

Original

## Fostering student participation through Dialogic Pedagogical Gatherings to face anxiety toward English (L2) learning

Nerea Gutiérrez-Fernández, Lourdes Villardón-Gallego, Aitana Fernández-Villardón y Maite Santiago-Garabieta

Universidad de Deusto, Facultad de Educación y Deporte

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### ABSTRACT

Anxiety is an affective variable that negatively affects learning in general, and specifically second language learning. Several studies have demonstrated that the active participation of students helps to reduce learning anxiety. The Dialogic Pedagogical Gatherings (DPG) are an educational action that promotes participation through dialogue. However, the effect of this pedagogic strategy to overcome anxiety towards learning English (L2) in pre-service teachers has not been studied in depth. To this end, a quasi-experimental study with a mixed design was carried out with the participation of 48 preservice teachers. The results show that the anxiety level of the participants decreases considerably after the DGP intervention. These results have implications for second language teaching.

## Promoviendo la participación de los estudiantes a través de Tertulias Pedagógicas Dialógicas para afrontar la ansiedad hacia el aprendizaje del inglés (L2)

### RESUMEN

La ansiedad es una variable afectiva que influye negativamente en el aprendizaje en general, y específicamente en el aprendizaje de una segunda lengua. Diversos estudios han demostrado que la participación activa del alumnado ayuda a reducirla. Las Tertulias Pedagógicas Dialógicas (TPD) son una actuación educativa que promueve la participación y el diálogo. Sin embargo, no se ha estudiado en profundidad cómo esta estrategia ayuda a superar la ansiedad hacia el aprendizaje del inglés en los estudiantes de formación inicial del profesorado. Para ello, se ha llevado a cabo un diseño cuasi experimental y mixto con la participación de 48 profesoras y profesores en formación. Los resultados muestran que el nivel de ansiedad de los participantes disminuye considerablemente tras la intervención. Estos resultados tienen implicaciones para la enseñanza de segundas lenguas.

#### Palabras clave:

Adquisición de segundas lenguas

Ansiedad de aprendizaje

Aprendizaje del inglés

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [aitana.fernandez@deusto.es](mailto:aitana.fernandez@deusto.es) (A. Fernández-Villardón).

## Introduction

Affective factors determine the input and output ratio of language learners and include certain variables, such as motivation, self-confidence and anxiety (Ni, 2012). Gardner et al. (1997) affirmed that affective variables in second language learning are related among them and, as a consequence, have an effect on one another. Authors such as Minera (2010) highlight that among the affective factors of greatest interest in teaching are, anxiety, beliefs, attitudes, self-esteem and motivation. The presence of a high affective filter presented as demotivation, low self-esteem and anxiety is one of the main problems affecting students during English as a foreign language classes (Rodríguez, 2017), and this occurs in the different life stages of learning. However, anxiety is considered to be one of the main influential emotional factors (Hanifa, 2018).

Anxiety is defined as a subjective emotion or emotional response that produces great discomfort in those who experience it (Pérez-Paredes & Martínez-Sánchez, 2000). Generalized Anxiety Disorder (DSM 5) includes an excessive level of anxiety and concern related to diverse events or activities (American Psychological Association [APA], 2014, 2014). Rojas (2014) asserts that anxiety is not a unitary phenomenon, as it shows four types of responses: physical, behavioral, cognitive and assertive or social.

Horwitz et al., (2010) have identified certain formal instructional contexts as associated with anxiety. This is related to a difficulty in performing a task and has a direct influence on academic performance. Academic anxiety is one of the psychological disorders with the highest rate among the general population attending health centers and also has a greater presence among university students (Othman et al., 2019). In second language learning, anxiety is considered a construct related to emotion, which intervenes negatively in the cognitive process of a subject. Experiencing an anxious response during language learning is described as "Language Learning Anxiety" (LLA) (Coryell & Clarck 2009). Learners may experience LLA due to previous negative experiences with language learning or for several socio cultural reasons (Hodne, 1997; Young, 1991). Being so, Pérez-Paredes & Martínez-Sánchez (2000) consider it important to understand foreign language anxiety if the affective domain of learners pretends to be understood.

