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## CAUSES AND SYMPTOMS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE LISTENING ANXIETY: A CASE STUDY OF PROFICIENT STUDENTS ABOUT TO GRADUATE WITH AN MA IN TEACHING EFL

The aim of the study was twofold. First it was to investigate sources and symptoms of foreign language listening anxiety (FLLA) among a very specific group of foreign language learners: proficient students of English (C1, C2) who were on the verge of completing their MA studies in the English department, with teaching English as their specialisation. The second goal was to create an instrument which would allow for a detailed analysis to be carried out of the factors giving rise to FLLA and identification of its symptoms. To achieve this aim, the author of this article proposed a new taxonomy of factors responsible for FLLA which served as a basis for constructing a questionnaire to investigate seven categories of FLLA sources and three categories of its symptoms. The research showed that the possibility of getting a poor mark, fast speech, mind drifting away while listening, and being evaluated were identified by participants as being the most common anxiety-provoking factors, although they were experienced less intensely than by less proficient students. As far as the effects of FLLA are concerned, the most common somatic symptoms were found to be a pounding heart and the mind going blank.

### **1. Introduction**

Anxiety experienced by students while learning a foreign language has been reported to be mostly of a debilitating nature. When students feel stressed and worried, their learning processes are hindered and the quality of their linguistic performance is lowered. This in turn exacerbates the anxiety and a vicious circle ensues. Therefore, research into the nature of anxiety is needed in order to help students cope with the apprehension they experience in a foreign language classroom. The aim of this paper is to identify the causes of foreign language listening anxiety (FLLA) by referring to the experience of advanced/proficient

students of English who were about to graduate with an MA specialising in teaching English as a foreign language. The paper begins with an outline of the research on FLLA and identifies the causes of listening anxiety. This is followed by a description of the empirical study and a presentation of the results of the questionnaire constructed for the purpose of the study. Finally, the results are discussed in the context of pedagogical implications and the limitations of the study are presented.

## 2. Review of the literature

Listening anxiety was found to be a distinguishable construct from general foreign language anxiety but still dependent on it because students displaying higher levels of foreign language anxiety tended to have higher levels of listening anxiety and vice versa (Elkhafaiti 2005; Bekleyen 2009). This finding is in line with studies on other types of skill-related anxiety which revealed that foreign language writing apprehension (Cheng 2004) and foreign language reading anxiety (Saito, Horwitz and Garza 1999) are related to, but distinguishable from, general foreign language anxiety.

Vogely's (1998) research aimed at a qualitative investigation of the causes of FLLA. A hundred and forty students of Spanish took part in the study. The most common stress-provoking factors were connected with parameters of input. Most participants reported feeling anxious due to the nature of speech which was too fast for them or characterised by poor enunciation, a different accent and teachers speaking too softly. The second most common stressor was found with process-related aspects of listening comprehension. The students often used inappropriate strategies which made them perceive the aim of listening comprehension tasks as a word for word decoding and consequently felt anxious when they realized they were unable to understand every word. Vogely (1998) distinguished two more categories of stressors: instructional factors, e.g. not enough listening comprehension practice and personal factors, e.g., fear of failure. These, however, were reported by a minority of participants only. Solutions proposed by the students mainly related to instructional factors. The participants suggested increasing the amount of time devoted to listening practice and combining listening comprehension with other skills. Another commonly suggested remedy was to make input comprehensible by basing tasks on familiar topics and known vocabulary. It was observed that students' ideas mainly involved instructions and input areas but did not include any suggestions on how to cope with anxiety. Vogely (1998) implied that this was caused by the students' lack of understanding of listening processes and not recognising the importance of emotional variables contributing to apprehension.

Atasheneh and Izadi (2012) investigated the role of teachers in reducing FLLA. Their study revealed that 30 highly anxious students who participated in an apprehension treatment session managed to improve their listening

comprehension results. The session aimed at removing stress aroused by the vision of failure: students were granted a second chance if they failed the test. The teacher also took great care to create a friendly, anxiety-free atmosphere by 'encouraging the testees, expressing his positive feelings about them and reinforcing their self-confidence and positive self-talk' (Atasheneh and Izadi 2012: 182).

Elkhafaiti's (2005) research revealed that increased anxiety adversely affected students' linguistic performance. Two hundred and thirty-three students of Arabic as a foreign language participated in the study. A significant negative correlation was found between FLLA and listening comprehension achievement. Highly anxious students obtained lower marks for listening comprehension. They also achieved poorer marks in the final assessment of their general language proficiency. Moreover, FLLA was found to decrease with the length of time spent at university and learning the foreign language. The older the students were (juniors, sophomores, seniors), the lower the levels of anxiety they displayed. Furthermore, a negative correlation was found between the level of a language course and anxiety levels: the more advanced participants were, the less listening apprehension they experienced. No difference was found in the levels of anxiety experienced by male or female students, which was corroborated by the studies of Bekleyen (2009) and Kimura (2008).

