PSYCHOLOGY-BASED ACTIVITIES FOR SUPPORTING ANXIOUS LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Creating Calm and Confident Foreign Language Speakers

Edited by Neil Curry and Kate Maher

Psychology-Based Activities for Supporting Anxious Language Learners

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FOREWORD

The fields of applied linguistics and psychology have become increasingly intertwined in recent years with an outpouring of research involving a psychological component into how languages are taught and learnt. It is now widely acknowledged that psychological ideas can help improve learning processes and lead to better academic outcomes as teachers employ methods that take into account the social, emotional and cognitive processes of their students. At its heart, psychology helps us to better understand human behaviour, and it therefore holds important clues about why learners act in the way that they do. My own experiences as a language educator, and later as a researcher, bear this out. When I arrived in Japan over twenty years ago to take up a new job teaching English at one of the country's national universities, I was at first puzzled and then frustrated by the lack of oral participation my students showed in class. Initially, I was persuaded that their silence must have been down purely to Japanese sociocultural factors (e.g. as a way of showing respect in the presence of someone senior – how wrong I was about that!). It was only later when I decided to investigate the phenomenon in depth for a large-scale study involving nearly a thousand learners (King, 2013) that I realized that a fair proportion of the reticence I was encountering was actually linked to students' socially situated feelings of anxiety. Leafing through a manual of mental disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) one day in my university's library, I was struck by how perfectly my study's data, based on classroom observations and interviews with silent learners, mapped onto the manual's description of social anxiety disorder. This lightbulb moment led me to adapt Clark and Well's (1995) cognitive model of anxiety for subsequent publications (e.g. King, 2014) to explain how an anxious language learner's shaky sense of self combines with increased watchfulness, negative thought processes and avoidance behaviours to support his or her avoidance of classroom talk.

I ought to make it clear at this point that it would be a mistake to consider all anxious language learners to be in some way mentally ill and in need of treatment. Feeling apprehensive when confronted with certain foreign language tasks in the public forum of the classroom is perfectly natural, and experiencing negative emotions is all part of the human experience. However, high levels of anxiety can potentially wreak havoc with a student's in-class performance and ultimately impact their academic achievement, particularly where communicating in the target language is concerned.

Therefore, while it would be unrealistic and an overreaction to expect language teachers to be also trained counsellors skilled at psychological medical interventions (after all, they have enough on their plate with often difficult working conditions and a lack of support; see Sulis et al., 2022), arming them with some easy-to-use practical techniques to combat anxiety and some hands-on psychology-based ideas to support anxious learners is highly advisable. This book achieves this aim with aplomb. The editors, Neil Curry and Kate Maher, have brought together an impressive team of contributors hailing from various parts of the world and working in a variety of different educational contexts. Some are just dynamically starting their research careers, while others are already well established and respected for their psychology-based language education work. What they all share is a desire to provide readers of this volume with straightforward, practical activities based on sound psychological concepts that will motivate teachers to improve the affective aspects of their pedagogy. The book is positively bulging with helpful hints and advice accompanying chapters on such issues as language anxiety causes, cognitive techniques, visualization and imagination, positive learning environments, learner well-being and so on. I am certain this well-informed and accessible collection will become a 'must read' text for anyone interested in how psychological theory and educational realities meet within the sphere of language learning.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Kate Maher and Neil Curry

For some foreign language learners, moments of success in their language learning journeys can feel far and few between despite hard work and commitment to studying the target language. Anxiety related to language learning has been defined as 'the worry and negative emotional reaction when learning and using' the target language (Gregersen and MacIntyre, 2014: 3). Foreign language anxiety (FLA) can distort how some learners perceive their abilities (Gregersen and Horwitz, 2002; Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986), and the resulting negative emotions may mean they cannot take advantage of communicative opportunities (Bao, 2014; King, 2014). Most language teachers will likely work with students who experience these inhibitive effects of FLA, which is one reason why FLA arguably remains one of the most significant research interests within second language acquisition (SLA) and a major affective factor in language learning (Daubney, Dewaele and Gkonou, 2017).

Over the past four decades of FLA research, a substantial focus has been placed on developing classroom interventions to support anxious language learners. Young's (1991) seminal text demonstrated the importance of creating a positive classroom atmosphere. In recent years, approaches aimed at increasing learners' positive emotions and making them feel more at ease when using the language have been adapted from positive psychology (Oxford, 2017; Williams, Puchta and Mercer, 2021). Toyama and Yamazaki's (2021) comprehensive systematic review of FLA classroom interventions highlights the vast range of approaches, including meditation, affirmations and relaxation techniques. This volume builds on this existing body of work by creating a practical guide on using psychology-based approaches to support learners who experience FLA.