Bearing in mind the impact that anxiety could have on students' learning-results, it is important to identify strategies to reduce anxiety in class (Alrabai, 2015). Ansari (2015) suggests role plays as an appropriate strategy to reduce student's anxiety. The author states that giving students the opportunity to achieve a new identity in the activity makes them feel more protected and reduces the fear of negative evaluation. For example, Ludke et al., (2014) agree that signing songs has proven to be beneficial for adults, to improve speaking abilities while reducing anxiety. Atas (2015) emphasized drama techniques that reduce speaking anxiety levels as the students feel less worried about making mistakes. Hammad (2020) pointed out the impact oral presentation techniques have on reducing student's anxiety in a foreign language class. Studies in the field identify the teacher as the cornerstone of the implementation of any strategy to reduce anxiety (Horwitz -et al., 1986). Moreover, Passiatore et al. (2019) affirm that those teachers that create a friendly atmosphere in class could help students to face the stressful situation of speaking a foreign language. Teachers should avoid comparing student's performance and should find indirect ways for correcting students' mistakes (Ansari, 2015). English as a Foreign Language teachers can play a crucial role in minimising student's anxiety, especially in developing speaking skill (Hammad & Ahmed, 2017). From the that aforementioned studies, it could be deduced that classroom strategies promote participation are a way to reduce anxiety. Further describe what characteristics are important for a

teacher to consider when developing a session. In this line, Dialogical Pedagogical Gatherings (DPG) are an educational strategy in which people gather to debate about scientific articles that share the above characteristics. Indeed, DPGs have been shown to foster student's participation in the classroom, sharing reflections about a text through egalitarian dialogue (Flecha, 2000). In DPGs participants are required to interact based on the exchange of the respective justifications, as they are more productive in terms of learning, than other types of non-dialogical interactions (García-Carrión-& Díez-Palomar, 2015). Moreover, the person who moderates, does a very important job, as he/she is the person who ensures an egalitarian climate in the classroom, where all ideas are respected and everyone has the opportunity to intervene and reflect on the idea that has been shared.

In this regard, all the elements highlighted in the studies before, as effective factors in overcoming academic anxiety, such as creating a friendly atmosphere in class, are also present in the DPGs, However it is necessary to analyze whether they help reduce anxiety. Considering that the effect-of this educational action on anxiety has not yet been demonstrated, this study aims to analyse how the DPGs help, if at all, to overcome anxiety towards learning English as a second language. Thus, these are the research questions (RQ) to be answered:

RQ1: Does the anxiety to learn English (L2) reduce through the implementation of DPGs?

RQ 2: What are the characteristics of DPGs that help to reduce the level of anxiety in learning English (L2)?

## Methods

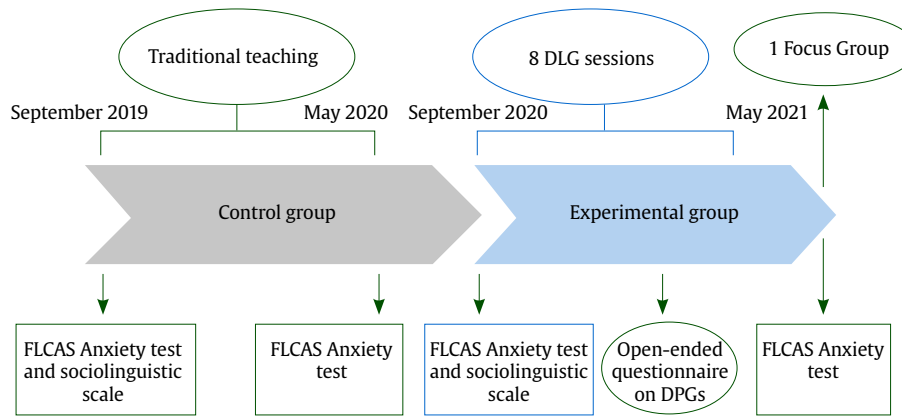
The study was carried out in a Spanish university with students of the English minor of the Primary Education degree in two different academic years (2019-2020, 2020-2021). Therefore, a quasi experimental study with a mixed methods design (Creswell, 2003) was conducted. This consisted of an intervention study, with a quasi-control and quasi-experimental group, including pre-post measurement using quantitative and qualitative data.

