

## **FACILITATING ANXIETY AS A POSITIVE TENSION IN LANGUAGE LEARNING CONTEXTS**

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### **Abstract**

Facilitating Anxiety as a Positive Tension in Language Learning Contexts Anxiety is generally identified as a normal human fear or uneasiness about certain states of matters such as starting a certain activity, job, test, etc. It is also one of the psychological drives that play an influential role in the context of teaching and learning a foreign language, the thing with which we concern ourselves in this present study. However, anxiety can be either a facilitating factor of learning if derives a learner to exert the required effort to learn the target language. Hence, this type of anxiety is facilitating. On the other hand, anxiety can be a debilitating factor of learning, when a learner's worriedness is higher than the other facilitating factors; therefore, this debilitating anxiety will be as a negative factor in the experience of learning the intended target language.

This paper is a quantitative analysis of the influence of the facilitating anxiety, which we term as a low tension in this study, in the teaching and learning of a language. First we set up the theoretical framework, and the review of the related literature on which this study is designed, then its importance, the methodological procedures and methods of data collection, analyses, the main findings, suggestions and recommendations for future replicable studies.

**Key words:** Facilitating Anxiety, Debilitating Anxiety, Positive Tension, Apprehension, Language Learning, Motivation, Self, Esteem, Correlation.

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## Introduction

The contexts of second foreign languages teaching and learning need variety of factors to be planned and integrated to grant success. These factors are either pedagogical or personal factors. The pedagogical factors can be factors of syllabi, educational planning, teachers' recruitment and training, etc. The personal factors are mainly those revolve around the learner as a person with certain characteristics and psychological readiness to encounter the voyage of language learning. In this present study our concern is mainly directed to the learner's psychological factors, and specifically factors related to facilitating anxiety as low normal tension in conditions of assessed performance such as language learning.

As a first survey of the affective factors, and anxiety in particular, we need first to explore the bulk of definitions set up by different scholars and experts in the field of psycho/applied linguistics. Anxiety has been intensively defined by a lot of scholars and researchers, and at the beginning, and according to what has been cited in Chan and Wu (2004: 290) Spielberger (1966) defines anxiety as “**subjective, consciously perceived feelings of apprehension and tension, accompanied by or associated with activation or arousal of the autonomic nervous system.**” The mentioning of tension in this stated definition serves our present study in that tension is equivalent to anxiety. By definition facilitating anxiety is, according to Scovel (1978: 139), the attempt that a learner tries to cope up with the language learning experience; in contrast with the debilitating anxiety by which the learner tries to defend him/herself against the learning experience. In other words, facilitating anxiety is a positive learner's attitude towards the learning experience in order to familiarize him/herself with the new experience of learning a second or a foreign language. In previous research studies a positive correlation is found between facilitating anxiety and the other affective factors such as motivation and self - esteem. Facilitating anxiety supports a learner in his/her language learning task. Therefore, in this present study facilitating anxiety is taken as a positive and normal tension that anyone feels when starting any new activity or work. In many studies there has also been a connection between a low level of anxiety and success as it has been emphasized by Krashen (1987: 31), who mentions that in contrary to a low level of anxiety a high level of anxiety is an indicator of failure.

In this study all the related previous research projects and literature will be traced, analyzed and correlated to process the study in order to detect how facilitating anxiety can be a positive tension or worry for granting success in second and foreign language learning. We believe that a slight tension is expected in any human activity, and it is expected to be a factor for exerting more effort to attain the set up goals. It is also a normal phenomenon among sound people to feel worried in encountering assessed performance in any human activity or endeavor. It can be said that psychological fitness does not imply freedom of some tension or low level of anxiety. Anxiety in general is identified as either debilitating, which is an excessive tension that brings about negative feelings in performance in any human activity, and

facilitating, the concern of our present study, as a normal and positive tension that increases the possibility of success in performance, and learning languages in particular.

Facilitating anxiety as a positive factor in learning a language, the topic of our concern in this present study, is always studied in the majority of related research projects in connection with the other affective factors such as motivation with all its classifications, self – esteem, positive attitudes toward the language and its surrounding context and personnel, success, and receptivity as a covering term that can be used to include all these positive affective factors.