The motivation for putting together this edited volume was to make the theories accessible and encourage the practical application of these theories by sharing interventions and strategies as a collection of classroom activities. Moreover, we hope this collection of activities contributes to the discussion that Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) initiated with their 'pioneering' (Horwitz, 2017: 31) conceptualization of FLA and diagnostic instrument, the Foreign Language Class Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). Identifying FLA in the classroom is just the first step in getting the discussion started with learners and supporting them in managing this negative emotion (Horwitz, 2017). We hope this book contributes to the discussion by providing teachers with techniques and strategies they can use with their learners.

Focus of this book

The activities in this book can be adapted to support learners with general FLA and skill-specific FLA (listening, reading, speaking and writing). However, most of the activities are directed towards speaking-related FLA. In the foreign language classroom context, anxiety has been identified as having significant potential to affect oral performance (King, 2014; Woodrow, 2006). Also, previous studies show that speaking tends to be the most anxiety-inducing of all the skill-specific anxieties in language learning, which suggests that learners who do not experience general FLA can become anxious when faced with speaking situations (Gregersen and Horwitz, 2002; Horwitz, 2010). So, this book builds on the growing body of research looking at interventions to encourage more oral participation in the classroom (Curry, 2014; King et al., 2020). Furthermore, as teachers who have worked with motivated and proficient language learners who became despondent at not being able to perform as well as they hoped due to their FLA, we felt compelled to create activities that might help give them, and others like them, a confidence boost.

Building language learners' confidence is also at the heart of this volume. Although there are arguments that FLA can be facilitative and 'motivate' learners (Ohata, 2005), we take the side of Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) and other researchers (Oxford, 2017; Toyama and Yamazaki, 2019; Young, 1991) who believe in the importance of supporting learners to overcome the debilitative effects of FLA and whose interventions are aimed at foreign language anxiety reduction (FLAR). As Horwitz (2017: 40) so persuasively argues, learners can often mask their anxiety with behaviours that make them appear unmotivated. In that case, it would be better to focus on increasing their motivation rather than risk not recognizing their FLA or using anxiety to engage them. The classroom is often the main opportunity where learners can develop their language skills, so teachers must create a supportive environment where their speaking confidence can develop too.

So, as well as usually being the primary learning space for content and skills, we believe that the language classroom should also function as a place for acquiring tools to manage FLA and other affective factors that influence language learning. Studies have demonstrated that affective strategies have the potential to reduce FLA and, therefore, should be taught alongside linguistic knowledge and skills (Oxford, 2017; MacIntyre, Gregersen and Mercer, 2019; Toyama and Yamazaki, 2021). Moreover, some students are unaware of affective influences or dismiss them, focusing on acquiring linguistic knowledge and skills. However, a consequence of this can be that they negatively attribute low proficiency or a nervous performance to having a lack of ability. In our experience, when talking with nervous learners about how to improve, common responses have been, 'I will learn 200 words a week, so I know more vocabulary', or 'I will study grammar more so that I make fewer mistakes'. Of course, these types of goals can be effective in helping learners gain speaking confidence. However, these are not always appropriate strategies as the learner could be overlooking other, more powerful, underlying factors related to affective influences (Maher, 2021).

In raising awareness of the importance of the affective factors that influence language learning, we also hope that this book contributes to the ongoing development of the psychology of language learning (PLL). This rapidly growing field applies theory and practical approaches from psychology to language learning and teaching (Gregersen and Mercer, 2022). The interdisciplinary nature of PLL suggests numerous inspiring and insightful opportunities for the context of language learning, broadening the possibilities for gaining knowledge and the development of interventions in the language classroom. The diverse range of perspectives is a characteristic that we have tried to emanate in this volume, incorporating approaches from engagement and flow theory, cognitive-behavioural theory, visualization and positive psychology.

The target audience

We hope this book will interest foreign language instructors – from trainees to experienced teachers – working in secondary schools, universities and adult education. The book's activities are grounded in existing theories within the field of the psychology of language learning and are presented in a way so that readers who may not be overly familiar with these theories will find them accessible. The contributors in this volume work in various educational contexts and come from different national, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Each person has included elements of personal experience in their chapter. By describing the reasons and events which gave rise to the development of the activities, we hope that readers will be able to

recognize their own experiences when reading the entries and realize how they can put the activities into practice in their contexts.

How to use this book

The book is organized into five parts, each with a different psychology-based approach. The parts contain chapters that introduce theoretical background in an accessible way and practical, easy-to-follow classroom activities to reduce FLA and increase learners' confidence when using the language. Each author has also provided some background explanation on why they use their chosen approach to give context so you can picture how it might be a good fit for your teaching context and students.

