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## Foreign Language Anxiety in the English Classroom: Towards a Deeper Understanding

### ABSTRACT

Classrooms can be an anxiety-inducing environment for any student, but a number of students suffer from anxiety specific to language classrooms. The Horwitz Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale may be used to identify the existence of this specific type of anxiety in language classrooms (Horwitz, E., Horwitz, M., & Cope, J. 1986). I administered a Japanese translation of the questionnaire to 95 university students of which 85 provided valid answers. The answers identified that there may be a problem with anxiety in my classrooms. This article serves as a reflection on my presentation at the LD30 conference in October 2023 in which I discussed the concept of foreign language anxiety, showed selected results of my survey, and offered some possible solutions to identifying anxiety in the language classroom and ways in which teachers can adapt their lessons to be more inclusive of the most anxious students.

**Keywords:** foreign language anxiety, learner development, teacher development, action research

Anxiety in the language classroom seems to be an ever-present problem no matter the level of institution I work at. Learners who are just beginning their studies in English may be anxious about speaking in front of their peers for fear of embarrassment or ridicule. It might be easy to assume then that motivated learners who show great success in language learning may not suffer from anxiety in the same way. However, from my experience teaching intermediate and advanced learners, as the demands of the language classroom increase, the fear of embarrassment or ridicule may also increase, as these students may feel they have more to lose. Having said this, some of my most energetic and motivated students have been streamed into the lowest class of their institution, yet still they openly profess to enjoy English. This paradox has puzzled me for a long time and was the reason I chose to focus on anxiety among language learners towards the end of my postgraduate studies and, indeed, for the presentation that I did at the LD30 Conference at Gakushuin University in October 2023. My experience at the conference in some ways mirrors my research. No matter how many times I present at a conference, I find that there are still some anxious feelings before every presentation. In this reflection piece, I will first introduce foreign language classroom anxiety and Horwitz's foreign language classroom anxiety scale. I will then give a brief summary of the results of the foreign language classroom anxiety scale that I administered to 95 of my students followed by a discussion of the problems that my students appeared to have. I will offer some suggestions on how to alleviate anxiety in the language classroom and end with my conclusions.

## FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM ANXIETY

When the audience members began to enter the room for my LD30 presentation, I felt anxious at the thought of making a mistake or not being able to convey my thoughts correctly. This fear of embarrassment or ridicule seems similar to what my students may feel in the classroom, but the premise of my research is that there is an anxiety that is unique to or exacerbated by the foreign language classroom. I began the presentation by introducing the concept of foreign language classroom anxiety. Foreign language classroom anxiety was defined by Horwitz (1986) as a “distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning.” From this definition, we can already see that anxiety is a complex emotion, which may be exacerbated by many factors unique to language classrooms. In practice, I have found (and I am sure that you have too) that many students stall when it comes to producing language in English classes, especially when it involves being in front of other people. For this reason, Horwitz (1986), in the same article that she defined foreign language classroom anxiety, created a corresponding scale, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, of 33 likert questions to determine whether a learner was suffering from an anxiety brought on by the language classroom itself. The test was designed to measure the effect of three factors: test anxiety, communication apprehension, and fear of negative evaluation. For the sake of brevity, I can say that test anxiety did not seem to present a major problem for my students, so I was only concerned with communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation for this presentation.

## DISPLAYS OF ANXIETY IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

I continued the presentation by introducing how anxiety may be observed. There are certain ways that anxiety displays in the classroom that may not be obvious at first glance. Gregerson (2005) identified behaviours in anxious students such as nervous gestures, twiddling thumbs, and self touching. These could be considered to be signs of anxiety because they are unrelated to and therefore do not enhance communication. Facial expressions may also give clues as to the anxious state of students. Students avoiding eye contact and focussing their attention elsewhere might be doing so to avoid the “threat” of a teacher’s persistent questioning. What seems to be apparent is that students who are making nervous gestures or avoiding eye contact may in fact be succumbing to a sort of negative arousal to cope with an unpleasant anxious feeling. Initially, teachers may feel that students who play with their phones are being rude, but when considered under the concept of negative arousal it might be easy to see how they could be showing signs of anxiety. Mobile phones are quite useful for an anxious student as they give them somewhere to focus their eyes (avoiding eye contact) and something for them to distract their hands (something to touch). For some students, this could be a coping mechanism to distract from negative or anxious thoughts and feelings. In my classes, I have observed some students who show these behaviours, so I decided to administer the foreign language classroom anxiety scale to identify any possible anxiety.

