Dealing with foreign language anxiety in the classroom

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Abstract

I språkundervisning ska elever utveckla kommunikativ kompetens och tillit till sin förmåga att uttrycka sig. En av språklärares största utmaningar, oavsett målspråk och utbildningsstadie, är att arbeta med elever och studenter som ogärna engagerar sig muntligt. Det här kapitlet handlar om talängslan, *foreign language anxiety*, d v s negativ stress och oro i relation till målspråksanvändning i språkklassrummet. Sådan talängslan är destruktiv för hela lärprocessen. Den etableras ofta tidigt och i en ond cirkel där den interagerar med prestation, självskattning och självbild. På så sätt får den långsiktiga negativa konsekvenser. Mycket forskning har ägnats åt bakomliggande psykologiska faktorer, där talängslan ses som ett problem på individnivå. Jag argumenterar här för ett mer konstruktivt förhållningssätt; istället för att betrakta talängslan som ett tillkortakommande hos enskilda elever bör den förstås som ett klassrumsfenomen och en oönskad men naturlig premiss i undervisningen, då elever förväntas uttrycka sig och sin person inför sina klasskamrater på ett språk de inte helt behärskar. Kapitlet beskriver talängslan och klassrumssituationer som triggar den. Det primära syftet är dock att diskutera direkta och indirekta sätt att motverka talängslan och öka möjligheten för alla språkelever att öva upp sin muntliga kompetens och stärka sitt självförtroende.

Keywords: talängslan, målspråksanvändning, interaktion

Introduction

Language learning requires communication and engagement (Ellis, 2008; Mercer, 2019). While it is satisfying for language teachers to see and hear their learners engaged in target language interaction, it may be equally frustrating to work with learners who refrain from speaking. In fact, one of the major challenges reported by teachers across the world revolves around making all learners engage orally with the target language (Copland et al., 2014). In my

experience, all language teachers can recount situations where learners have refused to speak, displayed visible signs of discomfort when individually addressed in class or requested to do oral presentations with only the teacher listening. Across age groups and educational settings, these learners themselves describe the stress, nervousness, embarrassment, panic or 'brainfreeze' they feel when prompted to speak the new language (Gkonou, 2017; Humphries et al., 2015; Nilsson, 2020, 2021). This phenomenon, which has been widely studied, is referred to as *foreign language anxiety* (FLA).

In a Swedish context, the syllabi for primary and secondary language education are permeated by a communicative approach to teaching and learning. They stipulate the goals of language instruction in terms of functional language use and underscore the role of confidence (SNAE, n.d., 2022). FLA is thus an unwelcome phenomenon in the language classroom and something that needs to be actively counteracted by language teachers.

The current chapter summarizes the extensive research focusing on causes and effects of FLA and its prevalence among varying groups of learners. More importantly, however, it makes the case that FLA ought to be framed as a professional and contextual challenge for teachers rather than a problem for, or with, individual learners. The subsequent sections direct attention to aspects of classroom instruction that may help alleviate FLA. These recommendations are anchored in findings from classroom studies, conducted by myself and others, and on experience-based knowledge generated by language teaching with learners of varying ages, including student teachers, and conversations with learners, teachers and researchers over many years. Furthermore, the proposed practices align with motivation theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and an empirically-based framework to enhance classroom interaction (Hamre et al., 2013). The chapter hopes to inspire and provide teachers with useful perspectives relevant to their everyday professional lives with language learners of all ages.

Origins and consequences of FLA

Gregersen and MacIntyre (2014) define FLA as "the worry and negative emotion aroused when learning and using a second language" and conclude that it is "especially relevant in the classroom where self-expression takes place" (p.3). As cognition and emotion are inextricably connected (Swain, 2013), FLA has negative consequences for the whole process of language learning. It impedes memory, retention and performance (for an overview, see MacIntyre, 2017). In addition, FLA is detrimental to learners' attitudes, confidence and agency (Gkonou, 2017; Nilsson, 2020, 2021). In fact, MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) claimed that the level of FLA is a strong predictor of success in language learning altogether. FLA develops in a vicious cycle where it is both a cause and an effect; feeling nervous about

speech impedes oral performance and causes learners to assess themselves negatively, which further reinforces anxiety, a negative self-image and avoidance behaviors (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). This way, learners begin to associate the learning situation with negative emotion and poor performance (MacIntyre, 2017). Across the world, there are scholars who argue that a certain level of FLA is beneficial and keeps learners alert (e.g. Kiaer et al., 2021; Lu & Liu, 2011). Horwitz, one of the prominent researchers in the field, however, finds the idea that FLA could be considered favorable, or even necessary, "truly disturbing" (2016, p. 934). Personally, I have never met a student with frequent experiences of FLA who has found this helpful to their language learning, their oral performance or their self-image.