Bekleyen (2009) analysed FLLA among 71 teacher trainees in Turkey. The study revealed that the participants experienced a high level of FLLA when measured on the Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS) constructed by Kim (2005). They mostly became stressed due to their unfamiliarity with English word stress and intonation, fast speech and their mind drifting away, as a result of which they missed some important information. An interview with highly anxious students resulted in the identification of causes of apprehension not included in FLLAS. Inadequacies of their earlier foreign language learning, the failure to recognise the spoken form of a known word and the failure to identify segments of sentences were reported as being the most common anxiety-provoking factors. This study corroborates some of Elkhafaiti's (2005) findings since a significant negative correlation was observed between levels of FLLA and listening grades, whereas no significant differences were observed between male and female students.

Arnold's (2000) study tackled the problem of alleviating listening comprehension anxiety during examinations. The researcher tested the efficiency of using relaxation and visualisation strategies before an examination. Eighty students took part in the study and were divided equally into control and experimental groups. The experimental group was given a pre-listening activity before each test which was designed to put students into a relaxed state using breathing exercises. Once a relaxed state was achieved, students were instructed to use visualisation. Their aim was to 'learn to access guidance from within the self or acquire a more positive opinion of themselves and their abilities, and thus modify preconceived notions about their inability to understand spoken English

(Arnold, 2000, p.782). The techniques were found to be efficient in alleviating stress before listening tests as the experimental group scored significantly higher during the final listening examination. Students who participated in the relaxation-visualisation sessions were positive about the strategies and openly admitted in a qualitative questionnaire that they felt their level of anxiety had significantly decreased.

Little research has been carried out on FLLA; therefore the aim of this study is to broaden it with a quantitative analysis of FLLA causes and symptoms. Moreover, no study has been conducted among highly proficient users of English, nor has any research project focused on students specialising in teaching English as a foreign language who were about to graduate after 5 years of MA studies. Although Bekleyen conducted a similar analysis of FLLA among teacher trainees, the participants in her study had just began their studies in English teaching (they were the first year students majoring in English) and their proficiency was at a lower level (intermediate).

Consequently two research questions were formulated:

What sources of FLLA prevail among participants?

What FLLA symptoms can be observed among participants?

The second purpose of this study was to construct an instrument that would enable the causes and effects of FLLA to be analysed, and which could be used as a basis for a more detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis of FLLA causes than that offered by Kim's (2000) scale. In order to construct the questionnaire, a new taxonomy of FLLA sources was proposed to provide more insight into the particular groups of stressors. Finally, a detailed description was provided, which shows the correspondence of particular questionnaire items with a specific category of stressor. This was to give guidance to potential users of this scale on how to interpret questionnaire results and also to allow for various modifications, for example removing some groups of stressors or some types of symptoms from the inventory.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Participants**

Seventy-one students of extra-mural MA studies in the English department were asked to fill in the questionnaire anonymously. They were all students specialising in teaching and on the verge of graduating. All of them had been attending listening comprehension classes at an advanced level for two terms (level C2: they were tested with CPE tests). There were 68 female and 3 male participants in the group. Fifty of the respondents were aged 21-25, twelve were aged 26-30, seven were aged 31-35, and two were aged 36-40.

### 3.2. Materials

For the purpose of the study, a questionnaire consisting of 53 Likert-scale items was constructed. Part of the questionnaire was based on Kim's (2005) FLLAS as this had been tested for validity and reliability. Of the 33 items in FLLAS, 26 were used in the questionnaire (items 1-24, 26, 30<sup>1</sup>) (see Appendix 1). Since analysis of the research on anxiety typical for other language skills revealed some causes which were not included in FLLAS, the questionnaire was supplemented with additional items which would allow FLLA to be analysed more extensively. First, Cheng's (2004) study of writing anxiety was used with its Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) and some of the items in it were adapted to fit a listening context (items 31, 32, 34, 35, 37, 39, 40, 42, 43, 45-48). Next, the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale constructed by Saito, Garza and Horwitz (1999) was analysed and items 28-30 adapted. Items 25, 27, 33, 36, 38, 41, 44 and 49 were constructed by the author of this article.

Item 5 'I feel stressed during listening activities due to my teacher's manner' was added on the basis of numerous studies in which teachers' behaviour was identified as a cause of stress (e.g., Young 1986; Ewald 2007) and items 33. 'I feel uneasy during listening activities as my teacher openly demonstrates frustration when I do not know the answer' and 27. 'I feel stressed because I do not know how to prepare for listening comprehension classes' were constructed with reference to Vogely's (1998) study in which participants reported feeling anxious as a result of these stressors. Since item 27 tackled the problem of unfamiliarity with metacognitive strategies, another item was formulated to verify students' general knowledge of learning strategies: 38. 'I am stressed during listening as I feel I do not know appropriate listening comprehension strategies'. It was directly based on Yan and Horwitz's (2008) findings which revealed that not knowing learning strategies correlates with language anxiety. As the lack of satisfaction with one's skills was found to generate language anxiety (Dewaele, Petrides and Furnham, 2008), item 44 was constructed: 'I am satisfied with my listening skills'. Item 41. 'I believe I can succeed in listening comprehension' was added as research (Yuh-show 2001; Dewaele, Petrides and Furnham 2008; Anyadubalu 2010) shows a strong negative correlation between self-efficacy and language apprehension. With item 49. 'I feel stressed during listening in English', the questionnaire also addressed directly students' listening apprehension. Brantenmaier's (2005) study was used as the basis for the construction of items 50-52. The researcher wanted to distinguish between reading anxiety experienced while reading a text and that experienced while reading text-related instructions, stressing that the latter may contribute to students' apprehension more than the process of reading itself. Items 50-52 were designed to verify whether tasks students perform during or after listening,

