

COMMUNICATION ANXIETY IN THE “ENGLISH APPLIED TO MILITARY OPERATIONS” CLASSROOM

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https://doi.org/10.60746/8_19_48013

ABSTRACT

Effective communication in English is essential in contemporary military and security contexts, particularly in multinational operational environments where clarity, accuracy, and confidence are critical. However, technical proficiency in Military English or English for Specific Purposes does not necessarily translate into communicative confidence. This study investigates the manifestations and implications of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety within the curricular units of “English Applied to Military Operations” taught at the Portuguese Military Academy and proposes strategies to mitigate communicative anxiety in military higher education. Combining quantitative survey data with theoretically informed qualitative interpretation, the study draws on responses from 136 cadets from the Army, Military Engineering, and the GNR, collected through a Portuguese translation of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistical procedures to identify general tendencies in communicative anxiety and anxiety-provoking classroom situations. The findings suggest that anxiety was primarily associated with spontaneous oral interaction, fear of negative peer evaluation, and concerns about appearing less competent before classmates and instructors. The study further indicates that emotionally supportive teaching practices, including structured speaking activities and supportive feedback strategies, may help reduce communicative anxiety while maintaining the discipline

and performance standards characteristic of military education. Overall, the article contributes to the understudied field of foreign language learning in military higher education and argues that communicative anxiety should be understood not merely as a pedagogical issue, but also as an operational readiness concern.

Keywords: Foreign language classroom anxiety; military English; English for specific purposes; military higher education; communicative anxiety.

RESUMO

A comunicação eficaz em inglês é essencial em contextos militares e de segurança contemporâneos, sobretudo em ambientes operacionais multinacionais, onde a clareza, precisão e confiança comunicativa são fundamentais. Contudo, a proficiência técnica em Inglês Militar ou Inglês para Fins Específicos não se traduz necessariamente em confiança na comunicação oral. Este estudo investiga as manifestações da Ansiedade em Sala de Aula na Aprendizagem de Línguas Estrangeiras (*Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety*) nas unidades curriculares de ‘Inglês Aplicado a Operações Militares’ lecionadas na Academia Militar Portuguesa, propondo estratégias para mitigar a ansiedade comunicativa no ensino superior militar. O estudo combina dados quantitativos provenientes de questionários com uma interpretação qualitativa teoricamente fundamentada. A amostra integrou 136 cadetes do Exército, da Engenharia Militar e da GNR, cujas respostas foram recolhidas através de uma tradução portuguesa da *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale*. Os dados foram analisados através de procedimentos estatísticos descritivos. Os resultados sugerem que a ansiedade está sobretudo associada à interação oral espontânea, ao receio de avaliação negativa pelos pares e à preocupação em aparentar ser menos competente perante colegas e docentes. O estudo indica ainda que práticas pedagógicas emocionalmente apoiantes poderão

contribuir para reduzir a ansiedade comunicativa, mantendo os padrões de disciplina e desempenho característicos do ensino militar. O artigo contribui para um domínio ainda pouco explorado: a aprendizagem de línguas estrangeiras no ensino superior militar.

Palavras-chave: ansiedade em sala de aula na aprendizagem de língua estrangeira; inglês militar; inglês para fins específicos; ensino superior militar; ansiedade comunicativa.

1. INTRODUCTION: FRAMING FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM ANXIETY

There are few fields where communication flaws can be as fatal as in the military and public security sectors (Park, 2009). The Portuguese Military Academy (MA) trains future officers who will most likely encounter situations where they will need to express themselves confidently and clearly in English, a global lingua franca. At the MA, student-cadets in the Army and National Republican Guard (GNR) receive training in Military English (ME) / English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in the Curricular Units of “English Applied to Military Operations’ (for Army cadets), ‘and English Applied to Security Operations’” (for GNR cadets). These units cover tactical vocabulary and specific grammar intended to provide cadets with the tools for fluent communication in their chosen field (Sovhar & Levko, 2023).

To acknowledge the relevance of our study, it is first important to understand the possible consequences of a limited communication for an ME/ESP student.

English proficiency in military higher education is not simply an academic skill, it is *mission-enabling*. It can directly affect operational effectiveness, the safety of military/security personnel and the public, and it can ultimately disrupt international cooperation (Dragomir et al., 2019). Military and security officers are leaders and decision-makers whose command roles demand persuasive, calm and clear communication (Shao et al, 2013). In time-critical situations miscommunication can cost lives, thus, a confident and fluent speaker can reduce friction and delays in important communications like briefings, incident reports, field coordination, etc. Given that the Portuguese Armed Forces frequently collaborate with NATO and EU allies, the English proficiency of those involved directly contributes to the success of joint exercises and peacekeeping missions, often requiring standardized proficiency levels such as NATO's STANAG 6001 (Ivanova et al., 2022).