FLA has been investigated in relation to a wide range of biographical and so called 'individual variables', such as gender, perfectionism, neuroticism, multilingualism and out-of school exposure (e.g. Dewaele, 2017; Piniel & Zólyomi, 2022) in attempts to identify components and causal relationships. The fact that these studies have rendered inconclusive results speaks to the complexity of FLA. Furthermore, due to differences in cultural, social and educational settings, findings may have limited bearing across contexts. In addition, the classroom implications of such studies are unclear; as pointed out by Horwitz (2017), there is not much teachers can do to change their learners' underlying psychological characteristics. Instead, she proposes a redirection of attention from the psychological and individual variables to a more pragmatic focus on how to develop and foster language teaching that alleviates FLA.

The global study identifying the task of prompting learners to speak as a common struggle for language teachers (Copland et al., 2014) also recognized two other major challenges: maintaining motivation and teaching mixed-ability groups. Most often, these aspects appear to be interrelated. A lack of oral engagement on part of a learner is sometimes attributed to a lack of motivation. However, the opposite causality is plausible; attending lessons where one feels nervous, and is allowed to remain quiet and establish a negative self-image, is likely to drain motivation (Oga-Baldwin et al., 2017). Moreover, it is reasonable to assume that a classroom with diverse proficiency levels has an inhibiting effect on those who feel less able than many of their peers. Acknowledging these risks, European policy documents increasingly describe positive attitudes and confidence among young language learners as goals rather than prerequisites for success (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019).

FLA is detrimental not only for individual learners but also for the teacher and the teaching. The presence of learners who feel anxious and refrain from participating affects the classroom atmosphere and makes it more challenging for teachers to assess learners' progress and provide effective scaffolding. Moreover, as FLA may obstruct learners' focus on task, their use of strategies and their ability to work independently, they become more reliant on their

teacher (Pekrun, 2014). Some teachers also adapt their choices of activities and communicate less in the target language (Inbar-Lourie, 2010). Consequently, FLA may impact instruction for all learners in the classroom.

Prevalence and triggers of FLA

FLA has been found at all levels of instruction across the world (Horwitz, 2016). It is often established early, despite common assumptions that portray young primary learners as self-confident and uninhibited by default (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2016; Waddington, 2019). In a Swedish study (Nilsson, 2019), as many as 18% of learners in school years 2–5, almost one in five, reported experiences of FLA during English lessons *often*, *almost always* or *always*. It is prevalent in varying Swedish upper secondary school contexts (Thompson & Sylvén, 2015) and has been found to peak during teenage years (MacIntyre & Dewaele, 2014), which is not odd, considering the increasing self-awareness at this age. Frequent experiences of FLA have longterm negative effects, impacting learning and confidence even as learners become adults (Gkonou, 2017; Nikolov, 2001). A study with Swedish student teachers (Nilsson, 2022a) concluded higher levels of FLA among them than their future primary learners. In fact, Horwitz (2016) has estimated at least 'modest' levels of FLA among 30–40% of language learners in general.

FLA has been studied and identified among learners with lower language proficiencies (MacIntyre, 2017) but also among more advanced learners (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). However, it is important to point out that although studies have attempted to focus on measuring anxiety and classified learners as more or less anxious, the reality is that learners are distributed across a continuum of anxiety levels (Nilsson, 2019). In addition, FLA may fluctuate over time and within a specific lesson (MacIntyre, 2017). In other words, many language learners experience occasional FLA of varying intensity and in different situations. Yet, learner accounts of their subjective experiences of FLA are remarkably consistent across age groups (Gkonou, 2017; Humphries et al., 2015; Nilsson, 2020, 2021).