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<sup>1</sup> Item 23 originally did not include the phrase 'and grammar structures'.

e.g. answering open questions orally, writing compositions, answering multiple choice questions or true/false statements, contribute to listening anxiety.

The author of the article proposed a taxonomy in which the causes of FLLA can be arranged into seven categories:

1. Input-related factors<sup>2</sup> which are connected with the parameters of the listening material that students are exposed to e.g., fast speech, unknown pronunciation, no opportunity to see the speakers. These could be analysed with items 2, 3, 7, 10, 17, 20, 22 and 23.
2. Knowledge-related factors causing anxiety due to gaps in the students' background knowledge and making listening more challenging, e.g., unfamiliar words, lack of knowledge of a given topic (items 4, 23 and 30).
3. Process-related factors connected with the way students handle the process of listening e.g., problems with time pressure, identification of a key word or differentiating words (items 1, 5, 6, 8, 9, 14, 15, 24 and 26).
4. Learning strategies which reflect students' awareness of how to develop listening skills (items 27 and 38).
5. Output-related factors relating to students' performance during or after a listening task. These causes may be connected with:
  - a. test anxiety, students are stressed by assessment (items 31 and 35);
  - b. negative social evaluation, students are afraid of what other students will think about their performance (items 21, 40 and 45).
6. Types of tasks. Some activities accompanying listening in a classroom, e.g., those based on techniques unfamiliar to students or involving sophisticated linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge, such as writing a composition, may evoke higher levels of apprehension (items 50-52).
7. Personal factors that may be subdivided into:
  - a. Teacher-related, for example teachers' ways of handling errors (items 25 and 34);
  - b. Student-related, e.g., a tendency to compare themselves with others or to underestimate their skills (items 14, 18, 28, 41 and 48).

Symptoms were arranged according to Lang's (1971) model of general apprehension which divides them into three groups: cognitive, connected with the feeling of tension and worry; behavioural, resulting in changes in students' behaviour, mainly in endeavours to avoid listening; and somatic, affecting the body in a physical way, e.g., heart beating faster, feeling hot or cold. Behavioural symptoms were analysed using items 16, 29, 37, 43 and 46, and somatic symptoms using items 12, 13, 32, 35, 36, 39, 42 and 47. Cognitive symptoms are described as feelings of worry, preoccupation and negative expectations (Cheng 2004), hence it is difficult to analyse these as a separate group of symptoms because any item in the questionnaire which concerns causes of students' anxiety and includes the phrase 'I feel worried', or one similar in meaning, investigates

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<sup>2</sup> The names of categories 1, 2, 3 and 7 were adapted from Vogely's (1998) publication.

cognitive effects of anxiety. Therefore, only two items asking students directly about how they feel during listening were constructed: 11. 'I feel stressed during listening' and 49. 'I feel confident when I am listening in English'.

### 3.3. Procedure

The participants were asked to complete a questionnaire. They could do this either after classes or take a questionnaire home. Those who volunteered decided to do it after classes. Completion of the questionnaire took the students no more than 20 minutes although no time limitation was imposed on them. The participants were assured that the questionnaire was anonymous.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Causes of foreign language listening anxiety

**Input-related factors.** The most common stressor connected with parameters of input was too fast speech which was indicated by 46 (65%) students. Forty (56%) felt anxious due to background noise. Thirty-four (48%) would be nervous listening to an English speaker on the phone. Twenty-five (35%) felt uncomfortable when they had no access to a script and 23 (32%) became worried as they could not listen to English at their own pace. The next group of factors were not experienced to any great extent as they were observed among fewer than 30 percent of participants. Nineteen (27%) were stressed by not being able to see someone's lips or face, 16 (23%) became worried when a speaker pronounced words differently to the way they themselves pronounced them and for 12 (17%), an instructional request to listen to a text twice resulted in nervousness. (See Table 1 for descriptive statistics)

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of items concerning input related factors of FLLA

Item	SA <sup>3</sup>	A	SA+A	SA+A (%)	N	N (%)	D	SD	D+SD	D+SD (%)
Fast speech	9	37	46	65%	7	10%	18	0	18	25%
Background noise	4	36	40	56%	4	6%	24	3	27	38%

<sup>3</sup> SA – strongly agree, A – agree, SA+A – the number of students who strongly agree or agree with a statement, N – neither agree nor disagree, D – disagree, SD – strongly disagree, D+SD – the number of students who strongly agree or agree with a statement, % – the percentage value of the number of students who chose a particular answer.

