# English as a Foreign Language Students' Emotional Intelligence Management When Taking Speaking Exams

## El manejo de la inteligencia emocional en los estudiantes de lengua extranjera mientras presentan sus exámenes orales de inglés

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This article is a mixed method study which examines how a group of six elementary students who study English as a foreign language manage their emotional intelligence while taking their speaking exams. Data were collected through both quantitative and qualitative instruments such as an emotional intelligence test, non-participant observations, surveys, and individual interviews with open-ended questions. The results provide further insight into the students' emotional intelligence and the coping mechanisms/strategies used to manage their emotional intelligence while taking two different speaking exams.

*Keywords:* coping mechanism, emotional intelligence, foreign languages, speaking exams, test anxiety

Este artículo es un estudio mixto el cual examina cómo un grupo de seis estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera del nivel básico manejan su inteligencia emocional mientras presentan sus exámenes orales. Los datos fueron recolectados a través de instrumentos cuantitativos y cualitativos como lo son: una prueba de inteligencia emocional, observaciones no participativas, encuestas y entrevistas individuales con preguntas abiertas. Los resultados proporcionan una mayor comprensión sobre la inteligencia emocional de los estudiantes y sus mecanismos de afrontamiento utilizados para gestionar su inteligencia emocional mientras presentan dos exámenes orales diferentes.

*Palabras clave:* ansiedad ante los exámenes, exámenes orales, inteligencia emocional, lenguas extranjeras, mecanismos de afrontamiento

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## Introduction

"Emotional intelligence is the capacity to control and regulate one's own feelings and those of others and use them as a guide for thought and action" (Barchard & Hakstian, 2004, p. 440). Supporting this statement, Goleman (1995) describes emotional intelligence in terms of "abilities such as being able to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustration, to control impulses and delay gratification; to regulate one's moods and keep distressed from swapping the ability to think; to emphasize and to hope" (p. 34).

Moreover, Fahim and Pishghadam (2007) argue that academic achievement is "strongly associated with several dimensions of emotional intelligence (intrapersonal, stress management, and general mood competencies)" (p. 240) and that there is a positive and significant relationship between emotional intelligence, skills, and academic success. Thus, students with high emotional intelligence have more academic success due to their stress management and general mood competencies.

In the foreign language field, Dörnyei (2005) also states that "researchers had to accept the fact that personality traits such as self-esteem, inhibition, anxiety, risk-taking, and extraversion, may well shape the ultimate success in mastering a foreign language" (p. 30). According to Méndez-López and Bautista-Tun (2017),

> the speaking performance of foreign language students can be affected by diverse factors generated by performance conditions, such as pressure, planning, and the amount of support provided. Furthermore, affective factors such as motivation, confidence, and anxiety can affect learners' willingness to participate in class (Méndez & Fabela, 2014; Shumin, 2002). (p. 153)

This underscores the need for students to be aware of emotional intelligence management to cope with those factors, especially in situations like test-taking. In agreement with the statement above, Young (1990) affirms that "speaking activities which require 'on the spot' and 'in front of the class' performance produce the most anxiety from the students' perspective" (p. 551).

On the other hand, Smith (2019) claims that some people experience intense fear or worry on tests because there is pressure to do well in that specific situation. Horwitz et al. (1986) also state that students usually realize, after taking a test, that they knew the correct answer but marked or gave the wrong answer due to nervousness; this means that the students could keep making preventable errors during their performance and that their anxiety—and errors—may increase with time. Additionally, Roso-Bas et al. (2016) affirm that "students with pessimistic tendencies are more likely to drop out [and that] pessimism is related with depressive rumination and lower levels of emotional clarity and repair" (p. 57).

This explanatory sequential mixed method research project aims to analyze A2[1] English as a foreign language (EFL) students' emotional intelligence management when taking speaking exams. Thus, the question that guided this study was: How does a group of A2 EFL students manage their emotional intelligence while taking speaking exams? To address this question, we sought to identify the participants' level of emotional intelligence, the factors that influenced their emotional intelligence while taking speaking exams, and the coping mechanisms they used to control their emotions in this situation.

