

Affective Dimensions of Spanish as a Foreign Language (SFL) Education: Exploring the Interplay of Anxiety, Motivation, and Self-Esteem among Secondary School Students

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Abstract

This study probed the associations among Spanish as a foreign language (SFL) students' anxiety, motivation, and self-esteem. Beyond mapping the connections between these affective factors, the research also examined the extent to which students' motivation and anxiety predicted their self-esteem. The data were collected from 118 secondary school students through three validated instruments, namely the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, Foreign Language Self-Esteem Scale, and Motivation towards Foreign Languages Survey. The analysis indicated clear patterns of association, with higher levels of anxiety linked to lower levels of both motivation and self-esteem. The results highlighted the importance of addressing emotional factors in foreign language education and suggested that interventions targeting anxiety reduction and the enhancement of self-esteem and motivation could foster a more supportive language learning environment. By demonstrating how affective factors shape SFL learning, the study offered practical insights for policymakers and language educators seeking to promote students' emotional well-being and engagement.

Keywords: anxiety, motivation, self-esteem, secondary school students, SFL education

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1. Introduction

The concept of affect represents a pivotal dimension in foreign language teaching and learning, influencing not only learners' experiences but also their academic engagement and outcomes (Alghazo, 2023). Arnold (2019) highlights the significance of affective factors, emphasizing their centrality within educational frameworks and research on language acquisition. While cognitive variables relate to mental capabilities such as aptitude, memory, and analytical skills (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012), affective variables encompass emotional and psychological factors, including motivation, anxiety, and self-esteem. Taken together, these affective variables are intrinsic to the learning process, shaping learners' engagement, persistence, and overall achievement (Dai & Wang, 2024; Derakhshan & Azari Noughabi, 2024; Kirkpatrick et al., 2025; Ma, 2024; Wang et al., 2024). Scholars such as Rojas (2014) and Zhao (2024) suggest that the interplay of emotional variables often exerts a stronger influence on learning outcomes than cognitive traits alone.

Building on this conceptual distinction, research has specifically investigated anxiety and motivation as core affective variables in language learning (Derakhshan et al., 2025; Pourgharib & Shakki, 2024). Foreign language anxiety, often described as situational apprehension associated with classroom learning (Horwitz et al., 1986), can undermine students' confidence and participation (Kasap & Power, 2019), leading to avoidance behaviors and reduced language output (Liyanage & Canagarajah, 2019). In contrast, motivation is strongly linked to academic success (Dörnyei, 2005), with both intrinsic and extrinsic factors enhancing resilience and mitigating anxiety (Li et al., 2025; Putinatr & Kiattikomol, 2022; Sung & Tsai, 2013). These two variables interact dynamically, highlighting the complex emotional environment that supports effective language learning (Alghofaili, 2022; Djafri & Wimbarti, 2018; Yilmaz et al., 2023).

Closely related to anxiety and motivation, self-esteem is another affective factor that significantly influences language learning. It concerns an individual's assessment of their worth or competence and shapes learners' perceptions of engagement and their responses to feedback (Elgamal, 2019). Studies indicate that higher self-esteem correlates with increased motivation, lower anxiety, and greater willingness to take

risks in language use (Kao, 2024). Enhancing self-esteem also strengthens academic self-efficacy and coping strategies (Ma et al., 2022), promoting resilience and adaptability in learners (Muñoz & Ortega-Martín, 2015; Nikitina, 2025). This body of work illustrates how anxiety, motivation, and self-esteem interact to shape learners' emotional and academic experiences in language classrooms.

Theoretical perspectives further underscore the importance of affective factors. Arnold (2011) categorizes them as individual or personality factors, including anxiety, motivation, and self-esteem, that emerge within classroom dynamics. Neglecting these factors can lead to identity-related conflicts, complicating the learning process. Similarly, Dörnyei (2005) emphasizes that emotional variables influence attitudes, behaviors, and language-learning success, highlighting the need for educators to accommodate individual differences when designing effective learning environments. This aligns with Krashen's (1985) "affective filter hypothesis", which posits that negative emotional states can create barriers to language acquisition (Shakki, 2023). Empirical evidence confirms that language anxiety can hinder classroom engagement and performance (Dai & Wang, 2024), particularly for students learning Spanish (Céleste, 2024). Sociocultural factors also shape motivation and engagement, underscoring the need for educators to understand learners' diverse emotional and cultural contexts (Gong et al., 2018; Kharlay et al., 2019; Sanchis-Sanchis et al., 2020).