The fact that FLA is prevalent in classrooms of heterogeneous language proficiencies (Frantzen & Magnan, 2005) speaks to its contextual nature. The classroom factors related to FLA across educational settings that do seem generalizable are perceived inferior language competence (Liu & Chen, 2013; MacIntyre, 2017), negative self-image (Csizér & Piniel, 2013; MacIntyre, 2017) and speaking the target language in class (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). Young learners in Sweden reported that speaking and making mistakes in front of others, risking negative reactions from peers and failing to grasp instructions, especially if the activity involved an oral response from learners, were the most frequent triggers of FLA (Nilsson, 2019). Arguably, such factors are context-specific; a learner who experiences FLA in one classroom

might not have done so in another, depending on the general level of the group and the socio-emotional atmosphere. In any case, FLA is related to speaking and social exposure. While the English term FLA has been investigated in relation to various skills, the Swedish term *talängslan*, 'speaking anxiety', thus appears appropriate.

In sum, extensive research concludes that common classroom situations often ignite FLA among learners of all ages, and it appears to be more prevalent than many teachers assume. At the same time, most people have experienced feelings of stress and rushes of adrenaline when expected to speak a foreign language in front of others. Maybe because, as pointed out by Gregersen and MacIntyre (2014), communicating in a language that we do not master as well as our mother tongue, we risk coming across as less intelligent and witty than we perceive ourselves to be.

FLA as a classroom phenomenon

Awareness of underlying psychological traits that may contribute to FLA are not likely to help teachers much; our classrooms are populated by individuals with all kinds of personalities and characteristics (Horwitz, 2017). Instead, we should focus on aspects within our realm of control, namely our teaching and the learning environment that we provide. To begin with, teachers need to be aware of FLA and how common it is, and strive to prevent it from establishing among younger learners and counteracting it later on.

Some teachers may try to adapt activities and not pressure reluctant speakers, for instance by allowing them to remain quiet or speaking only face-to-face with the teacher and no other interlocutors. Although such an arrangement is done out of sympathy, it is not likely to solve the situation. Instead, it may reinforce the self-image of an anxious learner (Nilsson, 2020, 2021).

The stance I am advocating here is to conceptualize FLA as a normal classroom phenomenon. Instead of viewing it as a problem for, and related to, certain individuals, we should regard it as something to be expected in a language classroom context. From this perspective, as FLA is triggered by classroom practices, it is the responsibility of the teacher to seek to prevent such distress. Furthermore, as FLA varies among learners depending on specific situations, conditions and activities, focusing on individuals is not the most pragmatic perspective. Instead, redirecting our attention to the teaching and processes of learning is a more constructive approach. Based on the understanding that common classroom activities, involving oral contributions and interactions in a TL with peers listening, can spark emotional reactions of stress, the question is how we can defuse the contextual triggers and increase oral engagement among all our learners.

In what follows, I will address ways of counteracting FLA based on my experiences from classrooms and exchanges with young, teenage and adult learners over the years, as well as teachers and scholars. These recommendations are not new, but with a special focus on FLA, they hope to serve as reminders about measures that are applicable to all levels of language teaching – for primary teachers who work to prevent FLA from evolving and teachers higher up in education taking over groups where FLA is already prevalent. The advice is underpinned by two different perspectives. One theoretical, self-determination theory (SDT), focused on human motivation and engagement, and one empirical, by Hamre et al. (2013), related to aspects of teaching that foster classroom interaction and learning.

Promoting oral engagement among all learners.

Learners themselves generally regard speaking as one of the most important skills and would like to engage in target language interactions. SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Mercer, 2019) holds that in order to create optimal conditions for such engagement to be enacted, three generic human psychological needs must be satisfied, referred to as *autonomy*, *relatedness* and *competence*. Autonomy entails volition and ownership of one's own learning. Learners must perceive themselves as agentic subjects in the learning process. Relatedness includes feelings of safety, acceptance, support and inclusion in the group. Competence refers to learners' self-image as language learners and perceptions about their capacity to master tasks presented to them. Lessons that meet these needs have been found to nurture the kind of intrinsic motivation that will drive engagement among learners of varying ages (Oga-Baldwin et al., 2017; Printer, 2021). Obviously, the teacher plays a vital role in order for teaching to foster such conditions (Mercer, 2019; Printer, 2021).