## Theoretical Framework

Salovey and Mayer (1990) define emotional intelligence as a mental process that comprehends the following aspects: appraising and expressing emotions about oneself and others, regulating one's own emotions and those of others, and using emotions in adaptive

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1 English A2 level is the second level of English in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). At this level, which might be described as "elementary," students master the basics of English and can communicate simple, basic needs (Council of Europe, 2001).

ways. In the same way, Ciarrochi and Mayer (2007, as cited in Abdolrezapour & Tavakoli, 2012) state that the "emotional quotient (EQ) is about the intelligent use of emotions and utilizing the power or information contained in emotion to make effective decisions" (p. 2). In accordance with these statements, students with the aid of emotional intelligence can develop the mental process and competencies necessary to perform well academically.

## Relationship Between Emotional Intelligence and Academic Achievement

Emotional intelligence has been shown to play a meaningful role in academic and professional success. Bar-On (1997) found that people with higher emotional intelligence performed better and had higher success rates than those with lower emotional intelligence. Regarding students' academic achievement, Fahim and Pishghadam (2007) affirm that there is a positive and significant relationship between emotional intelligence, skills, and academic success. For Steinmayr et al. (2014) "academic achievement represents performance outcomes that indicate the extent to which a person has accomplished specific goals that were the focus of activities in instructional environments" (para. 1).

In light of this, Preeti (2013) also states that "[academic] achievement encompasses student ability and performances; it is multidimensional; it is intricately related to human growth and [to the] cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development [of the student]" (p. 9).

## Psychological Barriers of a Foreign Language

In the EFL field, Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) describe the anxiety associated with learning a second language as "foreign language anxiety," which is "the apprehension experienced when a situation requires the use of a second language with which the individual is not fully proficient" (p. 5).

Horwitz et al. (1986) describe three components of foreign language anxiety that can hinder students' learning process: (a) communication apprehension due to the students' shyness to express themselves in public and to their lack of vocabulary and knowledge of the target language, which lowers their ability to express themselves clearly; (b) fear of negative evaluation, that is, the apprehension of being negatively judged by their teacher or peers; and (c) test anxiety that arises from the students' fear of failure.

Regarding speaking in a foreign language, Boonkit (2010) considers that this is "one of the macro skills that should be developed as a means of effective communication" (p. 1305). However, speaking in the target language has been regarded as the most challenging skill for EFL students due to its interactive nature (Harumi, 2011; Méndez-López, 2011; Woodrow, 2006; Zhang & Head, 2010) and also because it is an anxiety inducing activity (Young, 1990). Furthermore, other potential sources of EFL learners' anxiety are the level of the language course, expected language skills, motivation, proficiency, teachers, instructor–learner interaction, tests, and culture (Ellis & Rathbone, 1987; Oxford, 1992; Price, 1991; Sparks & Ganschow, 1991; Young, 1990).

## Psychological Burden of Evaluations

According to Shaw and Weir (2007), test anxiety can be considered beneficial for students as it can help them be more "alert and focused on the task." However, a high amount of anxiety can backfire and create more problems.

Following Horwitz et al.'s (1986) theories of components that can affect EFL students' learning process, test anxiety in specific refers to a special case of general anxiety consisting of physiological (sweating, shaking, rapid heartbeat, dry mouth, fainting, nausea, etc.), cognitive (blanking out, trouble

concentrating, etc.), and emotional (depression, low self-esteem, anger, feeling of hopelessness, etc.) responses related to a fear of failure and pressure to do well in that situation (Smith, 2019). According to Oxford Learning (2018) the possible sources of test anxiety can be divided in situational causes (time constraints, "poor study skills or a lack of preparedness," evaluator's attitude, "a history of stress related to test taking, lack of understanding the material, previous poor test performance") and mental causes ("fear of poor grades, a feeling of lack of control, fear of letting down . . . parents [or] teachers, placing too much emphasis on single tests and exams, high [performance] expectations, . . . using grades as a reflection of self-worth, [and] poor self-esteem or negative self-talk"; Causes of Test Anxiety section).

### Coping Mechanisms to Manage Stressful Situations

Admasu (2019) defines coping mechanisms as "strategies people often use in the face of stress and/ or trauma to help manage difficult and/or painful emotions. Coping mechanisms can help people adjust to stressful events while maintaining their emotional well-being" (p. 23). Since an anxious foreign language learner is a less effective foreign language learner (Horwitz, 1996), it is of extreme importance they learn to use coping mechanisms to control their anxiety.