## Research design

Pre-post measurements were conducted in both groups, quasi-control and quasi-experimental (see Figure 1). Quasi-control group started the course in September 2019. There, the first round of measurement was taken. After that, the quasi-control group followed the traditional teaching programme until the end of May 2020 when the posttest measurement was taken. The quasiexperimental group answered the pretest at the beginning of the course, September 2020. This group, instead of following the established programme for the course, received 8 sessions of DPG. Four of them were held from September to December. In January, an open-ended questionnaire was responded by the students. Then, the four remaining gatherings were held from February to May 2021. All of the DPGs were held on-site at the university. After that, the measurements were taken again at the end of the academic year. The teacher was the same for both groups, quasi-control and quasi-experimental.

## Participants

48 students enrolled in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of the bachelor degree voluntarily participated in the study. The sample was selected because there were students matriculated in these subjects: *English for Primary School Teachers I* and *Didactics of the Foreign Languages I: English*.



**Figure 1.** Research design.

The quasi-control group (G1) consists of 22 students, 12 girls and 10 boys. The quasi-experimental group (G2) is formed by 26 students, 19 girls and 7 boys. Both groups of students are homogeneous in age (20-21 years old). They all live in the Basque Country and have Spanish or Basque as their first language and English as a second language. Likewise, all of them decide to study the Bachelor Degree of Primary Education as their first choice.

### Data collection

Data collection included quantitative and qualitative information. Quantitative data was gathered through (a) a questionnaire about sociolinguistic data, and (b) the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Pérez-Paredes & Martínez-Sánchez, 2000). Qualitative data was gathered through (c) an open-ended questionnaire, and (d) a focus group.

**Questionnaire about sociolinguistic data.** The questionnaire consisted of 21 closed questions divided into three blocks. First, a section with socio-demographic data included questions on the participant's age, sex or nationality. The second section enclosed eight questions related to academic data, such as studies completed before entering university or the level of qualification of their parents. Finally, a third block on linguistic data was included. In this section, ten questions related to their previous experience with English were added.

**Anxiety scale.** Pérez-Paredes & Martínez-Sánchez (2000) Spanish version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was used to measure student's anxiety in class. FLCAS is a Likert-type scale composed of 33 items with five response options evaluating the degree of agreement being 1 (strongly agree) and 5 (strongly disagree). The scale, which has an overall reliability of .89 includes statements referring to various situations frequently encountered in language learning: *I feel pressure to prepare well for my English classes; I have the feeling that my classmates speak English better than I do, etc.*

The range of answers in the original study (Pérez-Paredes and Martínez-Sánchez (2000) is 49-140 (91) with Mean=89,07 and Standard Deviation= 18,98.

**Open-ended questionnaire about DPGs.** An open-ended questionnaire was distributed to the quasi-experimental group in the middle of the intervention in order to gather information on the DPGs sessions. This questionnaire was composed of 8 questions. The questions were in Spanish to ensure comprehension and it was completed individually by the students. The questionnaire included

questions related to students' feelings when speaking English in front of the classroom. Moreover, it also enclosed questions about emotions experienced during their participation in the DPGs.

**Focus groups.** The purpose of the Focus Group was to discuss the process and results of the DPGs. The 26 students in the quasi-experimental group voluntarily participated in them. A semi-structured script was followed in regards to the anxiety during the dialogic gatherings and about the characteristics of the gatherings that had helped them cope with anxiety symptoms. Below are some questions related to both sections: *how do you feel when you have to use English in the classroom? what features of the DPGs do you think have helped you feel better about using English?, has the classroom climate influenced your participation in the DPGs, in what way?*

### Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the university's ethics committee (REF: ETK-14/21-22). The students were informed about the research and the voluntary nature of their participation. All agreed to participate by signing an informed consent form.

### Procedure

The procedure for applying the instruments is explained below.

a) Sociolinguistic data: This questionnaire was individually completed in class session through a Google form questionnaire. Participants took 20 minutes to do it.

b) Anxiety scale (FLCAS): The scale was filled online. The link to answer the questionnaire was sent via a Google form. 25 minutes was the approximate time it took to respond to the scale.

c) Open-ended questionnaire about DPGs: Participants answered the questions individually in class. They did it through a Google form questionnaire and had about 30 minutes for it.

d) Focus group: The entire session was held in Spanish and it lasted about two hours. It was audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

### Intervention: DPGs

Eight one-and-a-half hour sessions of DPGs were conducted once a month from September 2020 to May 2021 as part of the two subjects *English for Primary Teachers I* and *Didactics of Foreign Languages I*.