1.1. ADDRESSING THE GAP BETWEEN TECHNICAL PROFICIENCY AND COMMUNICATIVE CONFIDENCE

Having established the vital importance of clear and accurate communication in the military field, we now address the identifiable gap between technical proficiency in ME/ESP and communicative confidence, i.e. being able to use that knowledge in real-time under any circumstances, making quick adjustments when needed, and reacting appropriately to the unexpected. This gap is critical because

this field requires high performance under pressure, and hesitations or unclear speech can be highly prejudicial in multi-lingual/multi-national contexts (Park, 2009).

Fluency in any language is not restricted to a solid knowledge of grammar, it is also influenced by the speaker's intelligibility, pacing, emotional control, and communication strategies such as asking for clarifications, rephrasing, etc. (Shao et al., 2013; Pishghadam, 2009). Therefore, confidence aligned with proficiency in foreign language communication reduces both mistakes and over-reliance on interpreters/translators (either human or machine), who might not always be available or reliable (Sovhar & Levko, 2023).

Considering the Portuguese context, this gap may be associated with educational practices that traditionally prioritize input over output. From the beginning of their English language education, students are guided by teachers/syllabus to spend more time reading and learning vocabulary/grammar, than speaking or engaging in interactive class activities (Walker & Panayides, 2014). English tests usually assess accuracy rather than interactions (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009), and young learners may fear making mistakes when they speak out in class due to a lack of speaking activities, which often leads to reduced spontaneity and communication anxiety in the classroom (Horwitz et al., 1986; Botes et al., 2022).

The American Psychological Association's Dictionary of Psychology (2015) classifies *anxiety* as “an emotion characterized by apprehension and somatic symptoms of tension in which an individual anticipates impending danger, catastrophe, or misfortune. The body often mobilizes itself to meet the perceived threat: Muscles become tense, breathing is faster, and the heart beats more rapidly” (American Psychological Association, 2015). Academic literature on foreign language classroom anxiety was spearheaded by Elaine Horwitz, Michael Horwitz and Joann Cope, with the publication of their 1986 seminal article “Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety”. Here, Horwitz et al. set out to classify it as a conceptually distinct variable, describing its specific effects on the learning process. Having established a theoretical framework for classroom anxiety, the authors then developed a reliable measurement tool to help educators identify and support students who might struggle with anxiety: *The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale* (FLCAS).

This scale identifies debilitating anxiety with high reliability and validity, having been incorporated ever since in studies on classroom anxiety. Some noteworthy examples include research with Japanese students (Aida, 1994), Chinese EFL learners (Shao et al., 2013), and Indonesian university students (Said & Weda, 2018). Many scholars have adapted FLCAS to closely relate it to their particular realities and contexts, like the 8-item Short-Form FLCAS (Botes et al., 2022), the

Rasch-based Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Inventory (Walker & Panayides, 2014), and the 20-item version utilized specifically in a military higher education setting (Ivanova et al., 2022).

The FLCAS has sparked plenty of follow-up research on how anxiety plays a part in hindering the progress of foreign language students in a wide multitude of contexts demonstrating its negative impact on academic achievement (Teimouri et al., 2019), its correlation with a reduced willingness to communicate (Liu & Jackson, 2008), and its detrimental effects on learner well-being and self-esteem (Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999). However, it still remains an understudied field in military educational institutions, which we consider a significant oversight. The goal of Operational English (ME/ESP) is to achieve intelligibility under pressure, and anxiety disrupts the very mechanisms that enable spontaneity, risk-taking in speech and communication recovery, which should make this topic prone to academic research.

This article argues that communicative anxiety in military English classrooms constitutes not merely a pedagogical issue, but an operational readiness concern. Therefore, in the interest of better prepared armed forces, researching ways to improve military/security personnel's communication skills in a foreign language is crucial. Some noteworthy examples that paved the way to this article are the study on motivation and anxiety at the Military Academy in North Macedonia (Ivanova et

al., 2022), the study on speaking anxiety among Korean military air traffic controllers (Park, 2009), and the exploration of professional communicative competence in maritime cadets (Fathiah et al., 2020).

2. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. DEFINING FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM ANXIETY (FLCA)

As established, FLCA is conceptualized as a “distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors” (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 128) specifically tied to the classroom language learning process. Unlike general trait anxiety, FLCA is situation-specific, arising from the unique psychological threat of having to communicate in a medium where the speaker’s skills are limited. Grounded in the work of Horwitz et al. (1986), FLCA is traditionally broken down into the following three performance-related anxieties:

Communication apprehension refers to the discomfort or fear associated with communicating with others, which is amplified in a foreign language setting where the speaker knows they will likely have difficulty being understood. In a survey we have conducted, this is reflected in items such as “I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation” (Item 9) and “I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class” (Item 31).

Fear of negative evaluation occurs in any social-evaluative situation where the speaker anticipates being judged negatively by peers or superiors. This is mirrored in the cadets' responses to Item 31, "I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English".

Finally, **test anxiety** speaks on a fear of failure in formal examinations, where students often perceive every correction or mistake as a personal failure rather than a step in the learning process.

2.2. THE ME/ ESP TEACHING CONTEXT

Teaching Military English/ESP within a military higher education institution introduces variables that differ significantly from general English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. The military context adds layers of task pressure and hierarchy that grossly exacerbate communicative anxiety. Unlike civilian students, cadets operate within a strict rank structure where professional identity is tied to perceived competence and leadership.

Research at the North Macedonia Military Academy "General Mihailo Apostolski" suggests that anxiety in this context is deeply rooted in the learners' sense of "self" and the fear of appearing "less competent" in front of peers and superiors (Ivanova et al., 2022).

The literature validates Horwitz et al.'s findings that "[a]ny performance in the L2 is likely to challenge an individual's self-concept as a competent

communicator and lead to reticence, self-consciousness, fear, or even panic" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 128). These effects may be further intensified within military culture, where cadets are expected to project assertiveness, emotional control, confidence, and professional composure at all times. Anxiety disrupts the mechanisms of spontaneity and risk-taking, which are qualities essential for field coordination and incident reporting. This emphasizes why spoken communication anxiety is a critical concern at the Portuguese MA: the transition from classroom accuracy to operational confidence is where the most significant gaps occur.

Military officers are decision-makers, expected to be persuasive, assertive and eloquent when giving operational commands (Ivanova et al., 2022). For a cadet, still building their path towards a military career, the deep discomfort in communicating in a foreign language can directly disrupt their self-image as a future competent leader (Horwitz et al., 1986; Ivanova et al., 2022). The ME/ESP class triggers a noticeable rift inside a cadet; on the one hand there is a capable and authoritative future officer, on the other there is an anxious and tentative speaker who is likely to “freeze” when called upon to engage in a role-play exercise (Horwitz et al., 1986; Ivanova et al., 2022). This fissure can induce profound self-esteem issues that cadets carry with them throughout their whole lives (Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999). Students can experience “mental blocks” that cause them to temporarily forget a word in the pressure of real-time interactions. If an officer experiences this during an

international mission, it would be considered a breach of professional competence (Dragomir et al., 2019; Park, 2009).

The unique hierarchical constitution of military institutions thus acts as a powerful catalyst for FLCA, as cadets are innately aware of social status differences between speakers (Ivanova et al., 2022). This further inflames the fear of perceived incompetence, as cadets feel pressured to avoid an appearance of weakness before peers and superiors (Horwitz et al. 1986; Ivanova et al., 2022,). For cadets, being mocked by their peers could trigger a unique ego-threat (Horwitz et al., 1986; Botes et al., 2022).

As military higher education comprises continuous monitoring of performance, every linguistic mistake can be perceived as a “professional failure”, rather than a learning step (Horwitz et al., 1986, pp. 128, 131). We thus argue that the link between classroom learning of FL and operational confidence is shaped by anxiety, requiring that certain measures are taken to minimize it and hopefully fully eradicate it (Dragomir et al., 2019; Ivanova et al., 2022).

3. METHODOLOGY

The present study draws on a digital survey answered by a sample of 136 student-cadets from the Portuguese Military Academy. The group is composed of cadets from the Army, Military Engineering, and the GNR. For this analysis, we

have considered all student-cadets as one single group, as we perceive their struggles with learning a foreign language to be transversal to their chosen course. This decision is grounded in the principle that validity and appropriateness are not “location independent” and must be established for the specific population under study. Translating the instrument into the participants’ native language (L1) ensures conceptual clarity and minimizes the risk of unreliable results caused by linguistic ambiguity.