Folkman and Lazarus (1988, as cited in Grover et al., 2015) divide the coping strategies into four groups: problem-focused (taking control, information seeking, and evaluating the pros and cons); emotion-focused (disclaiming, escape avoidance, accepting responsibility or blame, exercising self-control); support-seeking (seeking social support from others); and meaning-making coping, which relates to what Ignelzi (2000) describes as "the process of how individuals make sense of knowledge, experience, relationships, and the self" (p. 5).

Likewise, Weiten and Lloyd (2008) identify four types of coping strategies:

> appraisal-focused (employing denial, humor, or distancing oneself from the problem); problem-focused (deals with finding out information on the problem and learning new skills to manage the problem); emotion-focused (releasing pent-up emotions, distracting oneself, managing hostile feelings, meditating and using systematic relaxation procedures); and occupation-focused coping (changing one's activities or daily routine to avoid or distance oneself from the stressor). (p. 72)

### Method

This study takes on an explanatory sequential mixed method design. Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) describe the explanatory sequential mixed method design as "a method consisting of first collecting quantitative data and then collecting qualitative data to help explain the quantitative results" (p. 69). This means that the qualitative results will help the researchers interpret and clarify the initial quantitative results by providing more in-depth information about the phenomenon.

In this regard, this research followed the explanatory sequence method by first collecting the results acquired from the TMMS–24 based on Salovey and Mayer's (1990) Trait Meta-Mood Scale (TMMS) test (which is the longer and original version of the test) and then classifying the participants with high and low emotional intelligence. Next, qualitative data were gathered through non-participant observations, surveys, and individual interviews.

### Participants

For this research, a purposeful sampling technique was selected. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011, as cited in Palinkas et al., 2015) this type of sampling "involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowl-

edgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest" (p. 534).

Considering that foreign language anxiety has been shown for many years to be a key barrier in language learning—more so for beginners than for experienced language learners (Liu, 2006)—this research was carried out with six participants from an elementary English (A2 level) course in the EFL program at Universidad de Pamplona, a Colombian public university in the northeast of the country.

Of the six participants (four women and two men whose ages ranged from 18 to 20 years) three obtained higher scores than average on the emotional intelligence test while the other three were at the lowest levels.

### Data Collection Process

The TMMS-24 contains a list of 24 items related to feelings and emotions that the participants have to rate on a scale from 5 to 1 (*strongly agree – strongly disagree*). The aim of this instrument was not only to measure the students' emotional intelligence level but also to help select the sample according to the conditions previously determined (the three students with the highest scores and the three with the lowest). The Spanish version of this test, translated by Fernández-Berrocal et al. (2004), was used to guarantee the participants' full understanding of the test items (see Appendix A). The test was carried out online using Google Forms and it was answered in no more than 20 minutes by 17 A2 EFL students.

After collecting the quantitative data, we implemented the qualitative data collection instruments. On this occasion a survey containing six open-ended questions was applied via Google Forms to the selected six participants (see Appendix B).

Later, three semi-structured interviews were carried out in different instances: one after the first term speaking exam, one before the second term exam, and one after it. The objectives of these instruments were to collect data about the participants' emotions before and after taking speaking exams and to identify the coping mechanisms used by them when taking a speaking exam. Each interview was composed of a semi-structured, contained, six open-ended questions categorized into seven themes: emotional factors, physical factors, psychological factors, cognitive factors, situational factors, emotional intelligence influence on academic achievement, and coping mechanism.

For the interview applied after the first term speaking exam, four of the six participants were interviewed personally; the other two were interviewed and recorded (with their permission) via telephone since they were unable to meet with the researchers. For the interview that took place before the second term's speaking exam, all of the participants were able to meet with the researchers to be interviewed. For the final interview that was carried out after the second term's speaking exam, all the participants were interviewed via telephone since they were not in town due to an unexpected break in the academic calendar.

To gain further insight of the phenomenon studied, it was vital to have a closer contact with the phenomenon and its natural setting. For this reason, two non-participant observations were carried out by the researchers: one during the first term speaking exam on a virtual platform and the other on the second term speaking exam inside the classroom. The objectives of this instrument were to collect information about the factors that could influence the participants' performance in their speaking exams and to observe the participants' psychical, emotional, and cognitive reactions while taking their speaking exams.