## WHAT I FOUND OUT

I administered a Japanese translation of the Horwitz Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale to 95 of my students at two universities in Saitama and Chiba in April 2023. I administered the survey online using a Google form and I received 85 valid responses. The students are considered to be beginner level by both institutions, with most having a TOEIC score under 300. Nine students refused to do the survey, and one result was invalid. From the 33 questions on the FLCAS I chose to look more closely at three questions for this presentation: Q7, Q11, and Q30. These questions received the strongest response of the results and give clear insights into the students anxieties linked to distorted appraisals. The results for these questions can be seen in Table 1. A response of one suggests a strong agreement, and a response of five suggests a strong disagreement with the statements in the questions.

Table 1: Selected results from my implementation of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (based on Horwitz et al. 1986)

	Q7	Q11	Q30
Mode	1.000	5.000	1.000
Median	2.000	4.000	2.000
Mean	2.200	4.071	2.083
Std. Deviation	1.223	1.033	1.164

**Key:**

Q7. I keep thinking that other students are better at English than I am.

Q11. I don't understand why some people get so upset about English class.

Q30. I am overwhelmed by the number of grammar rules you have to learn to speak English.

A short summary of the results suggests that there was an overall anxious feeling among a majority of students, with a subgroup of particularly anxious students. Further analysis of the results may offer some interesting insights. In response to question seven, "I keep thinking that other students are better at English than I am," students responded quite strongly with an average response of two. This suggests that a large group of students appraise the abilities of their peers as better than their own. The mode of this question is 1 which suggests that a not insignificant number of students feel this very strongly. What strikes me as interesting about this response is that, if students are not willing to produce English freely in front of others, they may not be basing their appraisal of others' abilities on something they have seen in class. They might be basing their opinions based on an idea that they have created.

Question 11 shows that students strongly disagree with the proposition "I don't understand why some people get so upset about English class." This suggests that many students are well aware of reasons why some students are anxious during English classes and also that peers are very aware of what is going on around them rather than being consumed with their own anxiety. It may also suggest that students are very perceptive of anxious behavioural cues in the classroom, which may be an asset to a teacher who is looking to make the classroom a less anxious environment.

Question 30 provoked the strongest response of the three questions selected for this presentation, this time with students agreeing that the grammar burden was overwhelming for them. Again, the mode of the results was one, suggesting that there is a particularly anxious group among the students.

## REFLECTING ON THE RESULTS

What do these results say about the prevalence of anxiety in my English classrooms? I can say with certainty that anxiety presents a problem for the majority of my students. However, the degree to which individual students may be suffering from anxiety and how this impacts their performance requires further investigation and deeper reflection. I therefore find myself concerned with two particular points:

1. Why are students so anxious about the ability of other students when production in my classrooms is limited?
2. Why are students overwhelmed by the amount of grammar rules in English despite having undertaken six years of English study?

Generally, anxiety is contrasted with fear in that the threat is not usually known, so an inability to appraise accurately may contribute to stress. My initial answer to both these questions, then, is appraisal. Students in my English classrooms appear to be overestimating the ability of others, overestimating the amount of work required to learn English, and underestimating their own ability. In short, they do not seem to be able to appraise the situation around them accurately. This introduces an unknown element to the English classroom and exacerbates anxious thoughts and feelings. The reasons for this problem may not be readily apparent, but the survey results do offer some insights.

First, let us look at the first question from above. A majority of students showed signs of anxiety when asked about assessing the ability of other students, but is their appraisal rational? If students are taking an English class, then we can assume that they are not proficient users of the language, so they probably do not have the ability to assess another student's utterances for accuracy. What, then, could students be basing their ideas on? Some students, as well as engaging in coping behaviours, may actually be constructing ideas about the classroom to reinforce their beliefs. Perhaps there are confident students in the class who the teacher can rely on to answer questions, and these students are called upon more readily. This may give the perception that those students are more capable, as they are likely to be praised by some teachers despite their answer not being absolutely perfect. An anxious student may then develop the idea that these confident students are more capable than them as a way to avoid volunteering. This has the unintended effect of students not actually being able to measure their capabilities, however, so it may result in a vicious cycle in which the student continuously retreats from producing in front of others, but also has fewer opportunities to test their ability and receive feedback. In short, the students may create the idea of themselves as less capable as a coping mechanism, which in turn becomes a sincere belief.

