

Review

“It makes my whole body hurt”: Foreign language anxiety through the ages

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Abstract

Learning a foreign language in a classroom setting can be a veritably miserable experience. Nowhere is this better described than in *Buddenbrooks*, where Thomas Mann dissects his young protagonist’s feeling of negative anticipation before a language class, with its attendant physical and behavioural symptomatology. Skipping forward eight decades, this essay gives a brief overview of how applied linguists started using the construct of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) in the 1980s to explain deficient performance and a series of deviant learner behaviours in foreign language classes. It briefly clarifies how FLA fit into the institutional landscape of US higher education, and explains how the construct has since been refined by a wider body of empirical evidence. It concludes by discussing some implications for language teaching in similar instructional contexts today, while recognising that a classroom is not where the majority of people learn a foreign language.

Keywords foreign language anxiety, E. K. Horwitz, Thomas Mann

1. Introduction

“I’m scared,” Hanno told Kai. [...] “It’s driving me crazy, Kai, it makes my whole body hurt. [...] If only this wretched Ovid class were over and done with. If only my grade was already in his book, and I’d failed the class, and it would all be behind me. I’m not afraid of *failing*, I’m afraid of the whole brouhaha that goes with it.”
Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, 1901

Young Hanno’s negative emotions, unpleasant physical symptoms and maladaptive behaviour in relation to a foreign language class will ring familiar to many teachers and learners, today as in 1901. Is there something about learning languages in a classroom setting that makes the experience different, *worse*, than studying any other demanding subject? After all, despite a dramatic change in teaching approaches – the Latin lesson described by Thomas Mann would have been based on the outdated “grammar-translation method” (Chang, 2011) – avoidance, procrastination, compensatory behaviour, temporary loss of memory, as well as physical reactions that make one’s “whole body hurt”, as Mann eloquently puts it (1994, p. 582), are still a frequent corollary to foreign language classes. Significantly, the consequences of failure (feeling of inadequacy, punishment, being exposed to ridicule) do

not seem to matter as much to the student as “the whole brouhaha that goes with [failing]” (p. 582). In clinical psychology, this subjective experience of negative anticipation, with its attendant physical and behavioural symptomatology, has a name: anxiety (APA, 2023).

This essay gives a brief overview of how, since the 1980s, applied linguists have used the construct of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) to explain deficient performance and a series of deviant learner behaviours in foreign language classes, especially at university level. The starting point is Horwitz et al.’s exhortation at the end of their seminal 1986 paper:

[t]o improve foreign language teaching, we must recognize, cope with, and eventually overcome, debilitating foreign language anxiety as a factor shaping students’ experiences in foreign language learning. (p. 132)

Although the construct validity of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) – the 33-item instrument designed by Horwitz (1986) to measure FLA – has been established empirically (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989), the above historical claim cannot be evaluated without considering its context of origin. This essay briefly clarifies how the authors’ pedagogical imperative fit into the institutional landscape of US higher education in the 1980s, and explains how the construct of FLA has been refined by

a wider body of empirical evidence in the decades since. It concludes by discussing some implications for language teaching in similar instructional contexts today (UK universities), while recognising that this is not how the majority of people learn a foreign language.

2. The Birth of FLA

Given the widespread anecdotal knowledge that anxiety makes language learning difficult, as well as unpleasant, it may seem surprising that applied linguists did not pay much attention to this affective factor until the 1980s. At this time, institutional landscapes were becoming ripe for this type of exploration as new student-centred philosophies were taking over in some parts of the world. In particular, American universities, where the concept of FLA took shape, was slowly becoming dominated by a culture of helping students “learn for themselves”, as psychologist Carl Rogers put it (1983, p. 188). The demands of fee-paying students in a competitive market where drop-out rates affect rankings and where increasing numbers of students with special needs access higher education (Sparks & Ganschow, 2007) undoubtedly gave a push to research on how to support low-performing learners. In this context, the construct of anxiety became helpful to limit the damage of maladaptive behaviours in language classes: not listening, forgetting, avoiding participation (Gregersen, 2003) and even dropping out altogether (Dewaele & Thirtle, 2009). Seen through the lens of the neoliberal shift in US higher education (Saunders, 2010), the trend to medicalise language-learning failure through the construct of FLA starts to make more sense. Suddenly, struggling learners no longer lacked motivation, aptitude or the “right” personality for language learning: their potential was simply being blocked by anxiety. The implication was also a shift in the function of the teacher, whose role now overlapped with that of counsellors and student services specialists in that he or she was responsible for creating a positive student experience.