Table 1.

Item	SA <sup>3</sup>	A	SA+A	SA+A (%)	N	N (%)	D	SD	D+SD	D+SD (%)
Listening to an English speaker on the phone	3	31	34	48%	6	8%	28	3	31	44%
Listening without the written text	0	25	25	35%	15	21%	25	6	31	44%
Not being able to listen at one's own pace	0	23	23	32%	17	24%	27	4	31	44%
Not being able to watch the lips or facial expression of a speaker	2	17	19	27%	21	30%	23	8	31	44%
Different pronunciation from student's pronunciation	4	12	16	23%	23	32%	24	8	32	45%

**Knowledge-related factors.** The items concerning knowledge-related factors of FLLA revealed that 34 participants (48%) feared that they had inadequate background knowledge of some topics and 28 listeners (30%) became worried when they came across unfamiliar vocabulary or grammar structures. Problems with cultural knowledge were the reason of stress for 10 students (14%) as they agreed with the statement 'You have to know so much about English history and culture in order to understand a listening task'. (See Table 2 for descriptive statistics.)

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of items concerning knowledge related factors of FLLA

Item	SA	A	SA+A	SA+A (%)	N	N (%)	D	SD	D+SD	D+SD (%)
Unfamiliar topic	7	24	31	44%	16	23%	23	1	24	34%
U known words or grammar structures	1	27	28	39%	25	35%	16	2	18	25%
Need for extensive cultural knowledge	5	5	10	14%	21	30%	34	6	40	56%

**Process-related factors.** As far as the process-related factors are concerned, the greatest number of participants, 46 (65%), were anxious that their minds would drift while listening and that as a result they would miss important information.

Forty-one (58%) became worried when they had little time to process what they had just heard. Not being able to catch a key word was the cause of stress for 26 respondents (37%). The same number of listeners became nervous and confused when they did not understand every word. Twenty-two participants (32%) also admitted feeling stressed as they tended to get stuck on one or two words and 21 (30%) were revealed to be worried by having problems with guessing the content of the parts they missed while listening. Translating word by word without understanding the content and difficulty with differentiating words from one another were reported as causes of apprehension by 13 (18%) and 11 (15%) listeners, respectively. (See Table 3 for descriptive statistics.)

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of items concerning process related factors of FLLA

Item	SA	A	SA+A	SA+A (%)	N	N (%)	D	SD	D+SD	D+SD (%)
Mind drifting away	16	30	46	65%	11	15%	13	1	14	20%
Little time to think about what was heard	6	35	41	58%	13	18%	10	7	17	24%
Inability to catch a key word	5	21	26	37%	20	28%	20	5	25	35%
Inability to understand every word	0	26	26	37%	12	17%	24	9	33	46%
Getting stuck on one or two unknown words.	3	20	23	32%	14	20%	28	6	34	48%
Inability to guess about the missed parts	1	18	19	27%	31	44%	21	0	21	30%
Understanding words but inability to grasp the meaning	0	15	15	21%	20	28%	29	7	36	51%
Translating word by word without understanding the contents	2	11	13	18%	14	20%	30	14	44	62%
Difficulty in differentiating words	2	9	11	15%	23	32%	33	4	37	52%

**Learning strategies.** The research revealed that a lack of metacognitive knowledge is a stress-inducing factor for 33 (46%) participants who stated that they feel stressed because they do not know how to prepare for listening

comprehension classes. Nineteen (27%) admitted that not knowing appropriate listening comprehension strategies was a reason for their becoming stressed. (See Table 4 for descriptive statistics.)

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of items concerning learning strategies

Item	SA	A	SA+A	SA+A (%)	N	N (%)	D	SD	D+SD	D+SD (%)
No knowledge of how to prepare for listening classes	0	33	33	46%	11	15%	21	6	27	38%
No knowledge of listening comprehension strategies	2	17	19	27%	16	23%	30	6	36	51%

**Output-related factors: evaluation and performance.** The analysis of output-related factors revealed that worry about getting a poor mark was found to be the most common as it was indicated by 48 (68%) students. The second most frequently observed element was evaluation: 43 (61%) participants felt worried and uneasy when they knew they would be evaluated. Thirty-one (44%) admitted to feeling tense when listening to English as a member of a social gathering and 25 (35%) tended to worry about what other people would think of their listening comprehension. Finally, 21 (30%) stated they were afraid that the other students would mock their listening skills. (See Table 5 for descriptive statistics)

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of items concerning output related factors of FLLA