Another relevant perspective, that focuses more on the teacher, is the result of an extensive research project, conducted by Hamre et al. (2013), that set out to pin down essential characteristics of effective teaching, understood as the promotion of social and academic development in learners. Their framework *Teaching Through Interactions* (TTI), establishes that at the core of such instruction lies the quality of the classroom interaction and that teachers who achieve good results in this regard master three important dimensions of teaching, namely the *socio-emotional*, the *organizational* and the *instructional*. These findings stem from primary American educational contexts, across school subject. However, these three dimensions are applicable to teaching among all age groups, and for language teaching in particular, where communication is itself a goal (Nilsson, 2022b). As described above, the aspects of the classroom context that spark FLA emanate from oral production and exposure in front of peers, and are thus closely related to the classroom atmosphere and how we orchestrate such interactions.

Together, the qualitative dimensions of teaching in TTI and the basic psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness and competence brought forth by SDT have clear implications for language teaching and offer a useful backdrop as we consider teaching approaches that aim to mitigate FLA.

Fostering a safe classroom environment

Hamre et al. (2013) underscore that socio-emotional considerations form the basis of qualitative teaching – a claim that aligns with SDT. To create a supportive and safe language classroom, explicit conversations about FLA and classroom rules are fundamental, but appear to be uncommon. To simply acknowledge the fact that many people feel a bit anxious and nervous about speaking another language, and that this is completely normal, is a good starting point. Many frequently anxious learners actually believe they are alone in feeling the way they do, as such experiences have not been addressed in their classrooms (Nilsson, 2020, 2021). Talking about what it feels like to make a mistake, to mispronounce and to speak in front of others conveys that such emotions are common, and also deeply human. This is itself one way of defusing the power of FLA and should not be underestimated.

A logical next step on this topic is to discuss what is required to achieve a non-threatening learning environment. I promote straightforward ground rules, for instance, establishing that learners are not allowed to correct each other and that negative reactions such as giggling, commenting or rolling one's eyes (– all learners know what we mean by this!) will not be tolerated. Learners who feel hesitant or anxious some or most of the time benefit from knowing that the teacher is aware and shoulders the responsibility of creating good learning conditions. Many might argue that such decent behavior should be taken for granted in classrooms, at least among adults. However, based on experiences from pre-service and in-service teacher education, and considering the pervasive influence of FLA and negative self-images, I know that the acknowledgement of FLA and the explicit agreement on ground rules and expectations from the very start are appreciated and powerful.

Another important conversation to have concerns the goals of language education. When asked, learners generally regard communicative aspects, being able to understand and express themselves, as the most desirable goals. To thwart perfectionism and an exaggerated focus on accuracy, the aims in the syllabi can inform a discussion to underscore a functional language perspective and what characterizes communicative competence. Moreover, it is a good idea for teachers to share their ideas on how they will work to support learners in achieving their goals and, in doing so, refer to FLA as a joint challenge. Together, these conversations promote a safe socio-emotional learning context and send a strong message to learners.

From an SDT perspective, such conversations are meant to empower learners to engage in their learning, by speaking to their needs of competence,

autonomy and relatedness, and also framing FLA as an obstacle to be overcome together.

Increasing pair interaction

The organizational aspects of language teaching are also pivotal to decrease FLA. Each lesson needs to provide ample opportunities for learners to practice their oral skills. Too often, however, lessons allow for learners to remain quiet and leave without having said anything in the target language. As mentioned earlier, this, if anything, consolidates a negative self-image in learners with frequent FLA. Conversely, feeling able to contribute to target language interactions boosts confidence (Printer, 2021).