3. Horwitz et al.’s Theory

Horwitz et al.’s 1986 paper on FLA was based on their clinical experience with two groups of 15 students at the University of Texas. The authors describe FLA as “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (p. 125). Notably, in this paper they present FLA as a variable that is conceptually distinct from general anxiety. It is not, in other words, a personality trait, but an affective reaction that appears in a specific situation. This is a distinction that has been echoed by later research. MacIntyre & Gardner (1991), for example, found no correlation between trait anxiety and FLA in a study with 95 psychology students. Nor is FLA to be confused with

communication apprehension (CA), fear of negative evaluation (FNE), or test anxiety (TA). According to Horwitz et al. (1986), all three are related to FLA but are not its components. CA, for example, can even be alleviated in the foreign language: learners who are usually inhibited in their L1 may find it liberating to express themselves in a L2, “as if someone else is speaking” (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 127). Although conceptually separate, FNE can be heightened in language classes that require continuous evaluation. How FLA differs from TA is less clear. Sarason (1978) found a significant correlation between FLA and TA ($r = .53, p = .001$), although, as Horwitz (2001) notes, “the two measures only share 28% of variance and are, therefore, reasonably independent” (p. 115). In this case, assessment criteria could play a part, since in a foreign language class students are “evaluated according to uncertain or even unknown linguistic and socio-cultural standards” (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 128).

Wary of the fact that anxious reactions can be induced by other academic subjects – there is a large body of research on mathematics anxiety, for example (Dowker et al., 2016) – Horwitz et al. were especially keen to demonstrate that FLA results from the “uniqueness of the language learning process” (p. 128). Learning a language, in other words, is particularly anxiety-provoking because, the authors hypothesise, not being able to fully express oneself challenges one’s self-concept as a competent adult, causing a “disparity between the ‘true’ self [...] and the more limited self as can be presented at any given moment in the foreign language” (p. 128). Support for this explanation comes also from qualitative research, such as Cohen & Norst’s (1989) diary study with adult learners, who described how they could not be themselves in language classes. If learning a language poses such a profound challenge to one’s identity, the solution proposed by Horwitz et al. might appear rather inadequate: indeed, one may doubt that systematic desensitisation – an intervention typically used to treat phobias (Friedman & Silverstone, 1967) – would do much in a situation that is so powerfully ego-threatening. Despite this, researchers have continued to recommend cognitive and behavioural techniques such as systematic desensitisation, relaxation and cognitive restructuring (Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999) and there is some empirical evidence that they work to reduce FLA (Arabai, 2015; Zhang, 2017).

4. Developments and Criticism

Since the publication of the 1986 paper, the construct of FLA has been fine-tuned by a large body of empirical research. First and foremost, the construct had to be tested in a variety of languages and contexts. Aida (1994) applied FLA to non-Western languages that pose particular difficulties for English speakers, finding that it was related to learners’ low performance in L2 Japanese. Meanwhile, Saito & Samimy (1996) discovered that advanced students displayed higher

levels of anxiety – a finding they attributed to the advanced curriculum, which placed more emphasis on reading and writing. Since then, other studies have tried to answer the question of which skills are more anxiety-provoking. While speaking and listening remain the most researched skills associated with FLA (Kim, 2002; Serraj & Noordin, 2013; Zhang, 2013), Saito et al. (1999) isolated a specific foreign language reading anxiety and developed an instrument to measure it. In another study, Cheng et al. (1999) showed through factor analysis that anxiety about writing is clearly distinguishable from FLA. A final issue is whether FLA is stable and, if not, *when* exactly it arises. Gregersen et al. (2014), for instance, recorded heart rates and interviewed participants to investigate moment-by-moment anxiety fluctuations during an oral presentation in the L2. The picture that emerged was far from constant: anxiety tends to spike when the speaker loses the thread or forgets words. This body of research suggests that FLA is more multifaceted than initially suggested and that specific interventions may be needed to alleviate anxiety associated with different languages, levels, activities and specific skills.

Another question worth exploring is whether some teaching approaches are more anxiety-provoking than others. In their paper, Horwitz et al. (1986) recognise that “the current emphasis on the development of communicative competence poses particularly great difficulties for the anxious student” (p. 132) – an assertion supported by later qualitative studies (Chen, 2003). A related problem is that, whether or not a communicative approach is employed, FLA arises in a specific social setting: a classroom. Horwitz et al. (1986) were ready to point out that “anxious students also fear being less competent than other students” (p. 130). In spite of this, much of the subsequent literature has investigated FLA as an individual difference, without much attention to the interpersonal dynamics that may produce or aggravate it (rivalry, competition, etc.). Luckily, recent studies are adopting a more complex view of the phenomenon, closing in on the “interaction of the individual and environmental factors” that impact FLA (Kasbi & Elahi Shirvan, 2017, p. 1).