### **The Importance of the Study**

This study is important because it will be based on previous studies so as to fill a gap within these previous research projects. It is also important as it addresses a learner's affective factors that are needed for success in language learning in its wider perspectives and in its private dimension, that is, the learning of English language. The central point of importance in this present study is the study of anxiety as a factor of success away of most of the previous studies that show some kind of reluctance to deal with facilitating anxiety as a positive factor that contrasts the negative aspects of anxiety such as fear, tension, and apprehension. Therefore, in most of the previous studies the researchers abandoned the concept of facilitating anxiety, and instead they preferred facilitating motivation as an alternative positive factor in the domain of anxiety. This study focuses firmly on the concept of facilitating anxiety due to the belief that in normal and sound circumstances the learner of a second or a foreign language shows some kind of a slight worriedness or tension in studying such target languages, which will urge the learner to perform well in this context of learning. The study is expected to set forth some suggestions and recommendations for benefitting from facilitating anxiety as one of the affective factors on one hand, and on the other for continuing research in future similar studies.

### **Methodology**

The study follows the qualitative approach and a historical survey over the related literature and the previous research projects in order to be processed through the discussion to obtain the main findings and conclusion that suggest future recommendations for other studies. In other words this study will be built on the obtained findings of the previous studies, and no designed tools or techniques will be used to obtain the findings of this study. For that end a review, discussion and correlation among the previous related studies and the theoretical framework of the affective factors in general and facilitating anxiety in particular. In the first part of the discussion the theoretical frame work of the study will be outlined to include a definition of anxiety with its two types facilitating and debilitating, with much emphasis on facilitating anxiety as the central theme in this present research. Then the

related and previous studies and literature will be presented and analyzed to set up the grounds for the discussion, results, recommendations and suggestions for future studies.

### **Procedures**

Due to the nature of this study as a qualitative and historical survey of the related literature and the theoretical framework intensive collection of related literature and the concerned theoretical background will be presented, analyzed, and interpreted. Facilitating anxiety will be discussed in details to include its definition, how it is taken in previous studies, the correlation between facilitating anxiety and the other positive affective factors such as motivation and self – esteem, and the influence of facilitating anxiety in language achievement or success, learners' positive attitudes toward the target language, and receptivity as it has been mentioned before as a covering term or umbrella under which all the affective factors can be enlisted . Out of these related studies and literature the study will be directed to obtain the central findings of this present study on which the recommendations and suggestions for future similar areas of concerned will be outlined to continue the effort in future studies.

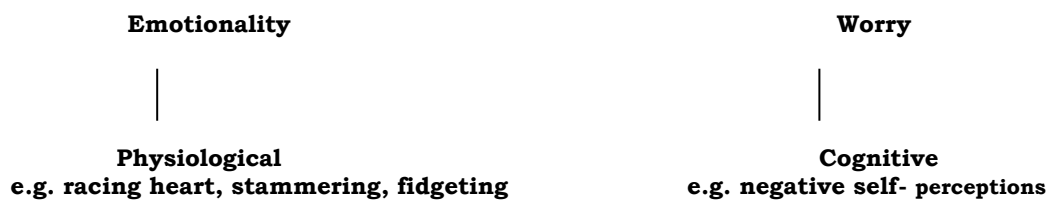
### **The theoretical frame work and some related studies**

As a starting point we need first to concentrate on some definitions of anxiety in general and facilitating anxiety in particular. For Zhanibek (2001: 13) a great interest has been directed to the study of facilitating and debilitating types of anxiety in research concerning the study of second/ foreign languages. This is of course a normal trend in such kinds of research projects as the prime aim of each research in the area of foreign language learning is to trace the factors of success on one hand, and the factors that may cause some difficulties in their process of learning. For Alpert and Harber (1960, as cited in Sellers: 2000: 512) there is a distinction between the levels of anxiety, facilitating and debilitating. The former is about positive influences on the learner's learning process' i.e. a kind of enthusiasm that is covered with slight fear in starting any new activity" while the latter brings about unfavorable feelings about the experience of learning a foreign language that may intervene in the process of learning. Bailey (1983: 41) in her diaries of her experience of learning French has considered two aspects of advantageous and disadvantageous competitiveness; the former encourages the language learner to exert harder efforts to perform well in the target language; hence, it is equated with facilitating anxiety, while the latter slows down the rate of learning, thus it is a kind of a debilitating anxiety.