The second question presents an equally puzzling problem. The majority of university students in Japan will have had at least six years of mandatory English education. The universities I work for are both private, and the associated junior high schools and high schools that most of the students went to have three or four lesson hours in English every week. It is quite plausible that someone could become a proficient speaker of English with this amount of education, but the students that I surveyed expressed a strong anxiety towards the amount of grammar rules required to learn English, suggesting that they were not confident in their ability. Reflecting upon this, I wondered if the way of teaching can cause students to poorly evaluate what is expected of them. This is something that is beyond the scope of the FLCAS, but it is an area I have a strong interest in and something I wish to pursue by doing further research. Many junior and senior high schools in Japan are known to use a grammar translation approach known as *yakudoku* which is considered to help students prepare for their entrance exams for university. Indeed, the schools associated with these two universities use this method which prioritises the teaching of complex grammar and vocabulary at the expense of production practice, particularly in terms of speaking. Some students may indeed see success on the English sections of their exams and may evaluate themselves highly. Universities in Japan, however, are expected to prepare students for the world of work, so the focus is often on all-English lessons with a non-Japanese teacher and an expectation that the students share their ideas in groups or presentations in front of their peers. It might be no surprise, then, that students feel overwhelmed by the demands of university education if they are confronted with a completely new style of teaching that expects them to use previously neglected skills. This mismatch may be a cause of anxiety, as students are no longer able to appraise themselves by their previous yardstick, causing them to overestimate what is required of them.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR ALLEVIATING ANXIETY IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM**

Anxiety may be an ever-present problem in language classrooms, but it may not always be easy to spot, especially if the students are of a different culture to the teacher. The first step in any intervention might be to identify more noticeable signs of anxiety in the language classroom. This

may be difficult, but it can improve with practice. If a student appears to be doing something that may come across as rude or disruptive, give them the benefit of the doubt and withhold judgment. If students are using their phone, does their facial expression seem interested in what is on the screen or do they appear stressed? Are they interacting with the phone intently or are they just looking for a way to keep their fingers occupied? There may be a very subtle difference between a student who genuinely does not care and a student who is overwhelmed by the demands of the language classroom. Also, my implementation of the survey identified that students may be very aware of the anxious feelings of other students, so this may be reflected in the class atmosphere. If students are unwilling to speak, some may interpret this as laziness or an unwillingness to interact. However, this may actually be a sign that students are anxious and might require a little more guidance in what they do. Next time, if students are silent in the classroom, maybe it is a sign that students need more information or explicit instruction for them to be able to appraise the situation accurately and act accordingly.

There may also be ways that teachers can structure classes over the semester to alleviate anxiety without direct intervention. Rather than asking students to come straight to the front of the classroom or to present their answers to a question without preparation, demands could be slowly increased over the course of a semester. In the first lesson, students could be asked to introduce themselves while sitting at their seat after being given a generous amount of time to prepare (both the words and mentally). In the next lesson, they could be asked to stand up at their desk and say a few words. Demands could be increased gradually throughout the semester until eventually students are comfortable coming to the front of the class and speaking without preparation.

As my analysis of the results determined that students may be unable to appraise accurately, it may be useful to help students do this. They may be given five minutes at the end of the class to reflect upon their progress that day. This can be structured in such a way that students are guided into assessing the evidence for their assumptions and critically evaluating their beliefs. They could be asked to answer questions such as “How many times did I volunteer to answer a question in class today?” or “How well did I understand this lesson compared to last week?” These simple questions may offer students a chance to understand that they are indeed making progress and English learning might be a steep challenge, but perhaps not as overwhelming as they had thought.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Coming to the end of the presentation, I felt a sense of relief that I had been able to share my research with the audience who seemed to have a keen interest in what I had to say. The audience members were enthusiastic with their questions. One member seemed to have a strong interest in using my Japanese translation of the FLCAS at their own school, which of course I was happy to oblige. The response to my presentation allayed any anxiety I had at the start of the presentation, and it made me empathise with my own students in the sense that it is very difficult to put yourself out there in front of others, especially so when speaking a foreign language. However, putting myself and my research out there offered me the chance to meet like-minded and supportive people who helped me consider my research from different perspectives and undertake the critical reflection that is required to become a better researcher. Creating the same supportive space for my students to undertake these challenges, alleviate their anxious feelings, and become more confident learners is a new priority after this experience.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, the results of my research suggest there is a general feeling of anxiety in my classrooms. I identified that the students' inability to appraise themselves and the situation around themselves accurately may be a primary cause of their anxiety. This may be caused by their previous English education and a conflict that appears when they enter university. The suggestions I offered involved

teachers being more empathetic to students and withholding judgement. Teachers could also stage activities to introduce anxiety-inducing tasks gradually. The students themselves may also be asked to think critically about their performance in the classroom at the end of each class to encourage them to appraise their abilities better. Anxiety may be a common problem in language classrooms, but if teachers and students adapt, there may be more solutions to the problem than first thought.

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