Item	SA	A	SA+A	SA+A (%)	N	N (%)	D	SD	D+SD	D+SD (%)
Concern about getting a poor grade	12	36	48	68%	11	15%	12	0	12	17%
Evaluation	10	33	43	61%	13	18%	15	0	15	21%
Listening to English as a member of a social gathering	5	26	31	44%	14	20%	26	0	26	37%
Worry over others' opinion	25	0	25	35%	16	23%	8	22	30	42%
Other students' mockery	3	18	21	30%	27	38%	17	6	23	32%

**Tasks.** The research also aimed at analysing which activities accompanying listening material provoke anxiety among participants. Writing a composition about what was heard during classes was identified as stressful by 29 (44%) students. Twenty-eight (39%) become anxious when they are asked to answer open-ended questions orally, whereas multiple choice questions and true/false statements accompanying listening material cause stress for 15 (21%) respondents. (See Table 6 for descriptive statistics.)

Table 6. Descriptive statistics of items concerning tasks and FLLA

Item	SA	A	SA+A	SA+A (%)	N	N (%)	D	SD	D+SD	D+SD (%)
Writing a composition during classes	3	26	29	41%	16	23%	22	4	26	37%
Answering open questions orally	5	23	28	39%	10	14%	30	3	33	46%
Answering multiple choice questions or true/false statements	3	12	15	21%	23	32%	28	5	33	46%

**Personal factors.** The data collected using items concerning personal factors revealed that the most common stressor was teacher-related. Thirty-seven (52%) participants agreed that they felt uneasy if their teacher openly demonstrated frustration when they did not know the answer. However, teacher behaviour, as generally perceived by students, caused anxiety for 19 (27%) of them. The group also displayed a significant inclination towards feeling anxiety through comparing their skills to others and assessing themselves as inferior: 33 (46%) did not agree with the statement ‘I don’t worry that my listening comprehension is a lot worse than others’ and 31 (44%) identified with the item ‘I keep thinking that everyone else except me understands very well what an English speaker is saying’. As far as self-perceived difficulty of a skill is concerned, 25 (35%) stated that listening comprehension is the hardest part of learning English. (See Table 7 for descriptive statistics.)

Table 7. Descriptive statistics of items concerning personal factors and FLLA

Item	SA	A	SA+A	SA+A (%)	N	N (%)	D	SD	D+SD	D+SD (%)
Teacher’s open demonstration of frustration	12	25	37	52%	12	17%	20	2	22	31%

Table 7.

Item	SA	A	SA+A	SA+A (%)	N	N (%)	D	SD	D+SD	D+SD (%)
Comprehension a lot worse than others	30	3	33	46%	18	25%	1	19	20	28%
Belief to be the only one who does not understand a text	1	30	31	44%	10	14%	19	11	30	42%
Belief that listening comprehension is the hardest part of learning English	10	15	25	35%	9	13%	31	6	37	52%
Teacher's manner	4	15	19	27%	21	30%	26	5	31	44%

**4.2. Symptoms of foreign language listening anxiety**

**Cognitive symptoms.** As clarified in the previous sections of this article, undertaking an analysis of cognitive symptoms in an exclusive way is difficult since each item in the questionnaire relating to the causes of students' anxiety also investigated cognitive effects. For this reason only two items are analysed in this section. The questionnaire revealed that 31 (44%) students admitted to feeling stressed when listening in English and 18 (25%) denied the statement 'I feel confident when I am listening in English'. (See Table 8 for descriptive statistics.)

Table 8. Descriptive statistics of cognitive symptoms of FLLA

Item	SA	A	SA+A	SA+A (%)	N	N (%)	D	SD	D+SD	D+SD (%)
Stress	2	29	31	44%	10	14%	25	5	30	42%
Lack of confidence	17	1	18	25%	25	35%	4	24	28	39%

**Behavioural symptoms.** The results show that participants did not reveal strong avoidance inclinations due to listening apprehension. Some behavioural symptoms can be observed among 20 (28%) students as these claimed that they would be satisfied with learning exclusively to speak, 14 (20%) stated that they would endeavour to excuse themselves from listening during classes, 9 (13%) revealed a habit of avoiding listening and 6 (8%) admitted that they were unwilling to listen to people speaking English. (See Table 9 for descriptive statistics.)

Table 9. Descriptive statistics of behavioural symptoms of FLLA

Item	SA	A	SA+A	SA+A (%)	N	N (%)	D	SD	D+SD	D+SD (%)
Preference for just learning to speak (without listening)	2	18	20	28%	10	14%	28	13	41	58%
Excusing oneself from listening during classes	1	13	14	20%	26	37%	26	5	31	44%
Doing one's best to avoid listening	0	9	9	13%	20	28%	33	9	42	59%
Unwillingness to listen to people speak English	1	5	6	8%	15	21%	28	22	50	70%

**Somatic symptoms.** The most prevailing somatic symptoms were observed among 31-44% of participants. Heart pounding was reported by 31 (40%) students and mind going blank by 29 (41%) listeners. Twenty-eight (39%) experienced body rigidity and tension and 25 (35%) became so confused during listening that they could not remember what they had heard. One third of participants also admitted to experiencing an extreme form of anxiety: panic while listening. Finally, feeling hot with cheeks burning or feeling cold and shaking, freezing when unexpectedly asked to listen to something and having jumbled and confused thoughts were found to be experienced by 16 (23%), 15 (21%) and 9 (13%) participants, respectively. (See Table 10 for descriptive statistics.)