While much is known about affective variables in adult or university students, gaps remain concerning adolescent populations, whose emotional and identity development is critical (Wu et al., 2022). Dewaele and MacIntyre (2018) note a scarcity of research on younger learners, limiting guidance for pedagogical practices tailored to this age group. Addressing this gap, the present study examines the interconnections among anxiety, motivation, and self-esteem in adolescent male learners of Spanish in the United Kingdom. Focusing on male students enables a targeted analysis of gender-specific emotional responses, as males often exhibit different patterns of anxiety, motivation, and self-esteem compared to females (Hartini et al., 2023; Hussain, 2018; Moazzeni Limoudhei & Mazandarani, 2021; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2013; Wang, 2023). Moreover, the structure and support

frameworks of independent schools provide valuable insight into how institutional contexts influence learners' emotional experiences (Hoang & Grégoire, 2020). By concentrating on this often-overlooked group, the study aims to enhance understanding of affective factors in foreign language learning and inform educational practices that foster supportive and effective learning environments for male students.

1.1. Present Study

The present study intends to examine the role of affective variables in Spanish as a Foreign Language (SFL) learning, with a particular focus on three key factors: motivation, anxiety, and self-esteem. More specifically, the study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How do students perceive their levels of anxiety, motivation, and self-esteem in the context of SFL learning?
2. What are the relationships among SFL students' anxiety, motivation, and self-esteem?
3. To what extent do anxiety and motivation explain variations in SFL students' self-esteem?

2. Literature Review

Foreign language anxiety has been conceptualized as a situation-specific form of anxiety that arises in response to the unique demands of language learning and performance (Horwitz et al., 1986). It often manifests as worry, nervousness, and apprehension in classroom settings and can negatively affect learners' willingness to participate, their perceived competence, and their actual performance (Kasap & Power, 2019; Liyanage & Canagarajah, 2019). Empirical work has consistently shown that higher anxiety levels correspond with lower achievement and engagement, as well as greater avoidance of communicative tasks (Dai & Wang, 2024; Yilmaz et al., 2023). In the context of Language Related Research (LRR), Shakki (2022) demonstrated that

teacher–student rapport and teacher support can foster L2 engagement, suggesting that anxiety and other achievement emotions may be moderated by supportive interpersonal dynamics in the classroom. Likewise, Moazzeni-Limoudehi and Mazandarani (2021) reported that proficiency level and gender can differentially affect anxiety when learning a foreign language, underscoring the need to examine affective variables in specific learner groups and contexts.

Motivation is widely recognized as a key determinant of success in foreign language learning (Dörnyei, 2005). It encompasses learners' effort, academic aspirations, and their integrative and instrumental orientations (Coleman et al., 2007). Higher levels of motivation can enhance resilience and buffer the negative impact of anxiety on performance (Li et al., 2025; Putinatr & Kiattikomol, 2022; Sung & Tsai, 2013). Recent research has also highlighted the mediating and moderating roles of motivation in the relationship between teacher support and learners' enjoyment, boredom, and anxiety (Derakhshan et al., 2025), further illustrating the dynamic interplay between motivation and other affective variables.

Self-esteem, understood as individuals' overall evaluation of their own worth or competence, is another important affective construct in language learning (Elgamal, 2019). Learners with higher self-esteem tend to display more positive emotions, greater willingness to take risks, and more effective coping strategies (Ma et al., 2022; Kao, 2024). Studies have shown that self-esteem is positively associated with motivation and negatively associated with anxiety (Muñoz & Ortega-Martín, 2015; Prodanovska-Poposka & Todorova, 2023; Song et al., 2023). These findings suggest that fostering self-esteem may not only improve learners' emotional well-being but also enhance their engagement and persistence in foreign language classrooms.