During each observation, we monitored the participants' physical, cognitive, and emotional responses, as well as the circumstantial factors that took place during a speaking exam. Taking these factors into account, an observation chart was created for both occasions (see Appendix C). For the first non-participant observation that took place during the first term's speaking exam, there was a change in the manner in which the

participants were going to be evaluated: Initially they would be evaluated through an oral presentation, however, the teacher decided to have the participants film themselves speaking and then post the video on YouTube. Therefore, the participants' videos became the source for the observation. In the videos the participants had to analyze a poem about loss and overcoming a difficult situation and talk about a personal experience related to the poem. It is worth noting that the test did not have a time limit.

For the final non-participant observation, which took place in the second term's speaking exam, we observe each participant interacting or speaking with other students for five minutes in the target language in the presence of their teacher and a co-evaluator.

After having collected the data, we implemented the typological analysis method, which is described as "dividing everything observed into groups or categories on the basis of some canon for disaggregating the whole phenomenon under study" (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, as cited in Hatch, 2002, p. 257). As explained by Hatch (2002), the primary strength of the typological analysis is its efficiency since it starts with predetermined typologies taking less time than "discovering" categories inductively.

Keeping in mind our research questions, the generalizations that emerged from our data analysis with the use of the software program MAXQDA are presented in three sections: (a) A2 EFL students with high and low emotional intelligence levels, (b) the speaking exams' circumstantial factors' influence on the participants' emotional intelligence, and (c) the coping mechanisms implemented by participants with low and high emotional intelligence. Generalization (b) was further divided into two subsections: first term speaking exam and second term speaking exam. The data were collected in L1 (Spanish) and translated into L2 (English) for the purpose of this publication. We use pseudonyms to refer to the participants for ethical considerations.

## Findings

### A2 EFL Students With High and Low Emotional Intelligence Levels

The TMMS–24 test revolves around the following dimensions:

- Clarity of feelings, that is, the person is more or less aware of his or her own emotional feelings.
- Emotional repair in which the person is able to regulate his or her emotional state correctly. A high emotional repair shows a good control of positive and negative emotions.
- Emotional attention in which the person is capable of feeling and expressing his or her emotions and feelings in an appropriate way. Unlike the other two dimensions, it is important that the person pay just enough attention to his or her emotions because too much attention could be harmful and cause unnecessary worry.

The information drawn from the test helped us find the participants' average score for each cognitive component, and thus, we were able to determine their levels of emotional intelligence (see Table 1).

Table 2 shows the participants' scores on the TMMS–24 test. These scores are divided into two categories: participants with high and participants with low emotional intelligence. In this case, the results of each of the three cognitive components of the emotional intelligence construct (attention to feelings, emotional repair, and clarity of feelings) are also shown.

In total, the participants' emotional intelligence levels ranged from 84 to 89, above the average, meaning that they have the skill to identify and recognize their feelings and those of the people around them; as such, they can recognize their emotions, label them, and understand the underlying causes behind their emotions. Lastly, they can regulate or control their emotions and, in doing so, also help others regulate their own emotions. Conversely, the participants whose total scores ranged

**Table 1.** Scales of Reference for the TMMS–24 Test

| | **Male participant score** | **Female participant score** |
|---|---|---|
| **Emotional attention** | Should improve his attention (pays little attention) < 21 | Should improve her attention (pays little attention) < 24 |
| | Enough attention 22 to 32 | Enough attention 25 to 35 |
| | Should improve his attention (pays a lot attention) > 33 | Should improve her attention (pays a lot attention) > 36 |
| **Clarity of feelings** | Should improve his clarity < 25 | Should improve her clarity < 23 |
| | Enough clarity 26 to 35 | Enough clarity 24 to 34 |
| | Excellent clarity > 36 | Excellent clarity > 35 |
| **Emotional repair** | Should improve his repair < 23 | Should improve her repair < 23 |
| | Enough repair 24 to 35 | Enough repair 24 to 34 |
| | Excellent repair > 36 | Excellent repair > 35 |

**Table 2.** Participants' Results of the TMMS–24 Test

| | **Clarity of feelings** | **Emotional repair** | **Emotional attention** | **Total** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Participants with high emotional intelligence | | | | |
| Girl | 28 | 26 | 30 | 84 |
| Black Panther | 23 | 31 | 34 | 88 |
| Salem | 37 | 25 | 27 | 89 |
| Participants with low emotional intelligence | | | | |
| Regina | 17 | 11 | 16 | 44 |
| Florecita | 15 | 17 | 16 | 48 |
| Tatiana | 21 | 15 | 16 | 52 |

from 44 to 52 (below the average) should, according to Salovey and Mayer (1990), pay more attention to their emotions to be able to recognize them and their causes and should work on regulating or controlling their emotions to prevent them from overriding their rational thinking.