According to Wang (2009: 25) after his distinction between facilitating and debilitating types of anxiety, he says that there is an intensive research concerning debilitating anxiety; while facilitating anxiety receives limited research interests. Therefore, our present study is an attempt to shade more light upon the importance of a low tension in language learning. In another study Williams (2008: 1 – 2) says that there is an intensive interest in research to study the impact of facilitating anxiety in test and second language learning performance.

However, Williams (ibid) feels that it is not easy to define facilitating anxiety; due to the condition that anxiety as a general term is connected with negative attitudes in doing different tasks such as fear, apprehension, tension, etc. Likewise, it is a matter of making a comparison between those who come across negative consequences of anxiety in learning or in test conditions, and those who find positive drives out of anxiety. Williams (2008: 6) says that educational settings feed the senses of fear and worriedness due to the kinds of punishments and regulations that seek to avoid any kind of failure or inability to perform well in these educational settings. We believe that this mode of interest is the outcome of the negative connotation that anxiety has as a debilitating factor than a facilitating factor mainly in learning foreign languages. This negative attitude towards anxiety in learning a second or a foreign language is expressed by Field (2004: 15) when he says that anxiety in its general underlined concept as one of the ‘*affective factors*’ affects negatively language ‘*performance*’. The negative side of anxiety has been stated by Chen (2011: 38) who said that anxiety might be of the greatest emotional hindrances in the experience of language learning. That is because anxiety is a compiled set of unpleasant affective and psychological negative depressing reactions and factors, and it is abound with low evaluation of self and other negative feelings and doubt. This negative attitude about anxiety in some research projects is also expressed by Tasnimi (2009: 118) in her statement about past research of anxiety as these research projects failed to measure the type of anxiety under investigation in language learning. Then she (ibid) outlines the types of anxiety mainly beneficial/facilitating and inhibiting/debilitating anxieties, and she also mentions some distinctions between trait anxiety which is the normal tension that every normal person may have as a part of his or her personality and the state anxiety which is the characteristic of anxiety that is associated with apprehension or fear in certain states or experiences. Accordingly, we can identify facilitating anxiety as a subcategory under trait anxiety and debilitating anxiety as a part of a state anxiety. According to Liebert and Morris (1967) the types of anxieties are followed with some reactions (Figure 2.1 below) which are either emotional with some psychological symptoms and reactions of body limbs and parts in the form of movements such as the beatings of the heart, and in the form of cognitive tensions which may be seen low perception of self. The observed physical symptoms of anxiety have also been stated by Muris et al (2010: 539) as “**hands trembling, sweating, difficulties with breathing, strange feeling in chest, heart beating very fast, feeling very warm, unpleasant feeling in head, feeling nauseous, feeling very dizzy, and unpleasant feeling in belly. Students are called to be anxious if get two or more of those symptoms**”.

**Figure 2.1: Anxiety as a psychological factor  
Anxiety reactions (Liebert and Morris (1967))**



In her study of differences between elementary male and female students' foreign language anxiety Soim (2014: 16) links the occurrence of facilitating and debilitating anxiety with the tasks of learning second or foreign language; the easily performed the task is the more facilitating the type of anxiety is expected to be. While, the more complicated the tasks are, the more debilitating the anxiety is expected to be. Hence, the task level of difficulty is a determining factor of the type of anxiety. This can also be linked to the contrastive analysis of languages because it is observed that aspects of similarity between the native and the target language can also be of the facilitating factors of language learning. The same idea has also been confirmed by Moyer (2008: 6) when saying that the academic tasks identify both facilitating and debilitating types of anxiety. She also says that the performance in the task is also related to the kind of competition and skills that students have in performing a certain task or activity.

For Jahangiri, and Rajab (2014: 77) facilitative anxiety is connected with some positive experiences in the context of language learning as they say that this type of anxiety as the name indicates makes learners' performance easier in a context of what seemingly difficult tasks. It can also be detected in learners' minds as a factor that encourages them to participate in the target language tasks in order to make membership of a required target language community of learners. This point is very close to our hypothesized idea in this present study that facilitating anxiety is a required slight tension in foreign language learning. Franklin et al (2019: 8) consider anxiety as a normal phenomenon in life, and the sound person should feel some sort of anxiety in performing tasks and duties. This point also confirms our assumption about anxiety as a normal tension for achievement.