Arguably, the biggest challenge to Horwitz et al.’s theory came from experts on dyslexia and learning disabilities. Sparks & Ganschow (1991), in particular, contested the interpretation that FLA negatively affects performance in foreign languages. FLA, they argued, is not straightforwardly one-directional: poor achievement could lead to anxiety as much as the other way round, and “students who experience difficulties learning a FL may have native language problems” (p. 3). This hypothesis was supported by the testing of 22 university students who had failed a foreign language course and who were found to also have undiagnosed L1 deficits (Sparks et al., 1989). Such difficulties, it is suggested, relate especially to problems with phonological encoding. More recently, Sparks & Ganschow (2007) also questioned in a longitudinal study whether the FLCAS was measuring anxiety or L1

skills. They followed 54 students over 10 years and found that poor L1 skills in first grade were negatively correlated with FLA scores several years later, when students started studying a foreign language in high school. According to the authors, this is further evidence that researchers who treat anxiety as the cause of poor achievement should consider the possibility that language learning skills are a confounding variable. The pedagogical implication is that “classroom teachers will need to address these language issues as a primary focus of instruction” (p. 279), rather than just focusing on alleviating the symptoms (i.e. anxiety).

Unsurprisingly, the view that FLA is a by-product of poor performance has been rejected by scholars who maintain that it is, in fact, a causal agent (MacIntyre, 1995). Horwitz (2000), for example, cites the fact that successful students also experience FLA. Another paper that disproves Sparks & Ganschow’s hypothesis is Chen & Chang’s (2004) study of 1187 EFL university students in Taiwan, which found that L1 Chinese learning history was correlated to FLA, but not able to predict anxiety. Lately, more conciliatory views have emerged, acknowledging that FLA is “both a cause and effect, part of a non-linear, ongoing learning and performance process” (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012, p. 106). Meanwhile, leaving aside the question of whether FLA has a negative impact on performance, Horwitz (2001) has also argued that research on methods to alleviate FLA is worthwhile in itself, given the “frustration and discomfort too many people endure when learning a second language” (p. 122).

5. Further Implications

As I explained, the construct of FLA emerged in a specific institutional context. Much of the subsequent research has also used participants from university classrooms. As such, Horwitz et al.’s paper and the following literature are more readily relevant to teaching environments with similar priorities, such as UK higher education. Today, addressing FLA is especially important for the thousands of international students who enrol in UK universities. As it emerged from an ethnographic study of international postgraduates (Brown, 2008), anxiety pushed non-native students to disengage and retreat into monoethnic communication. Alleviating FLA, then, is “not only the moral duty of universities seeking to attract full-paying students, but it will also result in improved student retention, positive word of mouth and therefore more successful recruitment” (Brown, 2008, p. 76). High levels of anxiety, Brown speculated, were likely related to “a clash in differences between status at home and abroad” (p. 81). This conclusion goes far beyond Horwitz et al.’s hypothesis about the ego-threatening quality of language learning. It seems apparent that the threat to one’s identity experienced by an international student in a UK university is qualitatively different from, say, that of the millions of school pupils worldwide for whom EFL is a

requirement or, again, that of a migrant worker who has to navigate the bureaucracy of the UK system. The construct of FLA, developed for classroom settings, falls short of describing the struggles of all these learners. Creating adequate support systems, then, involves more than “recogniz[ing], cop[ing] with, and eventually overcome[ing]” FLA (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 132): it involves identifying the specific sociocultural dynamics that create anxiety about foreign language learning in each one of these different contexts.

This essay began with a quote about an anxious learner in a very distant setting. My intention was not to suggest that anxiety about foreign languages is a universal, but to draw attention to how the same symptomatology (apprehension, physical reactions, maladaptive behaviour) has been understood by learners and teachers in different times and places. In the 1980s, Horwitz et al. thought that it was teachers’ duty to limit the negative effects of anxiety on language learning. The construct they contributed to define, FLA, reflects a push to medicalise learners’ experience, which was a good fit for the institutional context in which they operated. Assessing the veracity of their historical claim, then, means to recognise that they did not discover and measure something about language learning in general. However, we can confidently say that the construct of FLA reflects an understanding of what a “good” university language class should be that is still largely relevant today in US and UK higher education. The subsequent literature has refined the concept and presented abundant evidence of the usefulness of the FLA construct in analogous learning situations.

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