## The Influence of Speaking Exams' Circumstantial Factors on Participants' Emotional Intelligence

### First Term Speaking Exam

Data revealed that the circumstantial factors of speaking exams exert a strong influence on students' emotional intelligence. The circumstantial factors of the first term exam were different in the sense that the participants had to take their speaking exam through a video and in an individual manner in their homes; thus, they experienced such circumstantial factors as better preparation, time flexibility, absence of a second teacher evaluating, opportunity to edit mistakes, and autonomous work.

The previously mentioned circumstantial factors had a significant effect on the participants' emotional, physical, and cognitive responses. Regarding emotional responses, the participants with high emotional intelligence showed calmness and relaxation with an overall low degree of anxiety while taking the first speaking exam. Nevertheless, the observations did show some noticeable physical responses such as hand or body movements, random laughter, and the use of filler sounds. These responses can be the result of the participants trying to express themselves freely in a foreign language where they were alone in a front of a camera without a peer or teacher near. One thing that stood out about the participants with high emotional intelligence was their confidence, which allowed two out of the three of them to improvise or talk without reading a script.

On the other hand, the emotional responses presented by participants with low emotional intelligence were not as calm and relaxed as their counterparts. They showed more physical responses of anxiety such as moving their arms, use of filler words, and not looking at the camera (two of the threes participants with low emotional intelligence were visibly reading what they had to say). These responses could be due to a lack of preparation or memorization on their part. On the other hand, one participant, Tatiana, stated that she does not like recording herself since she always gets anxious and starts moving her body involuntarily and at random.

### Second Term Speaking Exam

Concerning the second term exam, which was an interaction between two students, the teacher asked them to perform a role play about a random situation using previous topics as a guide with a classmate (chosen by the teacher) and at the end of the role play they had to ask their partner questions and, in the same way, answer the questions their partners asked. Both exercises had a time limit of 5 minutes and a preparation time of 5 minutes for the presentation of the role play. Therefore, in this speaking exam different factors such as improvisation, teamwork, presence of a second evaluator, and time constraint had to be considered.

The emotional responses of the participants with high emotional intelligence were anxiousness, nervousness, and worry. Girl, for instance, indicated that these emotional responses were due to the small amount of time they had to prepare for the exam: "I improvised because I felt the teacher did not give enough time to prepare my oral presentation."

Furthermore, the participants' low proficiency in the foreign language as well as the need to improvise in that language made their cognitive responses more apparent. We could observe some participants becoming confused for short periods or making

speech mistakes. This, in turn, caused participants to exhibit physical responses such as shaking, trembling, fidgeting, blushing, sweating, or crossing their arms and they often resorted to filler words, especially after making a mistake.

In the same manner, the participants with low emotional intelligence showed more signs of anxiety, nervousness, and worry than the participants with high emotional intelligence. These participants' low proficiency level in the target language also influenced their cognitive responses, more so than the participants with high emotional intelligence because they blanked out and made speech mistakes more frequently, which, at the same time, increased their worry of failing the exam: "I started to go blank, I forgot words. I think I made several conjugations wrong" (Tatiana). "I didn't know how to answer or how to ask a question well" (Regina).

However, it is relevant to mention that there was one participant with high emotional intelligence whose responses were very similar to those who had low emotional intelligence. During the observation, this participant's physical, cognitive, and emotional responses were more transparent and numerous than the other participants with high emotional intelligence: "The partner I was with . . . did not speak fluently, I could not understand him when he spoke, that influenced my performance on the test" (Black Panther).

The fact that the speaking exam was taken in pairs also impacted Black Panther's performance since he was unable to understand his partner. This situation can be the result of not being able to choose a partner whom he trusts and feels comfortable with when speaking.