We recommend that you start by using the instruments in Part One to assess what levels of FLA are present in your class and what the possible causes are in your context. Starting here would be especially beneficial if you are at the beginning of a course with new students, have concerns about your class or individual student, or if this is your first step in investigating the FLA of your students. Once you have established an initial understanding of your students' FLA, choose a section from Parts Two to Five with an approach depending on your context, interests and the needs of your students. Ideally, your students' responses to the questionnaires in Part One will help inform which approach and activity to choose first. Table 1.1 is intended to act as a quick guide to help you navigate the book. We hope this volume will be a helpful resource to have next to you when planning lessons.

TABLE 1.1 Summary guide

Part One. Assessing FLA: Identifying FLA and causes in your context
Two instruments for assessing FLA and identifying potential underlying factors causing it. These instruments are also intended to prompt discussions with students about their experiences of FLA and to inform which activities from Parts two to five to use. Both can be easily adapted for different contexts.

Chapter title (shortened)	Key points of chapter
2. Identifying emotions and thoughts	• Questionnaire instrument • Identify which situations make students anxious and why • Assess what coping strategies students use in these situations • Encourages students to reflect in detail
3. You are not alone	• Questionnaire instrument • Includes a speaking activity • Raises students' awareness of FLA and that they are not the only ones to feel nervous • Quick and simple to use

Part Two. The classroom environment: Creating a positive learning space
These activities aim to create a positive and engaging learning atmosphere. The classroom context is an important factor in FLA, and some class groups need support to develop better interpersonal relationships and rapport to facilitate effective language learning practice tasks.

4. Creating a sense of belonging	• Useful as an ice-breaker activity to help create rapport • Boosts self-esteem by talking about themselves • Speaking activity that most teachers will find familiar and simple to set up • Appropriate in contexts where students are not familiar with communicative activities
5. Student-centred socially motivating classrooms	• Builds rapport and trust among classmates • Student-centred activity to create class rules for how to support one another • Class discussion can be made into a speaking practice activity • Adaptable for different contexts and ages
6. Flowing classrooms	• Uses elements of 'flow' theory to make the classroom a space where students can more easily become engaged • Practical steps on how to incorporate 'flow' into language learning tasks • Simple tweaks that can easily be applied to existing lesson plans and other activities
7. Making speaking tasks emotionally engaging	• Creates a more relaxing classroom atmosphere to build rapport • Aims to increase students' emotional engagement in their language learning • Useful in contexts where students are not familiar with communicative tasks or group work • Ideas on how to apply 'flow' to language practice tasks

Part Three. Cognitive techniques: Thinking through anxiety
How an individual interprets their environment determines how they feel about it and what action they take. Cognitive-based approaches emphasize the importance of how students think about using a foreign language and show them how their thoughts can be managed to reduce their anxiety.

8. The art of cognitive distancing	• Teaches affirmations as a coping strategy that students can use independently when needed • Useful for lecture-style or content classes where it may be hard to incorporate support activities or other interventions • Short and simple, with minimal preparation • Can be used as a base for discussion activities with higher-level learners in the L2
9. The confidence-building diary	• Boosts learner autonomy as can be used independently by students • Can be used with a class or individual students • Adaptable to different contexts and individual needs of students • Useful for classes where there are anxious and more confident students as benefits both

10. Facing worries head on	• Facilitates sharing and creation of co-constructed ideas to build a bank of coping strategies • Encourages students to test and evaluate coping strategies through reflection • Collaborative discussions can be used as speaking practice activities
11. Attributional retraining techniques	• Encourages students to develop positive-growth mindsets rather than focusing on blaming themselves • Provides students with positive ways to perceive themselves and their performance • Structured approach to objective thinking that can be used independently
12. Adopting a rational approach to building confidence	• Facilitates rapport among classmates as they become aware they are not the only ones who are nervous when speaking • Develops balanced thinking and awareness of the influence of negative thoughts • Can be used with classes or individual students, adapted to situations that worry them
13. Identifying FLA triggers	• Cognitive-behavioural theory-based technique for identifying what factors influence individual students' FLA • Creates an individualized plan to make an informed decision when choosing coping strategies • Students become more aware of their individual needs, making coping strategies and learning goals more effective

Part Four. Visualization techniques: Imagining confidence
Guided by teachers, students are introduced to visualization techniques that prompt them to imagine and focus on positive experiences of using a foreign language, helping to reduce their FLA.

14. An imagery-focused mindfulness approach	• Students are guided to focus on positive physical experiences and imagery to improve their performance • Can be used independently as a coping strategy once students have learnt the technique • Can be used for a variety of scenarios/activities, and situations, depending on students' needs • Can be used in larger classes
15. Rewrite your inner script	• Positive visualization technique for reducing public speaking anxiety, helping to boost confidence in tasks such as presentations • Promotes group bonding by sharing ideas for coping strategies • Students reflect on the technique and personalize it for independent use • Can be used as a regular feature in class for various speaking tasks