In a study by Vitasari et al (2010: 496) after stating the general tendency among researchers that high levels of debilitating anxiety affects students' study performance; they also said that the results that they obtained from their engineering students confirm the other previous researchers' findings that increased levels of debilitating anxiety affect students' general academic performance and low grades in their studied courses. Out of this study we can say that this is the general tendency among the majority of the researchers that anxiety in the overall perspective is a negative affective factor that affects negatively students' general study course performance. Therefore, in some of the research projects the concept of facilitating anxiety is abandoned as a whole, and instead as we said before the concept of facilitating motivation is used instead. However, we believe that a low level of tension or

facilitating anxiety is not escapable in study and general performance activities, i.e. a sound normal person feels such slight tensions when performing something under the supervision or control of other outer sources either human beings or designed performance strategies and procedures because in the overall outcome there should be some kind of assessment to locate in, or to measure individuals performance through the whole course of study performance.

Ahmed (2004: 158) summarizes his study of learners' affective factors in the domain of 'receptivity and defensiveness by saying that a low level of anxiety is a factor of success in learning a second or a foreign language. That is to say, this low fear is an indication of the desire to learn. There, is a positive correlation between facilitating anxiety and receptivity, which implies openness to the experience of learning other languages than the native language. Debilitating anxiety, on the other hand correlates with defensiveness which implies the setting of some defensive strategies either to avoid learning another languages, or escaping from this experience of learning a language over the native language, with which the learner is prepared and adapted genetically and contextually to acquire from his/her earlier years of life among a supporting context of the assigned family members. In another similar study by Luo et al (2020: 53) who study the correlation between facilitating anxiety and certain types of motivation namely 'intrinsic, extrinsic, and amotivation', (which is a mixture between the two) they find that such a kind of anxiety boosts motivation although it is not given a greater interest by the majority of researchers who always perceive of anxiety as always connecting with negative aspects of language learning such as tension, apprehension, and fear. They also say that debilitating anxiety correlates with extrinsic and amotivation in cases of avoidance strategies to avoid the experience of learning a foreign language.

In his study about the role of facilitating anxiety in reading Mikami (2023: 30) mentions also the neglect of researchers of facilitating anxiety in second language research and reading in particular mainly as a facilitating factor of learning. Some of his main findings about facilitating anxiety and reading (ibid: 42) mainly through the comparison that he outlines between the negative correlation between the positive second language learning variables and 'reading test performance such as "Reading Efficacy, comfort, and Intellectual Value, and the positive correlation between the same contextual factors and facilitating anxiety. The students' performance in such cases of facilitating anxiety show their level of motivation towards second language learning and all the positive aspects of dealing with contexts of second language learning. These ideas support the same results discussed above in Ahmed's (2004) study about the affective factors and language learning, and in particular the positive correlation between facilitating anxiety and the positive affective factors such as motivation and self – esteem.

In another study by Gaeddert and Dolphin (1981) in their exploration of testing methods they said that students with high level of debilitating anxiety get lower testing grades; while those with high levels of facilitating anxiety get high scores in tests even in comparison with those with low levels of facilitating anxiety itself. Then they apply some kind of comparison among their subjects of their study who were '103' male and '93' female students who studied



biology courses by saying that male students' efforts of study were not affected by the level of the anxiety. This result can be interpreted by the general tendency among males who tend to be more firm and stout in cases of higher pressure and tension in comparison with females.

Facilitating anxiety in the majority of the related studies has a contrasting relationship with all the positive affective factors namely self – esteem, motivation, attitudes toward the target language, attention, and receptivity as a covering term that embraces all the affective factors that increase learners' openness and readiness to enroll positively in the process of learning other languages than the native language. A low level of anxiety correlates with a high level of instrumental motivation in the outset of the different types of motivation. A learner's high evaluation of self or simply self esteem is also correlated with facilitating anxiety, and likewise positive attitudes toward the target language indicate a low level of facilitating anxiety; hence, a positive engagement in the experience of learning a second or a foreign language. A low level of anxiety also increases a learner's attention in second or foreign language classrooms. All these positive affective factors as studied by Ahmed (2004) are grouped under the umbrella of receptivity which imply a generalized openness to the whole experience of learning a second or a foreign language, i.e. a receptive student is the learner who has a low level of facilitating anxiety, a highly motivated, attentive, with positive attitudes toward the target language and with a high level of self – esteem.