Table 10. Descriptive statistics of somatic symptoms of FLLA

Item	SA	A	SA+A	SA+A (%)	N	N (%)	D	SD	D+SD	D+SD (%)
Heart pounding	3	28	31	44%	13	18%	23	4	27	38%
Mind going blank	3	26	29	41%	12	17%	28	2	30	42%
Rigid and tense body	6	22	28	39%	20	28%	21	2	23	32%
Getting confused and unable to remember what has been heard	4	21	25	35%	21	30%	23	2	25	35%
Panic	0	22	22	31%	14	20%	26	9	35	49%
Feeling hot with cheeks burning or feeling cold and shaking	2	14	16	23%	18	25%	31	6	37	52%

Table 10.

Item	SA	A	SA+A	SA+A (%)	N	N (%)	D	SD	D+SD	D+SD (%)
Freezing up when unexpectedly asked to listen to something	1	14	15	21%	18	25%	30	8	38	54%
Thoughts becoming jumbled and confused	1	8	9	13%	20	28%	34	8	42	59%

## 5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify the most common stress-provoking factors in a foreign language listening context and to point out the most common symptoms of anxiety. Of the 38 possible causes of anxiety given in the questionnaire, getting a poor mark (68%), fast speech (65%), a fear that their mind will drift away while listening (65%) and knowing that they will be evaluated (61%) were identified by students as the most common anxiety-inducing items. Other causes observed among more than half of the participants were background noise (56%), insufficient time to process what was heard (58%) and teachers' demonstration of frustration (52%).

A qualitative analysis of the questionnaire showed that from among input-related stressors, fast speech was considered as the most apprehension-provoking factor, which was also the case in Vogely's (1998) research. However, the study revealed some new stressors typical for participants, namely background noise and the thought of listening to a native speaker on the phone. Background noise may be stressful for proficient users of English as they are beyond their control and high proficiency will not eliminate this problem. It is rather a matter of the skill or the strategy of making inferences and filling the gaps in the listening material in order to make up for what was missed. As far as listening to a native speaker on the phone is concerned, it may be assumed that proficient users of English are perceived by native speakers as fully competent and consequently native speakers may not feel the need to modify their input. It is highly probable that such conversations are successful in terms of communication; however it seems that they are also highly stress-provoking for non-native, proficient users of English.

As regards knowledge-related factors, most participants became nervous and worried due to a lack of background knowledge about some topics. This is a problematic issue to discuss since, theoretically at least, this stressor should be eliminated by properly planned warm-up activities. Therefore, it could be stipulated that either the warm-up activities students performed during listening classes were inefficient or the topics of listening materials were far beyond

the common knowledge of an adult, educated student. This observation also indicates that even at advanced levels of linguistic knowledge the basic pattern of a listening task (pre-listening, listening) is needed, as without it stress and worry can result among course participants. It seems that teachers should also be careful with the use of listening tests (e.g., CPE tests) as techniques for developing listening comprehension: they are easy to implement and familiarise students with listening test elicitation techniques, however, in most cases, they do not include any warm-up activities and as a result may cause apprehension even among advanced listeners.

The results did not agree with Saito et al.'s (1999) hypothesis formulated to explain the cause of reading apprehension. This hypothesis suggested that a student's anxiety level is caused by problems with comprehension resulting from insufficient cultural knowledge which leaves the student understanding discourse at a word level but still having difficulties with grasping the meaning of a text. Very few participants expressed concern over gaps in their cultural knowledge and their effect on their listening skills. This may be explained by the fact that advanced students on the verge of completing an MA felt confident about their knowledge of target language culture.

The analysis of process-related factors revealed that 'mind drifting away' and as a result missing some important information and insufficient time to think about what was heard were the most stressing elements for the participants. The issue of time pressure while listening is difficult to tackle; however, dividing listening material into chunks and giving students some time to reflect upon what was heard seem to be beneficial in this context. Introducing students to the art of note-taking might also be worth consideration. Notes could give listeners the opportunity to think about a right answer, not during but after listening, and eliminate the problem of not having enough time to process what was heard while listening. Furthermore, the inability to catch a key word, not being able to understand every word and getting stuck on one or two unknown words were reported as stress-provoking by 32-37% of respondents. These elements may arise from unfamiliarity with listening comprehension strategies that will be discussed below.

The study revealed that about one third of the participants related their apprehension to a lack of metacognitive knowledge; in particular they admitted that they did not know how to prepare for listening classes. This observation is both surprising and disturbing because the participants were about to become English teachers and they should have been familiar with listening comprehension strategies and with learning strategies in general. These results indicate the need for strategy-based instruction even among advanced students who may seem not to need it due to their level of proficiency.