**Table 1.**  
Level of anxiety in groups and timepoints

	Pre-test	Post-test	Wilcoxon test
Quasi-Experimental (n=26)	2.99 (.62)	2.35 (.62)	Z=-4.45 (p < .00)*
Quasi-Control (n=22)	3.71 (.62)	3.66 (.63)	Z=-2.97 (p = .01)*
U Mann Whitney	Z=-3.71 p < .00*	Z=-5.15; p < .00*	

Note. Descriptive measures Mean and Standard Deviation of the FLCAS (Pérez-Paredes & Martínez-Sánchez, 2000) and differences between groups in each timepoint (U Mann-Whitney) and differences intragroup between timepoints (Wilcoxon test).

The DPGs are an educational activity that consists of reading and discussing teaching scientific texts. In this study, several articles were read in the gatherings. In order to select them, these criteria needed to be accomplished:

1. Topics related to education and language teaching
2. High quality scientific publications, considering their indexation and scientific impact

Before starting the gatherings, an explanation session was held to introduce the principles of dialogic learning (Flecha, 2000). To participate in the gatherings, students must previously read the text and select the ideas they consider relevant. The DPGs are usually held in a circle to enhance visual contact with the classmates. The teacher moderates the session, being responsible for promoting an egalitarian dialogue, facilitating interaction among participants. They are given the floor to participate and share their reflections, trying to ensure that all students have the opportunity to participate on the basis that all opinions are valid to create meaning in the text (Ramis, 2018).

**Data analysis**

The data analysis was mixed. On the one hand, data related to the anxiety scale was analyzed quantitatively. After the DPG interventions, opinions on the DPG questionnaire and the focus groups were examined qualitatively.

Descriptive and inferential analysis has been conducted for the FLCAS using the SPSS statistical software version 26. In order to know if the differences between groups in each time-point were significant non-parametric analysis was conducted given the sample size (n=48) and the lack of normal distribution of variables. In the same way, due to the small sample size of the quasiexperimental (n=26) and the control (n=22) groups, non-parametric analyses were carried out to know if differences between each timepoint scores were significant. Firstly, the items 8, 11, 18 and 28 were recoded, so that the relationship between score and level of anxiety is positive. The means and standard deviations of the scale for each timepoint and group were calculated. The U Mann-Whitney was calculated in order to know if differences between the quasiexperimental and quasi-control group are not due to randomness (Table 1). Besides, the Wilcoxon test was conducted to know if the differences between both measures were statistically significant for each group. Although the test has been conducted with differences of mean ranges, the Table 2 shows Means and Standard Deviations to facilitate understanding. The qualitative analysis was developed in two ways. To categorize the

anxiety symptoms, a deductive analysis was carried out following the proposal of Rojas (2014). The four categories reflecting anxiety symptoms were identified as shown in Figure 2.

In order to identify the characteristics of the DPG that had contributed to reducing anxiety in learning English, the second categorization of the analysis was carried out inductively. For this purpose, the responses extracted from the open-ended questionnaire and the focus group were analyzed in detail.

**Results**

The results are presented in two main sections. One referred to the anxiety questionnaire and the other related to anxiety symptoms at the beginning and end of the intervention.

**Anxiety Scale FLCAS Differences**

Regarding differences between groups in FLCAS, there are significant differences between control and quasiexperimental group both in the pre-test and in the post-test measures (based on U Mann Whitney test- see Table 1). Thus, the groups were not equivalent at the beginning of the implementation. In the same way, the two groups presented significant differences in anxiety level after intervention, showing the quasi-control group a higher level of anxiety (Table 1). Considering the instrument range of punctuation (1-5), the anxiety level of the quasi-experimental group in the two moments can be considered medium and, in the case of the quasi-control group, medium-high in both timepoints.

Moreover, differences between pretest and posttest have been calculated for each group (quasi-experimental and quasi-control). In both groups, there is a significant decrease in the punctuation of FLCAS. Nonetheless, the differences in the quasi-experimental group are slightly bigger than in the quasi-control group (based on the Mean measures and Wilcoxon test- see Table 1).