In another study by Küçükler (2020: 38) on foreign language anxiety, and after determining the influence of anxiety on the learners' performance he remarks that teachers should have a positive role in delivering their lessons in a way that makes the experience of learning a foreign language successful. To do these necessary changes teachers should take into consideration their students' needs and requirements for learning a foreign language, and as far as the teaching meets the students' requirements it will address a need; hence, it will lead to success through avoiding anxiety provoking factors. In a similar review of test anxiety Howard (2020: 41) points out to some interventions as a joint effort between school and home to avoid the negative impact of test anxiety on students, this can be done through cognitive therapies according to the observed symptoms of anxiety, and also through the building of certain academic skills to let students be ready to take or to have such academic assessments and measurements.

### **Discussion, Results, Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study aims at exploring the impact of a low tension or a facilitating anxiety in the contexts of language learning as opposed to language acquisition. The former context is something that is designed or created intentionally through certain pedagogical and educational theories, approaches, techniques, etc. while the latter is spontaneous unintended normal process that takes place among a certain family members who interact normally using their assigned native language(s). The study follows a qualitative approach and a historical



survey over previous studies that include all the necessary required tools and procedures of a scientific research. The main assumption of this study is that facilitating anxiety works positively to grant success in the learning of second and foreign languages.

As a starting point anxiety has been defined by citing variety of definitions that revolve around the fact that anxiety is an unpleasant tension or fear that a practitioner encounters in different performance activities either in learning or in all the life style performance settings. However, it is not an easy task to come with a thorough satisfying definition, as it is the case in defining different terms in different fields of study. Within the attempts to define anxiety, we find ourselves encountered with the subdivisions of the term anxiety as state and trait anxieties, mainly facilitating and debilitating anxieties to which we give space to define each in turn. Facilitating anxiety on one hand is the low tension that a language learner, in particular, as the focal point of our study, feels to perform well in achieving success in second or foreign language learning contexts. While the debilitating anxiety is related to an increased high level of tension, fear and worriedness in learning a second or a foreign language that may result in a withdrawal of the learning experience or may even lead to failure in the experience of learning other languages than the mother tongue or native language. Most of the previous studies focus on the area of debilitating anxiety because the concept of anxiety, itself, is directly connected with the learners' negative feelings of fear and tension on one hand; and on the other hand there is a believe among some researchers that anxiety can never be considered as a factor of success in contexts of learning and teaching foreign or second languages, i.e. elements of facilitating anxiety as normal tensions in general performance and practice activities.

Out of the discussed literature and the related previous studies we feel that nearly most of the researchers find a positive correlation between a low level of anxiety, or facilitating anxiety and success in the experience of learning languages. That is to say they find that a low level of anxiety is an encouraging factor to increase the effort to perform well in the learning of languages. Not only this point of facilitating anxiety, but also an increasing high level of facilitating anxiety grants more success than a low level of it as well. On the other hand, we come across some researchers who feel that it is not an easy task to consider facilitating anxiety as a subdivision of the whole term anxiety, instead they have suggested 'facilitating motivation' because they feel that anxiety as a term is surrounded with a variety of negative factors such as tension, worriedness, fear, apprehension, etc. Therefore, they have abandoned the concept as a whole, and as a result they suggested 'facilitating motivation'. Personally speaking I stand firmly with the concept of facilitating anxiety because it can be confirmed by the personal feeling and the other people's expertise, that is to say a lower level of tension is required to trigger and activate the learning rate; moreover, we can say that it is more human than being without any kind of tension or worriedness. Normal and sound human beings show some kind of tension in their different performances and activities; the person who is dumb and nonintellectual shows no reactions towards his/her deeds; hence this is a factor of failure instead of being a factor of success.