Output-related issues were found to dominate as causes of listening apprehension. The participants worried mostly about getting poor marks and felt anxious about evaluation. It seems that apprehension connected with testing and assessment does not disappear even at high levels of proficiency. Bearing this in

mind, teachers should approach assessment during listening classes with caution, even with advanced students. Eliminating the element of surprise (Young 1986) and offering academic and personal support (Huang, Eslami and Hu 2010) were found to reduce general anxiety levels and it might be hypothesised that they could also be applicable and efficient in the context of alleviating FLLA among advanced listeners.

Students were found to display a fear of social evaluation while listening in a foreign language. This observation is in line with findings concerning general levels of anxiety (e.g., Young 1991; MacIntyre and Gardner 1991; Kitano 2001; Yan and Horwitz 2008) which showed that worrying about what others might think of one's performance or skills intensifies apprehension. These stressors may be dominating due to the specificity of the surveyed group. Language teachers are expected to be authorities in foreign language knowledge. Situations where other group members see that a prospective teacher has problems with comprehension when listening to the language he or she is supposed to be teaching, may be highly frustrating. A similar interpretation may be offered for the fear of assessment: the fact that a trainer could witness a trainee teacher's poor performance may intensify stress. Young (1986) found that fear of negative social evaluation may be alleviated by a friendly atmosphere promoting mutual support and respect. The study by Huang et al. (2010) revealed that teachers' academic support, in which a teacher helps learners to achieve success and is ready to help, reduced general foreign language anxiety. It seems logical to assume that these findings, though related to foreign language classroom anxiety, might be adapted to the FLLA context and might be beneficial in reducing fear of negative social evaluation in listening situations.

The analysis of listening-related tasks revealed that advanced students were stressed by the vision of having to write a composition about what they had heard and answering open questions orally. True/false statements and multiple choice questions generated anxiety among fewer participants. This may be explained by students' unfamiliarity with open tasks, since this latter technique seems to prevail among listening tasks performed by students majoring in English. (This also suggests a negative washback effect: students are not stressed by testing techniques which are a part of e.g., CPE examinations, but feel anxious when other techniques for developing listening skills are used). In conclusion, trainers ought to bear in mind the fact that listening comprehension anxiety can be significantly heightened by the type of listening or post-listening activities. This observation should not imply that open question techniques or, as Ur (1991) calls them, 'longer response activities' are not to be used. On the contrary, they should be introduced into the teaching of listening more often and with hope they will generate less stress as students become familiar with them.

The analysis of personal-related stressors indicated that a majority of respondents were stressed by a teacher's showing irritation when a student did not know a right answer. Once again, the subject of student proficiency should be brought up here, because trainers may expect from proficient users a level

of expertise during listening tasks which if not demonstrated, induces stress among students. Moreover, this observation shows how significant the opinion and behaviour of a trainer can be, even for adult, advanced students. The project also revealed that one third of participants perceived listening comprehension as difficult. At this point it seems worth referring to a study undertaken by Piechurska-Kuciel (2011) who, while analysing general foreign language classroom anxiety, found that students who felt supported by their teachers tended to evaluate their skills higher than those who felt neglected.

If the results were to be compared to the studies of FLLA among lower proficiency students, only Bekleyen's (2009) study can be taken into account, since Vogely's (1998) did not use any scale. It can be observed that causes of FLLA were more intensely experienced by lower proficiency students: fast speech was a stressor for above 80% of respondents, and mind drifting away for more than 70%. In this study, none of the dominating stressors passed a threshold of 70%. However, as the scales for FLLA measurement were different, looking for similarities and differences is difficult, and some of the stressors prevailing among this study's participants were not investigated nor included in the questionnaires used by other researchers.

The research also analysed the symptoms of FLLA. As far as cognitive effects are concerned, 44% of participants admitted to feeling stressed during listening. It may be observed that the participants did not exhibit FLLA symptoms very intensely. The most common symptoms were of a somatic nature, e.g., heart pounding, mind going blank and a rigid body (44%, 41% and 39%, respectively). The information about the somatic effects of anxiety experienced by language learners should not be ignored because these may cause serious problems while listening; this is because they directly interfere with comprehension processes, especially in the case of the mind going blank. Moreover, they may make students feel uncomfortable and unfocused in a classroom, which consequently may lead to problems with comprehension and cause higher levels of anxiety. (A vicious circle may even ensue at this point: a student is stressed and displays anxiety symptoms and the anxiety symptoms go on to cause even greater stress). Behavioural symptoms were barely observable which may be justified by the maturity of adult students. It may be hypothesised that although students feel stressed during listening, they are aware that in order to succeed in learning a language they cannot evade listening skills classes. It is also possible that, at this level, the students' proficiency allows them to enjoy listening tasks despite simultaneously experiencing some stress and tension. One of the ways of dealing with FLLA symptoms, apart from alleviating FLLA in the first place, may be relaxation-visualisation techniques as described by Arnold (2000) and strategy-based instruction with emphasis on effective strategies (e.g., Oxford, 1990) as these seem to be beneficial in helping students to cope with the consequences of stress, worry and tension.