This approach follows established academic precedents where the FLCAS has been translated into languages such as Chinese and Greek to maintain high levels of internal reliability and cultural responsiveness - Shao et al. (2013) and Li and Xu (2019) utilized a Chinese version to study university and high school students, and Walker and Panayides (2014) translated the scale to ensure it was appropriate for their specific population.

The primary tool used was a direct translation of the FLCAS, which consists of 33 items measured on a 5-point Agreement Likert scale, ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree". To ensure its accuracy, the survey was translated into Portuguese to match the cadets’ L1, following the systematic procedures used in similar international validations (translated to Portuguese by Professor Ana Romão). By translating the scale, we performed a necessary cultural adaptation that allowed

the metrics to capture the specific manifestations of anxiety unique to the Portuguese military environment.

This study combines quantitative survey data with theoretically informed qualitative interpretation grounded in the literature on FLCA. The analysis undertaken has the following structure:

Descriptive Statistical Analysis: Quantitative data were analyzed primarily through descriptive statistical procedures, including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions, to identify general tendencies in cadets' FLCA levels. The analysis focused particularly on anxiety-provoking classroom situations, communicative confidence, and perceptions associated with spontaneous oral interactions, such as the fear of being ridiculed, and the cadets' overall communicative confidence.

Qualitative Interpretation of Findings: While the survey data provided a quantitative profile of cadets' anxiety levels, interpretation of the findings was informed by the theoretical literature on FLCA and the specific institutional characteristics of military education. Particular attention was given to the relationship between communicative anxiety, professional identity, and fear of negative evaluation within hierarchical learning environments.

4. RESULTS

4.1. PARTICIPANT PROFILES

This study was conducted with the volunteer participation of 136 cadets enrolled at the Military Academy who completed the translated FLCAS. Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to identify the overall levels of communicative anxiety and the most salient anxiety-provoking situations experienced by cadets in the ME/ESP classroom.

FLCAS Dimension / Item Category	Main Finding	Percentage / Tendency	Interpretation
Overall classroom anxiety	Low-to-moderate anxiety levels among cadets	Mean anxiety score: M = 2.36, SD = 0.66	Anxiety was present but generally manageable
Calmness during English tests	Majority reported feeling calm during tests	68.4% agreed/strongly agreed	Test situations were not perceived as highly threatening
Confidence speaking in class	Many cadets felt confident during oral participation	61.8% agreed/strongly agreed	Learners demonstrated relatively high communicative self-confidence
Positive attitude toward English lessons	Cadets expressed willingness to attend more classes	60.3% agreed/strongly agreed	English learning was generally viewed positively
Relaxation before English lessons	Majority reported feeling relaxed before class	58.1% agreed/strongly agreed	Anticipatory anxiety appeared limited
Nervousness when called upon unexpectedly	Elevated anxiety during spontaneous oral interaction	Moderate-to-high tendency	Unpredictability increased communicative stress
Fear of making mistakes	Some cadets worried about linguistic errors	Moderate tendency	Error sensitivity remained an important anxiety factor
Fear of negative peer evaluation	Relatively low concern about classmates' reactions	Low tendency	Classroom climate appeared supportive
Anxiety related to teacher correction	Limited anxiety concerning instructor feedback	Low tendency	Teacher behavior was not perceived as threatening
Comparison with peers	Some cadets perceived classmates as more proficient	Moderate tendency	Social comparison influenced communicative confidence

Table 1. Main Findings on FLCA Among Military Academy Cadets (n=136).

4.2. OVERALL LEVELS OF FLCA

The overall results show that cadets claim to experience generally low-to-moderate levels of communicative anxiety in English language classes. The mean anxiety score across all items was 2.36 ($SD = 0.66$) on a five-point scale, suggesting that although anxiety is recognized, it is not perceived as a dominating factor in the learning experience of most participants.

The findings further state that cadets consider they have relatively high levels of confidence and comfort in several communicative situations. In particular, many respondents indicated that they remain calm during English tests and generally approach classes with a positive attitude. For example, 68.4% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they are usually calm during English tests. Similarly, 61.8% reported feeling confident when speaking in class, while 60.3% stated that they would not mind having more English lessons. Furthermore, 58.1% indicated that they feel relaxed and confident on their way to classes.