Overall, previous research underscores that anxiety, motivation, and self-esteem are closely related in foreign language learning and that they jointly shape learners' emotional experiences, participation, and performance in the classroom.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants in this study comprised 118 General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and A-Level students, ranging from Year 10 to Upper Sixth, enrolled at an independent secondary school in the United Kingdom. This institution is a single-gender school, resulting in a sample exclusively composed of male students. The participants had an average age of 15 years, with a standard deviation of 1.08. Among the participants, some students were engaged in a curriculum that included multiple languages alongside Spanish, while others specialized solely in Spanish. This diverse selection of subjects was intentional, aiming to capture a broader spectrum of results and to facilitate a more pronounced contrast in the data regarding the influence of affective variables on foreign language acquisition.

3.2. Instruments

3.2.1. Foreign language classroom anxiety scale (FLCAS)

The FLCAS, developed by Horwitz et al. (1986), measures the levels of anxiety that students experience specifically in the context of foreign language classrooms. The FLCAS consists of 33 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, allowing for the quantification of anxiety levels and facilitating comparisons across participants. The original scale has an alpha coefficient of .93, whilst in the present investigation, a Cronbach's alpha of 0.93 was found.

3.2.2. Foreign language self-esteem scale (FLSES)

The FLSES, adapted from Hassan (1992), evaluates students' self-esteem in relation to their foreign language learning experiences. It comprises 25 items that assess learners' perceptions of their abilities and confidence in using the target language, providing insights into how self-esteem may influence language acquisition. In the present investigation, a Cronbach's alpha of 0.90 was found.

3.2.3. Motivation towards foreign languages survey

The survey, designed by Coleman et al. (2007), consists of 29 items measuring key motivational components, including effort, academic achievement, integrative orientation, and instrumental orientation. The items were simplified for accessibility, ensuring that they were relevant and understandable for the participants. The original survey has an alpha coefficient of .89, whilst in the present study, a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91 was obtained.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaires were administered during regular class sessions in a controlled environment using Google Forms, which allowed participants to complete them without external distractions. This method ensured that all students had equal opportunity to engage with the instruments under consistent conditions. The use of a digital platform facilitated efficient access, immediate submission of responses, and accurate recording of participants' data, minimizing potential errors associated with manual data entry.

Prior to administration, informed consent was obtained from both students and their guardians, in accordance with ethical research standards. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. The controlled classroom setting, combined with clear instructions, helped maintain a focused and standardized environment, ensuring that participants could respond thoughtfully and honestly to all items on the questionnaires.

3.4. Data Analysis

The relationships among the research variables were examined using quantitative statistical techniques. Before conducting the main analyses, assumptions of normality and homoscedasticity were evaluated using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test to ensure the appropriateness of parametric analyses. All statistical tests were conducted at a significance level of 0.05, and IBM SPSS Statistics version 28.0 was employed to

manage and analyze the dataset. Pearson correlation analysis was performed to assess the strength and direction of the relationships among students' anxiety, motivation, and self-esteem. This analysis provided a preliminary understanding of the interconnections between the affective variables and informed subsequent analyses. To further investigate the predictive role of anxiety and motivation on students' self-esteem, regression analysis was conducted. This allowed the study to identify the extent to which variations in anxiety and motivation could explain differences in students' self-esteem, providing insight into the underlying dynamics of affective factors in SFL learning.

4. Results

In line with the first objective of the study, the findings indicated that the students exhibited moderate to high levels of anxiety ($M = 112.58$). For self-esteem ($M = 68.53$) and motivation ($M = 51.70$), moderate levels were observed (see Table 1). These descriptive results provide an initial overview of the participants' affective profiles in the context of SFL learning.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for the Scales

Scale	Mean	Std. Deviation	Observed range	Possible range
FLCAS	112.58	20.06	62–153	33–165
FLSES	68.53	12.85	33–103	25–125
Motivation	51.70	9.44	23–64	29–145

To examine the relationships among anxiety, self-esteem, and motivation in the context of foreign language learning, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. The results of this analysis are summarized in Table 2, providing insight into the strength and direction of the associations among the affective variables.

Table 2*Pearson Correlation Matrix Between Anxiety, Self-Esteem, and Motivation*

Variable	1	2	3
1. Anxiety	—	-.84**	-.47**
2. Self-esteem	-.84**	—	.63**
3. Motivation	-.47**	.63**	—

Note. $p < .01$.