To sum up, the project allowed the most common causes of anxiety experienced by advanced students of English on the verge of graduating with an

MA to be identified, these being: fast speech, background noise, mind drifting away, insufficient time to think about what was heard, concern about getting poor marks and about being evaluated. It also revealed that the somatic symptoms experienced most intensely by the participants were heart pounding, mind going blank and rigid body.

## 6. Limitations of the study

The study described here has its limitations, therefore the results should be viewed with some caution. First, the items in the instrument, though constructed with reference to the research results of other scholars, have been chosen with some subjectivity. Hence, more research is required which would focus exclusively on the construction of a questionnaire to investigate the causes of FLLA. The questionnaire could also be supplemented with open questions which would benefit a qualitative analysis of FLLA and reveal anxiety-provoking factors not mentioned in the literature concerning FLLA. Moreover, as the study was exclusively of a descriptive character and no inferential statistics were included its results are not to be generalised beyond the sample used in the study. The results may however provide information about the potential causes and symptoms of FLLA.

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## Appendix 1

### Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Questionnaire

1. When listening to English, I tend to get stuck on one or two unknown words.

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
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2. When someone pronounces words differently from the way I pronounce them, I find it difficult to understand.
3. When a person speaks English very fast, I worry that I might not understand all of it.
4. I am nervous when I am listening to English if I am not familiar with the topic.
5. It is easy to guess about the parts that I miss while listening to English.
6. If I let my mind drift even a little bit while listening to English, I worry that I will miss important ideas.
7. When I am listening to English, I am worried when I cannot watch the lips or facial expression of a person who is speaking.
8. During English listening tests, I get nervous and confused when I do not understand every word.
9. When listening to English, it is difficult to differentiate the words from one another.
10. I feel uncomfortable in class when listening to English without the written text.
11. I feel confident when I am listening in English.
12. When I am listening to English, I often get so confused I cannot remember what I have heard.
13. My thoughts become jumbled and confused when listening to a text important information in English.
14. I get worried when I have little time to think about what I hear in English.
15. When I am listening to English, I usually end up translating word by word without understanding the contents.
16. I would rather not have to listen to people speak English at all.
17. I get worried when I cannot listen to English at my own pace.
18. I keep thinking that everyone else except me understands very well what an English speaker is saying.
19. I get upset when I am not sure whether I understand what I am listening in English.
20. I am nervous when listening to an English speaker on the phone or when imagining a situation where I listen to an English speaker on the phone.

21. I feel tense when listening to English as a member of a social gathering or when imagining a situation where I listen to English as a member of a social gathering.
22. It is difficult for me to listen to English when there is even a little bit of background noise.
23. I feel stressed when I come across words or grammar structures that I do not understand while listening to English.
24. When listening to English, I often understand the words but still cannot quite understand what the speaker means.
25. I feel stressed during listening activities due to my teacher's manner.
26. It frightens me when I cannot catch a key word of an English listening passage.
27. I feel stressed because I do not know how to prepare for listening comprehension classes.
28. The hardest part of learning English is listening comprehension.
29. I would be happy just to learn to speak English rather than having to learn to listen as well.
30. You have to know so much about English history and culture in order to understand a listening task.
31. While listening comprehension I feel worried and uneasy if I know it will be evaluated.
32. My mind often goes blank when listening comprehension activity starts.
33. I feel uneasy during listening activities as my teacher openly demonstrates frustration when I do not know the answer.
34. If my listening comprehension in English is to be evaluated I would worry about getting a poor grade.
35. I usually feel my whole body rigid and tense when we do listening comprehension tasks during classes.
36. I feel hot and my cheeks are burning or I feel cold and start shaking when we do listening comprehension tasks during classes.
37. I usually do my best to avoid listening in English.
38. I am stressed during listening as I feel I do not know appropriate listening comprehension strategies.
39. I often feel panic when I do listening comprehension tasks during classes.
40. I'm afraid that the other students would mock my listening skills.
41. I believe I can succeed in listening comprehension.
42. I feel my heart pounding when I do listening comprehension tasks during classes.
43. I would do my best to excuse myself from listening during classes.
44. I am satisfied with my listening skills.
45. I don't worry what other people would think of my listening comprehension.
46. I usually seek every possible chance to practice listening comprehension in English outside of class.

47. I freeze up when unexpectedly asked to listen to something in English during classes.
48. I don't worry that my listening comprehension is a lot worse than others.
49. I feel stressed during listening in English.
50. I become anxious when I have to listen to something in English as homework.
51. I become anxious when I have to answer open questions orally during classes about what I have heard.
52. I become anxious when I have to answer multiple choice questions or true/false statements during classes about what I have heard.
53. I become anxious when I have to write a composition during classes about what I have heard in English.