los participantes, el uso de un cuestionario de ansiedad basado en Zung, la administración de una prueba de muestra de inglés alineada internacionalmente y la estrategia analítica no paramétrica utilizada para examinar las asociaciones. Se consolida la evidencia descriptiva para comparar los niveles de ansiedad, la competencia general en inglés, los perfiles específicos por destreza y las diferencias entre años de estudio. La sección inferencial se centra en las asociaciones entre la competencia en inglés y la ansiedad general, somática y afectiva. Las secciones finales interpretan los hallazgos en relación con la investigación sobre el aprendizaje de lenguas, identifican implicaciones para una instrucción emocionalmente supportive y los servicios institucionales, y aclaran las limitaciones de un diseño transversal de sitio único y muestra por conveniencia. El capítulo está destinado a apoyar a docentes universitarios, directores de programas, investigadores y profesionales de apoyo estudiantil que buscan integrar el desarrollo lingüístico con la atención al bienestar emocional de los estudiantes. Palabras clave: Ansiedad; Inglés como lengua extranjera; Competencia lingüística;

Estudiantes universitarios; Salud mental.

Ansiedade em relação à língua inglesa e proficiência entre estudantes universitários peruanos: uma comparação transversal ao longo de cinco anos de estudo

Resumo

Este capítulo examina a ansiedade como fator educacional e de saúde mental na aprendizagem da língua inglesa entre estudantes de graduação matriculados em um programa de formação de professores de línguas estrangeiras de uma universidade pública no sul do Peru. A discussão está organizada em torno do Quadro Comum Europeu de Referência para as Línguas e das quatro habilidades comunicativas: leitura, escrita, compreensão auditiva e expressão oral. Apresenta a relação conceitual entre manifestações somáticas e afetivas da ansiedade e o desempenho linguístico, e em seguida descreve um estudo correlacional quantitativo e transversal realizado com estudantes do primeiro ao quinto ano do programa. O capítulo explica o perfil dos participantes, o uso de um questionário de ansiedade baseado em Zung, a administração de um teste de amostra de inglês alinhado internacionalmente e a estratégia analítica não paramétrica utilizada para examinar as associações. A evidência descritiva é consolidada para comparar níveis de ansiedade, proficiência geral em inglês, perfis específicos por habilidade e diferenças entre anos de estudo. A seção inferencial concentra-se nas associações entre proficiência em inglês e ansiedade geral, somática e afetiva. As seções finais interpretam os achados em relação à pesquisa sobre aprendizagem de línguas, identificam implicações para uma instrução emocionalmente supportiva e serviços institucionais, e esclarecem as limitações de um delineamento transversal de local único e amostra por conveniência. O capítulo destina-se a apoiar professores universitários, diretores de programas, pesquisadores e profissionais de apoio ao estudante que buscam integrar o desenvolvimento linguístico com atenção ao bem-estar emocional dos aprendizes.

Palavras-chave: Ansiedade; Inglês como língua estrangeira; Proficiência linguística; Estudantes universitários; Saúde mental.