A considerable proportion of cadets reported experiencing nervousness when required to respond without preparation during classroom interaction. Many also expressed discomfort when they were uncertain whether they would be called upon by the professor, indicating that unpredictability in classroom communication may intensify anxiety levels. Feelings of comparison with peers also emerged as an important factor. Some cadets reported perceiving other students as more proficient

in English, which may contribute to reduced communicative confidence and increased self-consciousness during oral tasks. These results demonstrate that communicative confidence was strongly associated with familiarity and preparation. Cadets reported significantly lower anxiety in situations involving prepared speech or predictable communicative tasks, whereas spontaneous interaction generated noticeably higher levels of tension. This tendency reflects one of the central characteristics of foreign language anxiety identified in previous research: oral performance under conditions of uncertainty often produces higher psychological pressure than receptive or written activities.

Concern about teacher correction and fear of failing the English course did not emerge as dominant sources of anxiety for most respondents. The least anxiety-provoking items included fear of teacher correction, concern about the pace of lessons, and confusion resulting from studying for English tests. These findings may stem from the fact that the English Curricular units are not considered as important as other (more operational) units by the cadets. At the same time, fear of negative peer evaluation appeared less pronounced than expected. Only a relatively small proportion of participants agreed that they were afraid classmates would laugh at them when speaking English.

An additional observation emerging from the study concerns the apparent discrepancy between the questionnaire results and the classroom behaviors observed

by the English instructors responsible for this research. Although the survey data generally indicated moderate and manageable levels of communicative anxiety, classroom observation frequently revealed visibly higher levels of nervousness, hesitation, and emotional tension during oral interaction activities. Cadets often appear reluctant to volunteer answers, display signs of stress during spontaneous speaking tasks, and demonstrate behavioral indicators commonly associated with communication apprehension. This discrepancy may be partially explained by the specific sociocultural and institutional characteristics of military education. Within military environments, competence, emotional control, resilience, and self-discipline are highly valued attributes. As a result, cadets may feel a strong implicit pressure to minimize or conceal signs of vulnerability, including anxiety related to foreign language performance. Self-reported questionnaire responses may therefore underestimate the actual intensity of communicative anxiety experienced during classroom interaction in a military context. We believe that many cadets may have responded in ways that reflected the professional identity expected within military culture rather than their immediate emotional experiences during language learning situations.

The findings therefore suggest that a deeper and more complex study is in order to fully understand the impact of communicative anxiety in military contexts. Consequently, future research on foreign language anxiety in military educational

settings may benefit from combining quantitative survey methods with classroom observation, qualitative interviews, and behavioral analysis to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of communicative anxiety among military learners.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study investigated communicative anxiety among cadets enrolled at the Portuguese Military Academy and demonstrated that FLCA remains a significant affective factor within military higher education. Although questionnaire responses generally indicated moderate and manageable anxiety levels, classroom observation revealed noticeably higher levels of hesitation, nervousness, and communicative apprehension during spontaneous oral interaction tasks. This discrepancy between self-reported perceptions and observable classroom behavior constitutes one of the study's most relevant findings.

The results suggest that communicative anxiety in military educational contexts may be partially concealed by institutional expectations associated with discipline, emotional control, resilience, and professional competence. Cadets may therefore minimize visible signs of vulnerability while still experiencing substantial communicative stress internally. These findings reinforce the importance of complementing self-report instruments with classroom observation and qualitative

interpretation when investigating affective dimensions of language learning in military settings.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings indicate that emotionally supportive teaching practices may help reduce debilitating classroom anxiety while maintaining the discipline and performance standards characteristic of military education. Strategies such as small-group speaking activities, preparation time before oral participation, realistic communicative simulations, and supportive feedback practices may contribute to the gradual development of communicative confidence in psychologically safer learning environments.

The results further emphasize the importance of recognizing anxiety-related behaviors accurately. Learners who appear withdrawn, hesitant, or reluctant to participate may not necessarily lack motivation or preparation; rather, they may be experiencing significant communicative apprehension that remains hidden beneath outward displays of discipline and composure. Educators therefore play a crucial role not only in developing linguistic competence but also in creating classroom environments that support emotional security, communicative risk-taking, and learner resilience.

Overall, this study argues that communicative anxiety in military English classrooms should not be interpreted as an individual weakness, but as a context-sensitive phenomenon shaped by institutional culture, classroom dynamics, and

emotional regulation. Addressing communicative anxiety through supportive and evidence-based pedagogical practices may ultimately contribute not only to more effective foreign language learning, but also to the preparation of more confident and operationally effective officers in multinational environments.

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