As shown in Table 2, anxiety and self-esteem were strongly negatively correlated ($r = -.84, p < .01$), indicating that higher levels of self-esteem were associated with significantly lower levels of anxiety. Anxiety also demonstrated a moderate negative relationship with motivation ($r = -.47, p < .01$), suggesting that as anxiety increased, motivation tended to decrease. Regarding the association between self-esteem and motivation, a moderate-to-strong positive correlation was observed ($r = .63, p < .01$), indicating that higher self-esteem was accompanied by higher levels of motivation.

A multiple linear regression analysis was further conducted to examine the combined predictive effects of anxiety and motivation on self-esteem. The regression model was statistically significant, $F(2, 104) = 179.85, p < .001$, explaining approximately 77.6% of the variance in self-esteem ($R^2 = .776$). Anxiety demonstrated a strong negative and significant association with self-esteem, whereas motivation was positively and significantly related to self-esteem. These findings indicate that both anxiety and motivation are significant predictors of self-esteem in the context of SFL learning (see Table 3). Specifically, higher levels of anxiety are associated with lower self-esteem, while greater motivation contributes positively to self-esteem.

Table 3*Coefficients of the Regression Analysis of Self-Esteem*

Predictor	β	t	p	Tolerance	VIF
Constant	—	16.94	$< .001$	—	—
Anxiety	-.71	-13.62	$< .001$	.79	1.26
Motivation	.29	5.52	$< .001$	.79	1.26

Note. Dependent variable: self-esteem.

A multiple linear regression analysis was further conducted to examine the combined predictive effects of anxiety and motivation on self-esteem. The regression model was statistically significant, $F(2, 104) = 179.85$, $p < .001$, explaining approximately 77.6% of the variance in self-esteem ($R^2 = .776$). Anxiety demonstrated a strong negative and significant association with self-esteem ($\beta = -0.71$, $p < .001$), whereas motivation was positively and significantly related to self-esteem ($\beta = 0.288$, $p < .001$). These findings indicate that both anxiety and motivation are significant predictors of self-esteem in the context of SFL learning (see Table 3). Specifically, higher levels of anxiety are associated with lower self-esteem, while greater motivation contributes positively to self-esteem.

5. Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the levels of anxiety, motivation, and self-esteem among secondary school students learning SFL at an independent high school in the United Kingdom. Additionally, it sought to investigate the relationships among these affective variables and to determine the extent to which anxiety and motivation predict students' self-esteem in foreign language learning. The findings indicate that students exhibited high levels of anxiety alongside moderate levels of self-esteem and motivation. Consistent with previous research (Kasap & Power, 2019), anxiety among students was often manifested through restlessness, nervousness, and discomfort in the classroom. In contrast, self-esteem and motivation did not present significant difficulties, suggesting that students generally maintained confidence in their language learning abilities. Nevertheless, as Ma et al. (2022) noted, fostering self-esteem is crucial, as higher self-esteem is associated with positive emotions, better social adjustment, and the employment of more effective coping strategies (Song et al., 2023). Similarly, motivation plays a pivotal role in resilience and perseverance, enhancing students' capacity to adapt and overcome challenges in learning (Putinatr & Kiattikomol, 2022; Sung & Tsai, 2013). These findings underscore the importance of addressing affective factors alongside cognitive skills to support holistic language learning.

Regarding the interrelationships among the variables, the study confirmed

significant associations between anxiety, self-esteem, and motivation. Specifically, anxiety was negatively related to both motivation and self-esteem, aligning with prior research showing that heightened anxiety can interfere with engagement and reduce students' willingness to participate in learning activities (Alghofaili, 2022; Djafri & Wimbari, 2018; Liyanage & Canagarajah, 2019; Yilmaz et al., 2023). Conversely, self-esteem and motivation were positively correlated, indicating that students with higher self-esteem tend to exhibit greater motivation toward language learning. These findings are consistent with the broader literature emphasizing the interconnectedness of affective variables in foreign language acquisition (Kao, 2024; Kasap & Power, 2019).