In regard to the physical responses (random hand movements, nervous laughter, shaking, etc.) of the participants with low emotional intelligence, these were more noticeable as compared to the first exam; plus, the use of filler words was more evident as well.

However, it is important to mention that Tatiana, a participant with low emotional intelligence, experi-

enced similar responses to those of the group with high emotional intelligence. During observation, Tatiana's anxiety and nervousness were less transparent than those of the other participants with low emotional intelligence. In the interview, she mentioned the fact that the speaking exam was taken in pairs influenced her performance because she did not feel at ease with her partner, who seemed very nervous during the exam:

> I was blanking out a little because of my partner…if you do not feel safe or trust that person, you too will be filled with nerves, and I felt that with my partner. When the exam started, I was confident, but my partner started to feel very nervous, then I started to go blank and I started to forget words.

Nevertheless, this particular factor did not seem to affect Tatiana's responses in a great manner since she also stated that at the end of the exam there was a feeling of satisfaction: "The truth is that I'm satisfied. I didn't make it an excellent job...but I did it well" [*sic*].

## Coping Mechanisms Implemented by Participants With Low and High Emotional Intelligence

In general, the coping mechanisms implemented by the participants to help control their anxiety or negative emotions while they were taking their speaking exams did not vary much from each group.

In the first term speaking exam, all participants expressed in the interviews that they used the following coping mechanisms to lower their anxiety before taking the exam or while presenting it: listening to music, breathing slowly, and positive thinking. According to Carver and Connor-Smith (2010), the coping mechanisms used by the participants are emotion-focused, that is, "aimed at minimizing distress triggered by stressors" (p. 685). In addition, two participants with high emotional intelligence (Girl and Black Panther) and one participant with low emotional intelligence (Florecita) placed emphasis on preparing themselves

before the exam by reviewing or studying: "I relaxed too much listening to music before taking the oral exam; also, I studied a lot" (Black Panther). I tried to think positive, breathe, review what I studied and singing relax me too" (Florecita) [*sic*]. As specified by Folkman and Tedlie-Moskowitz (2004), studying for an exam is a problem-focused coping mechanism that aims at changing or eliminating the source of the stress by taking control of the problem and seeking information.

In the second term speaking exam, two participants with high emotional intelligence (Black Panther and Girl) emphasized again the importance of preparation and studying before the exam (a problem-focus coping mechanism). Girl mentioned that for this exam she studied and practiced her speaking with a friend, which, according to Folkman and Tedlie-Moskowitz (2004), is a support-seeking coping mechanism that deals with seeking social support from others in times of need.

> While I was preparing to take the exam, I played music in the background, but in this case, I have a classmate with whom I always practiced in English and we talk in class and outside in English. (Girl)

The other participants with high and low emotional intelligence mentioned having resorted to breathing, positive thinking, self-talk, and avoidance of the problem as mechanisms to control their anxiety, that is, emotion-focused coping mechanisms used to alleviate or minimized distress: "Controlling your breath helps a lot, also the fact of speaking to yourself and saying 'calm down, everything will be fine'" (Florecita).

> I am used to taking deep breaths before and during the exam. Also, I think positive during the exam and I repeat to myself that I am going to do very well, and if I do poorly, there will be another opportunity in the third term to have a better grade; then, I try to think the best and stay calm. (Salem)

## Discussion

This study examined how a small group of six A2 level EFL students managed their emotional intelligence while taking their speaking exams. According to the findings, the speaking exams' circumstantial factors played a big role in the participants' anxiety levels regardless of the results obtained on the TMMS–24 test. However, the participants with high emotional intelligence were able to control their anxiety levels on both speaking exams that had different circumstantial factors (time preparation, teamwork, evaluators, difficulty level, etc.) more effectively than the participants with low emotional intelligence, who were visibly more nervous and anxious when taking their speaking exams; responses which led to more grammatical mistakes in the target language and forgetfulness. This result is consistent with Zeidner's (1998) idea that "students who experience test anxiety tend to be easily distracted during a test"; they also "experience difficulty in comprehending relatively simple instructions and have trouble organizing or recalling relevant information" (p. 4).