**Anxiety Symptoms**

In this section the anxiety symptoms identified at the beginning and its evolution at the end of the implementation of the DPGs are explained.

**Before the Intervention.** When starting with the DPG intervention, students showed certain anxiety-related responses that affected the language learning process and their attitude.

Type of response	Description
behavioral responses	Behavioral reactions, for example, trying not to come to class.
Cognitive responses	Thoughts that occur while we are listening to someone talk: restlessness, concentration difficulties or generalized pessimism.
Physiological responses	Body's reaction to stressful stimuli: trembling of voice, feeling overwhelmed or nail biting, etc.
Social responses	Responses that show social interaction difficulties: to initiate a conversation with another person, difficulties to show disagreement or blocking in social relationships are examples of it.

Note. Adapted from Rojas (2014).

**Figure 2.** Type of response towards anxiety.

There were some students who indicate a behavioral response and, due to the anxiety that speaking in English generated in them, would try to skip class the classroom:

*Speaking in public in English quite a lot of stress for me and that made me prefer to skip class some days (DL3).*

Other students mentioned that due to the anxiety generated, in September they did not raise their hands to participate in the DPGs, as they preferred to have a passive role and just listen.

*In September, we were all afraid to participate (...) there were no hands raised (DL7).*

Another type of response, among students had to do with cognitive responses. Students had a generalized pessimistic thinking, always considering they would do it wrong in front of their peers.

*I felt that my contribution to the discussion group was going to be bad (...) (DL5).*

Others thought they were not good enough speaking in English and that they would always do poorly due to their low level of English.

*I feel I don't have enough level. (DL12)*

Another type of answer that also occurred in the classroom had to do with the student's body language to certain situations; these were classified as physiological responses.

*I was super nervous in class, I kept biting my nails. (DL6)*

*In the first gatherings my voice trembled every time I had to speak. (DL1)*

The fourth type of anxiety response includes social responses. They included situations in which students find difficulties to speak, disagree with their peers or fear of making mistakes.

*At the beginning, it bothered me to make mistakes in front of my colleagues. (DL04)*

**After the Intervention.** After the intervention, the same categories from Rojas (2014) were used to explain how these anxiety symptoms have decreased. In relation to the behavioral responses the students mentioned that in the last gatherings they participated a lot.

*My level of participation has increased a lot in the last few gatherings, especially in the last four (DL9).*

Regarding the cognitive responses, students affirm to feel more capable and confident.

*I am no longer thinking about whether my colleagues know more or less than me, now I focus on me, and I do not compare myself with anyone else (DL7).*

*I was feeling more confident when participating and my anxiety level was much lower in the last gatherings.*

In relation to the physiological aspect, students report feeling calmer.

*In September I was not able to speak because my voice trembled and now I have control over it (DL1).*

Finally, with respect to the social responses, students are shown to feel more relaxed seeing that no one is laughing in front of them.

*Since I have seen that no one is laughing, I feel calmer now (DL20).*

*I am not anxious about speaking in public in front of my colleagues (DL1).*

### **Characteristics of DPGs That Helped Students Overcome Anxiety**

There are certain characteristics in the classroom that have greatly helped to generate a nice atmosphere and, thus, reduce the level of student's anxiety in the DPGs. On the one hand, there was the support provided by the teacher. The studies considered

her a great help to feel more confident, encouraging them to participate and continue learning.

*(...) Teacher's support has helped me to realize that if I tried I was capable of improving and in the end, I have been more comfortable in the subject (EL10).*

The gestures of assent were identified by the students as a gesture of encouragement.

*The teacher always nodded when we participated (DL9)*

On the other hand, there were some elements that favored the participation: the classroom climate, peer support and shared difficulties among the participants. The relaxed atmosphere in the class was positively valued.

*(...)then you start to relax because you see that the atmosphere of the gatherings is very good and that all thoughts are accepted (DL15).*

Moreover, the solidarity among the students was key to knowing that their peers supported them.

*My classmates helped me when I couldn't say a word in English (DL17).*

Finally, the students felt at ease when they saw that their classmates were also making mistakes. That is, these shared limitations or difficulties made them see that they were not the only ones facing difficulties.