The present study further highlights the relevance of gender-specific patterns in affective responses. Previous research has demonstrated that male students may experience anxiety, self-esteem, and motivation differently from their female counterparts, which can influence their overall engagement in foreign language learning (Hartini et al., 2023; Hussain, 2018; Wang, 2023). This is particularly pertinent in the context of an independent school, where institutional structures and support systems may foster a learning environment conducive to positive emotional development (Hoang & Grégoire, 2020). By focusing exclusively on male students, the study offers a nuanced perspective on how gender can shape affective experiences in SFL learning. Additionally, cultural and contextual factors play a significant role in shaping students' emotional regulation and expression. Age, interpersonal contexts, and cultural background influence how emotions such as anxiety and self-esteem are experienced and manifested (Dörnyei, 2005; Kharlay et al., 2019; Sanchis-Sanchis et al., 2020). Variations in emotional expression across cultures and age groups highlight the importance of considering these factors when designing interventions to support learners' affective well-being (Gong et al., 2018; Mardiana, 2023). Understanding these dynamics allows educators to better tailor their teaching approaches to the needs of diverse student populations.

Finally, regression analyses demonstrated that anxiety negatively predicted self-esteem, whereas motivation had a positive, albeit more moderate, predictive effect. This suggests that high levels of anxiety can hinder students' self-evaluation when learning a foreign language, which could in turn influence their levels of satisfaction

(MacIntyre, 2017). As Alghazo (2023) rightly pointed out, students with higher self-esteem tend to exhibit greater motivation to participate in language learning activities, reinforcing the idea that self-esteem influences the perception of self-efficacy. This notion is further supported by Prodanovska-Poposka and Todorova (2023), who emphasized the importance of self-esteem in encouraging motivation among language learners, indicating that a positive self-image can enhance students' willingness to participate in language learning.

6. *Limitations and Future Directions*

In the context of the current study, several limitations must be acknowledged that could influence the findings regarding the relationship between anxiety, motivation, and self-esteem among adolescent male learners of Spanish in an independent high school. First, the scope of the research is limited to a single educational context within the United Kingdom, which may restrict the generalizability of the results. As the emotional variables related to language learning, such as anxiety and self-esteem, can vary significantly across cultural and institutional settings, future studies should consider a more diverse sample from multiple educational backgrounds to foster broader applicability.

Another notable limitation concerns the homogeneity of the study population. Focusing solely on male students may provide insights into gender-specific emotional dynamics; however, it excludes a more comprehensive understanding of how female students might demonstrate different patterns of anxiety and self-esteem in the language learning process. Inclusion of diverse gender identities and cultural backgrounds could enrich the findings and facilitate the development of more inclusive pedagogical strategies that cater to the varied emotional needs of all students.

The reliance on self-reported measures of anxiety, motivation, and self-esteem also highlights another limitation. Such measures can be subject to biases, including social desirability or self-perception discrepancies. Studies indicate that adolescents may be prone to underreporting their anxiety levels or overestimating their motivation due to peer pressure or cultural expectations. Future research should aim to incorporate a mixed-methods approach or utilize observational methods to obtain

a more nuanced understanding of students' emotional experiences in language learning environments.

7. Conclusion

This study provides important insights into the affective dimensions of SFL learning among adolescent male students in school contexts. The findings demonstrate that anxiety, motivation, and self-esteem are closely interrelated, with anxiety negatively influencing both motivation and self-esteem, while motivation positively supports self-esteem. Taken together, the findings reveal that affective variables serve as foundational drivers of the learning process, shaping how students perceive themselves and their capacity to engage productively in foreign language learning.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the growing body of research on the affective domain in language acquisition. It reinforces the affective filter hypothesis (Krashen, 1985) by empirically demonstrating how negative emotional states, such as anxiety, can impede learning outcomes. Furthermore, it highlights the interplay between multiple affective factors, anxiety, motivation, and self-esteem, showing that these variables collectively shape students' foreign language learning trajectories. By focusing specifically on adolescent male learners, the study also adds nuance to the literature on gendered patterns in affective responses, illustrating how individual differences can moderate these experiences.

In terms of practical implications, the findings suggest several actionable strategies for educators and curriculum designers. First, language educators should implement classroom interventions aimed at reducing anxiety, such as creating supportive learning environments, incorporating stress-reduction techniques, and encouraging collaborative learning. Second, they should actively promote self-esteem by providing positive feedback, celebrating incremental achievements, and fostering a growth mindset in language learning. Third, motivating students through engaging, meaningful tasks, aligned with both intrinsic and extrinsic incentives, can reinforce positive self-perception and strengthen commitment to learning. Schools and policymakers may also consider providing teacher training that emphasizes the emotional dimensions of foreign language learning, ensuring that educators are

equipped to address students' affective needs.

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