Conversely, there were two special cases that demonstrated different results: In the first term speaking exam, a participant who, according to the TMMS–24 test, had a low emotional intelligence showed the same responses to anxiety as the participants with high emotional intelligence; in other words, he was confident, calm, and did not make many mistakes in his speech, but on the second term speaking exam, where the circumstantial factors were more demanding and difficult, his responses differed from those who had high emotional intelligence because he was noticeably more anxious and made more mistakes while speaking. In contrast another participant who, according to the TMMS–24 test, had a low emotional intelligence level, showed similar responses on the first term speaking exam as those who had low emotional intelligence; that is, he was nervous and made some mistakes in his speech even though he was the only participant

with low emotional intelligence that did not limit himself to reading what he wanted to say but tried to improvise in the target language. On the second term exam, his responses also varied or differed from those with low emotional intelligence because his anxiety and nervousness were less transparent than those of the other participants with low emotional intelligence.

Regarding the coping mechanisms implemented by the participants to control their anxiety while taking their speaking exam, all participants primarily used emotion-focused coping mechanisms such as listening to music, positive thinking, self-talk, and breathing exercises, as well as problem-focused coping mechanisms by studying before the exam. There was another type of mechanism used by only one participant with high emotional intelligence: the support-seeking coping mechanism in which the participant asked a classmate to practice her speaking.

The results of this study show that the participants' anxiety levels when taking a speaking exam depend in great measure on the speaking exams' circumstantial factors: the preparation time, the trust they have in their partners, the presence of a second evaluator, their proficiency level in the target language, and so on. This result is in line with the large body of research linking the characteristics of the test such as the nature of the task, difficulty, atmosphere, time constraints, examiner characteristics, mode of administration, and physical setting to the level of anxiousness felt by the student (Putwain et al., 2010; Salend, 2012).

Furthermore, the results also showed that the coping mechanisms implemented by the participants were somehow effective in helping them to cope with their anxiety or nervousness when taking their speaking exams. As suggested by Carver and Connor-Smith (2010), emotion-focused coping may reduce the influence of a stressor in such a way that it never brings out a negative emotional response and produces less anxiety. Even though the main purpose of this strategy is also to decrease stress (Endler & Parker, 1999), this is not always successful, and, in some cases, it even increases stress.

Nevertheless, to assess the success of a coping mechanism, Carver and Connor-Smith (2010) remind us that it is important to look at variables such as type of stress and individual (habitual traits) and circumstantial characteristics (environment). Therefore, it is possible that the difficulty of the second term exam caused so much distress and anxiety to the participants that the coping mechanisms used lost their effectiveness.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, while the participants' emotional intelligence levels were in some cases able to predict the participants' performance when taking their speaking exams, the circumstantial factors of the exam also played a major role in the participants' anxiety responses and in their performances. The participants with high emotional intelligence did manage their emotions more effectively than their low emotional intelligence counterparts, thus allowing them to perform better and act with confidence and clarity. In contrast, the participants with low emotional intelligence did not control their emotions as effectively, which opened the way to mistakes that could have been prevented had they not been as anxious and distressed. However, the speaking exams' circumstantial factors changed or increased participants' distress and anxiety to the point that the participants with low emotional intelligence made more mistakes on their speaking exam than did their high emotional intelligence counterparts. Despite all this, the results are not always consistent since there were two participants whose results showed different responses to anxiety despite their emotional intelligence levels. These results demonstrate that the speaking exams circumstantial factors can influence any student's performance despite their emotional intelligence levels and the use of coping mechanisms. Sometimes positive thinking, self-talk, and breathing exercises were not enough to help them control or manage their emotions, anxiety, and distress.

## Implications

It is important for teachers and university administrators to understand that test anxiety and low emotional intelligence levels in students "can be potentially serious when it leads to high levels of distress and academic failure in otherwise capable students" (Wachelka & Katz, 1999, p. 191). Therefore, teachers and administrators should find ways to help students control their anxiety and negative emotions that often manifest themselves before a speaking exam. According to Bass et al. (2002), teaching organizational and study skills and effective test-taking strategies will allow students to be more successful and experience less anxiety during testing. Therefore, teachers and administrators should consider implementing strategies within the curriculum such as test preparation and test-taking and anxiety-reducing strategies to assist students with anxiety. It is also important that students find healthy ways to cope with their emotions and stressful situations, develop good study habits and good test-taking skills that will allow them to have better access to the information they have learned, focus on test questions, and have the confidence to answer them correctly.