As a factor of success, and from the discussed studies and the theoretical frame work, a low level of tension or facilitating anxiety is correlated with the other positive factors that enhance success in language learning, namely motivation, self-esteem, attention, and receptivity. That is to say there is a correlation between facilitating anxiety and motivation, which is the affective derive that activates learning. In other words students with a high level of facilitating anxiety or low tension are highly motivated and successful students. There is also a positive correlation between a low level of tension and attention, which is a factor of concentration on the effort to succeed. Krashen (1987: 19) considers attention as a matter of conscious learning, that is to say through his/her consciousness the learner will facilitate the process of learning by directing attention to perform well in the learning process. The correlation here between the facilitating anxiety and attention is that this low level of tension triggers and raises the level of consciousness or attention for a successful learning voyage. It can be said that a low level of anxiety or namely facilitating anxiety is a factor of high attention in the learning process, and it is a factor of success in language learning. There is also a positive correlation between facilitating anxiety and self – esteem, which can simply be identified according to Coopersmith (1967) as it has been cited by Heyde (1979: 229), Al – Busairi (1990: 52), and Brown (1994: 137) as the sustained ‘evaluation’ that a learner gives and always maintains about self value in the process of learning. Students with low tension or facilitating anxiety have high rates of self – esteem. There is also a positive correlation between facilitating anxiety and students’ positive attitudes toward the target language and its surrounded factors such as people and culture. In other words students with high levels of facilitating anxiety have positive attitudes toward the target language and its surrounded features such as its people and its culture.

### **Summary of the main findings**

This study is primarily concerned with the study of facilitating anxiety as a low normal tension in cases of assessed activities and performance. The use of a low tension in this present study as a required affective factor for success in language learning is intended because we feel that human beings feel such a tension whenever they feel that their performance is monitored in a way or another by outside authorities or individuals with whom they do not share intimate or direct friendly relationships. Therefore, the statement of the study, its importance, methodology, and procedures of the study have been outlined at the beginning as normal processes for conducting a scientific research. Therefore, some of the previous related studies have been discussed with comments upon them depending on the implicit and sometimes explicit observations on these studies. The most common observation is that these studies concentrate mainly on factors of tension and fear as debilitating factors of learning; some other studies shift their attention on facilitating anxiety in the domain of anxiety to the domain of motivation by considering facilitating anxiety as facilitating motivation for the believe that anxiety studies are bound with frightening factors that

debilitate rather than facilitate language learning. In this present study we follow the domain of interest on anxiety by believing that a low tension or facilitating anxiety is a positive factor of learning; i.e. the normal sound person is expected to suffer some kind of tension in all his/her performance. If this tension is low, it will facilitate routes of performance, and hence shifts the influence of anxiety from being a debilitating factor to being a facilitating factor. On the other hand any increase in the level of anxiety will let anxiety be a debilitating factor than a facilitating factor. These ideas will lead us to put the following points discussed below as the central findings of this present study on which the recommendations and suggestions for future similar studies will be based on replicate similar future research projects in the same field of a low tension in learning target languages in general and English language as the language with which we are concerned.

In the light of the above discussion, the theoretical framework, and the reviewed literature the following points will be the main findings of this present study:

There is a strong evidence to support the following findings:

1. A high level of facilitating anxiety is correlated with high performance in the learning of the target language.
2. A low level of facilitating anxiety is correlated with a low level of performance in the target language.
3. Students with high levels of self – esteem show high levels of facilitating anxiety.
4. A high level of facilitating anxiety correlates with openness to the experience of the target language.
5. A high level of facilitating anxiety correlates with positive attitudes toward the target language.
6. Facilitating anxiety is correlated with attention target language learning.

### **Suggestions and recommendations for future studies**

Due to the nature of this present study which aims primarily to investigate the impact of a low level of tension in success in second or foreign language learning, this study needs to be carried out in future research projects for two central reasons; the first one is that anxiety in general and facilitating anxiety in particular used to be studied as a part of all or some of the other affective factors such as motivation and self – esteem; however, we believe that it should be singled out of the other affective factors to direct more attention and light on all its shades and principles. The second reason is related to the study of anxiety and its classification to at least facilitating and debilitating, and the trend among a lot of researchers to believe that facilitating anxiety should never be considered as a class of anxiety; instead it should be considered as a facilitating motivation instead because in the general analyses of anxiety the researchers deal with hard debilitating, fear, and tension factors. Therefore, we suggest the following statements to be elaborated in future research projects to carry on similar discussions that will help to clarify the status of anxiety, and facilitating anxiety in particular in target languages settings:

1. Facilitating anxiety in relation to debilitating anxiety in language performance.
2. The impact of facilitating anxiety on mastering oral language skills.
3. Facilitating anxiety as a motivating factor in the domain of debilitating context of general anxiety.
4. Facilitating anxiety as a factor of success in language achievement tests.
5. Facilitating anxiety in the domain of other facilitating affective factors.

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