The most effective way to activate all learners in oral target language production, that also reduces FLA, is to increase pair work. Models such as think-pair-share (commonly referred to as EPA [*ensam-par-alla*] in Swedish), instantly create opportunities for all learners to interact simultaneously. This approach is useful across ages and languages; it can be employed to have learners discuss an aspect of a novel, describe a picture, consider possible translations of a phrase, share comprehension strategies or come up with three different greeting phrases as retrieval practice. All learners are not likely to engage in subsequent full-class conversations, but doing so is not itself a goal. However, the likelihood that learners volunteer to speak in full class increases if they have had a few minutes to prepare by speaking and trying out ideas in dyads. More importantly, speaking to one or two classmates is a much more authentic situation than speaking up with 20 other people listening to you. Furthermore, pair work takes away the element of assessment that many learners associate with full-class performance and that hampers their participation.

Needless to say, full-class teaching has a role to play in the language classroom, to provide comprehensible input, explain and scaffold, related to the instructional dimension of effective teaching, as will be discussed in the following section. Yet, in many cases, full class discussions are a waste of precious lesson time and opportunities for oral practice, as the teacher interacts with one learner at a time while the rest remain silent. Joint exploration of a topic in full class can be fruitful, but more varied use of work modes and frequent transitions between ‘pair’ and ‘share’ usually vitalize such conversations and make everyone feel a bit more involved.

Language teachers usually work in mixed-ability classrooms, with learners of varying proficiency levels. As one of the triggers of FLA is low perceived competence, pair work can preferably be organized with this diversity in mind, where learners are paired up with a partner on a similar language level. Differentiating activities, so that there are options and varying kinds of challenges and scaffolding, is becoming increasingly important even from an early age.

In sum, within the organizational domain of teaching, we should keep our eyes on the objectives and organize classroom work accordingly. In relation to SDT, increasing oral pair work caters to learners' needs of relatedness, autonomy and competence as learners practice and use the target language in safe and more authentic conditions where they control the interaction.

Working with input, output and objectives

With a positive classroom atmosphere and non-threating work modes, learners are more likely to focus their cognitive resources on learning. As for the instructional aspects of teaching, language learning requires lots of comprehensible input and ample opportunities for output and interaction. In line with a communicative approach, teaching should focus primarily on meaning, but also on form (Ellis, 2008; Nation, 2007). As all teachers know, language instruction involves input, explanations, scaffolding and modelling. Learners, especially those who may not feel as confident in the language, do call for such instructional elements in full class (Nilsson, 2020, 2021). Then, they appreciate plenty of opportunities to practice in small groups. Moreover, grasping procedural instructions is crucial, so that they know exactly what is expected of them, especially when the activity involves speaking. In contrast, not understanding instructions may spark FLA. Particularly during the early stages of language learning, support in the first language may be a constructive option to maintain focus and manage time efficiently. Furthermore, always providing some linguistic support, introducing or reminding learners of useful vocabulary and phrases as they engage in oral practice is a way of expanding their repertoires and instilling feelings of competence.

Repetition and retrieval practice are cornerstones of language teaching (Harmer, 2012), for language acquisition but also for learners' self-confidence. Brief and playful pair activities offer useful opportunities for repetition, where learners do an oral activity several times, with a bit more fluency, with slightly different content or a new partner. Encouraging learners to reflect on the effect of such repetition on their performance and their learning fosters metacognitive reflection and feelings of competence. Making use of a prior activity to start a lesson is a good way of warming up and making sure that all learners engage for a few minutes in the target language – time well spent.

The language classroom where learners receive input and scaffolding before being activated to participate in meaning-focused interactions with a few classmates and practice their oral skills every lesson is likely to be the kind of setting where negative emotion does not interfere with learning and performance. These are also the kinds of lessons that coincide with the needs of autonomy, relatedness and competence that, according to SDT, contribute to a positive cycle of intrinsic motivation, which drives learner volition and engagement.

Conclusion

This chapter seeks to inspire an understanding of FLA as an unwanted but normal feature of instructed language learning and thus to be expected in all language classrooms. The advice shared is substantiated by theory and empirical findings on learning and engagement and hopes to serve as a reminder to teachers about the importance of counteracting FLA, and that this is part of teachers' professional responsibilities. Furthermore, striving to create supportive conditions for target language exploration and interaction benefits all learners. If we focus on overcoming the hurdle of engaging all learners and facilitate their oral participation, we nurture language learning, by stimulating more practice, more fluency and more confidence.

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