The insights gained from this study could be used for further research focusing on determining, analysing, and exploring useful and effective coping mechanisms that EFL students may use when taking their speaking exams. Also, further research could delve more deeply into how EFL students speaking exams' circumstances influence their performance.

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# Appendix A: The TMMS–24 (English Version)

Below you will find some statements about your emotions and feelings. Please read each statement carefully and decide whether or not you agree with it. Place an "x" for the answer that comes closest to your preferences. There are no correct or incorrect answers, neither good nor bad. Don't spend too much time on each answer.

5 = Strongly agree
4 = Somewhat agree
3 = Neither agree nor disagree
2 = Somewhat disagree
1 = Strongly disagree

|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I pay a lot of attention to feelings. | | | | | |
| 2. I usually worry a lot about what I feel. | | | | | |
| 3. I usually spend time thinking about my emotions. | | | | | |
| 4. I think it is worth paying attention to my emotions and mood. | | | | | |
| 5. I let my feelings interfere with what I am thinking. | | | | | |
| 6. I often think about my moods. | | | | | |
| 7. I often think about my feelings. | | | | | |
| 8. I pay close attention to how I feel. | | | | | |
| 9. I am clear about my feelings. | | | | | |
| 10. I can often define my feelings. | | | | | |
| 11. I almost always know how I feel. | | | | | |
| 12. I usually know my feelings about people. | | | | | |
| 13. I am often aware of my feelings on an issue. | | | | | |
| 14. I can always tell how I feel. | | | | | |
| 15. Sometimes I can tell what my emotions are. | | | | | |
| 16. I can come to understand my feelings. | | | | | |
| 17. Although I sometimes feel sad, I usually have an optimistic outlook. | | | | | |
| 18. Even if I feel bad, I try to think of pleasant things. | | | | | |
| 19. When I am sad, I think of all the pleasures of life. | | | | | |
| 20. I try to have positive thoughts even if I feel bad. | | | | | |
| 21. If I think about things too much and complicate them, I try to calm down. | | | | | |
| 22. I worry about being in a good mood. | | | | | |
| 23. I usually have lots of energy when I'm happy. | | | | | |
| 24. When I am angry, I try to change my mood. | | | | | |

*Note*. The original version of the test is in Spanish (Fernández-Berrocal et al., 2004); it has been translated for publication purposes. The Spanish modified version of the TMMS used in this study is available from the authors, free of charge, for research purposes only.

# Appendix B: Survey

**Objectives:**
- To collect information about students' emotions before taking an English-speaking exam.
- To gather information about self-regulation strategies students use to control their emotional intelligence before taking an English-speaking exam.

**Instructions:**

Read each question carefully, then answer it honestly and try to be as descriptive as possible. There are no right or wrong answers.

1. How do you prepare yourself academically to take your English-speaking exam? (study methods)
2. What are your perceptions towards English-speaking exams? (difficult or easy, why?)
3. How do you feel before taking an English-speaking exam?
4. Do you think your emotions may influence the results of your English-speaking exam?
5. Do you think that the circumstances (complexity, time, evaluators, etc.) of the exam may influence its results?
6. Do you often use coping mechanisms to control your emotions during a speaking exam? (pray, breathe deeply, or think positively, etc.)

# Appendix C: Observation Chart

**Pseudonym:**

**Date:**                    **Hour:**                    **Place:**

**Objectives:**
- To gather information about factors which influence students' performances while taking an English-speaking exam.
- To observe students' reactions to an English-speaking exam.

**Aspects to observe:**
- Emotional responses to an English-speaking exam
- Cognitive responses to an English-speaking exam
- Physical responses to an English-speaking exam
- Circumstantial factors of the exam

| Hour | Description | Comments |
|------|-------------|----------|
|      |             |          |

| Aspects to observe | Observed | Not observed | Comments |
|--------------------|----------|--------------|----------|
| Observable physical responses (e.g., sweating, fidgeting) | | | |
| Cognitive responses (e.g., blanking out, trouble concentrating, etc.) | | | |
| Observable emotional responses (e.g., expressions of anger, unease, annoyance, etc.) | | | |
| Circumstantial factors (e.g., evaluators, time of the exam, etc.) | | | |