*Once you realize that your peers also have difficulties and that little by little we are all improving, you relax (D13).*

### **Discussion**

Considering the prevalence of academic anxiety in second language learning and how this variable negatively affects learning, it is a priority to identify strategies that decrease academic anxiety. This study aimed to analyse how the DPGs could help to overcome anxiety in learning English as a second language. To this end, we thought to answer two research questions. On the one hand, whether this strategy reduced the anxiety level of the students and, if so, which were the characteristics that helped to reduce this anxiety level.

The results suggest that DPGs reduce the level of anxiety among the students. The results of the quasi-experimental study conducted indicate that at the beginning of the course the students in the quasi-control group showed a higher level of anxiety about learning English than those in the quasi-experimental group. Being the groups equivalent in age and socioeconomic level, this initial difference can be explained by the fact that the students in the quasi-control group received their classes online, due to the COVID 19 pandemic. This ultimately meant that the COVID 19 involved an unfamiliar situation in which the students in the group had to interact through a screen. This situation could generate more anxiety. On the other hand, both the quasi-control and quasi-experimental groups decreased their anxiety about learning English throughout the course. This may be related to the anticipatory nature of anxiety (Grupe & Nitschke, 2013), defined as worry about the future, the fear of not being able to successfully accomplish what one has set out to do. It may also be related to the teaching strategies used even in the quasi-control group, focusing on teamwork and oral presentations in the target language. However, despite the overall improvement, the quasi-experimental group obtained a greater decrease in anxiety among the students. This could indicate the importance of participation, as well as egalitarian dialogue, in overcoming anxiety in language learning. Other studies in the field show that dialogic teaching also decreased anxiety symptoms (Özbek & Uyumaz, 2020).

Students have shown to improve behavioral, cognitive, physiological and social anxiety responses thanks to the participation in the

gatherings. This comes aligned with students in the field that also show the benefits of class participation in university classrooms (Petress, 2006; Taylor et al., 2014). Among the specific aspects of the DPGs that have helped to reduce anxiety are the support provided by the teacher and the classroom climate. Classroom climate is defined as the combination and accumulation of diverse learning experiences that contribute to the development of academic, behavioral, and socioemotional outcomes of children and adolescents (Chapman, Buckley, Sheehan, & Shochet, 2013; Hattie, 2009; Pianta & Hamre, 2009). In the climate generated during DPGs in the classroom, it was possible to see how peer support was crucial for coping with difficulties. This is in consistent with studies in the area that show that peer support could influence individuals' wellbeing and decrease learning anxiety (Wentzel, 2005). It has been shown that a good support network can help students cope with academic challenges, and, make students feel more confident (Collie et al., 2017). In short, the DPGs promote effective conditions for the inclusive participation of students, thus creating a favorable climate for interaction that helps to reduce anxiety. Previous educational research has shown both the academic (López de Aguilera, 2019) and social benefits of dialogic gatherings (Soler-Gallart, 2019) and this study goes a step further by demonstrating that it can also have an impact on affective factors, reducing academic anxiety when learning a second language.

### Limitations

One of the limitations encountered in this study is the small sample size. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic situation faced when data were collected, it was not possible to gather information from other universities and groups. In addition, it would have been very interesting to compare the quasi-control and quasi-experimental groups with students from the same cohort. These limitations could be remedied on future occasions by expanding the sample with students from other institutions. In relation to this, it would have been interesting to increase the number of DPGs held in the classroom and test whether it further reduces the anxiety level of the participants. Contribution and future research

Despite the limitations, this research contributes to improving teaching by providing evidence of a strategy that helps overcome anxiety towards learning English (L2). For future research it would be interesting to test the impact of DPG in other educational stages, such as secondary education where the level of academic anxiety of the students increased (Colunga-Rodríguez et al., 2021). In addition, it would be interesting to analyze the effect of DPG on anxiety and its long-term duration through longitudinal studies.

### Conclusions

The aim of this study was to analyze the impact of the DPG on anxiety about learning English as a second language in initial teacher education. Focusing on a sample of forty-eight university students doing a pre-post study with intervention, the research revealed that DPG reduces the anxiety level of students in the classroom generating favourable conditions for participation and interaction. These results contribute to improving teacher training, as they provide ways to enrich the process of teaching and learning a second language.

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