

Foreign Language Anxiety in Education

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Abstract

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) poses a pervasive challenge for language learners venturing into the acquisition of a new language. Manifesting as heightened fear and anxiety, it significantly impacts the learning process. This comprehensive review aims to explore the origins, consequences, and aftermath of FLA, encompassing both traditional in-person learning and the virtual realm of online education, i.e., within the context of modern educational approaches, including distance and online learning. The narrative navigates the intricate interplay between anxiety and language acquisition, underscoring the pressing need for additional empirical evidence. The study emphasizes elucidating the origins and consequences of FLA and its impact on language learners in diverse educational settings. Highlighting the urgent requirement for empirical evidence, the review provides essential guidance for the development of holistic methods to nurture and support language learners as they progress toward linguistic proficiency. Finally, the review concludes by offering recommendations for future research endeavors pertaining to FLA.

Keywords

Education, Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), Language Education, Language Learning Technologies, Modern Learning Environments

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INTRODUCTION

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is a common challenge faced by many language learners when they embark on the journey of acquiring a new language; it encompasses a range of emotions, including unease, fear, and nervousness, which can manifest during the process of language acquisition. This anxiety can exert a profound influence on learners, impacting their motivation, self-confidence, and overall language proficiency.

Anxiety, when viewed from a broader perspective, is a complex condition that can disrupt various aspects of an individual's life, occasionally jeopardizing their overall well-being (Horwitz et al., 1986). Its effects ripple through diverse domains, including social interactions, career trajectories, and educational pursuits. Furthermore, anxiety presents a significant hurdle in the realm of second language acquisition (SLA), as highlighted by the work of MacIntyre and Gardner (1994). Over the past four decades, numerous scholars have explored the intricate relationship between anxiety and the process of acquiring a second or foreign language. However, despite its profound significance, a universally accepted definition of this psychological state remains elusive, with scholars yet to converge on a comprehensive definition that encompasses all its facets, as observed by Horwitz et al. (1986) and MacIntyre and Gardner (1991).

In recent decades, psychologists and researchers have made concerted efforts to define anxiety from various perspectives. This diversity in potential definitions has created a landscape where early research on the influence of anxiety on SLA produces divergent findings. Scovel (1978) contends that anxiety, as a construct, is intricately entwined with multiple factors, making its precise measurement a formidable challenge.

In this respect, the initial incongruence in research findings can be traced back to the 1970s when pivotal studies were conducted by Chastain (1975), Backman (1976), and Kleinmann (1977). Chastain unraveled a complex web of correlations, ranging from positive to negative, and even non-significant, between anxiety and proficiency in a second language (L2). Backman's investigation, as discussed by Williams (1991), uncovered a paradox where two students, displaying the lowest and highest levels of anxiety, demonstrated the least progress in proficiency development. Meanwhile, Kleinmann's observations suggested that students with a moderate degree of anxiety were less inclined to avoid situations that required specific English language structures compared to their counterparts, hinting at the potential benefits of manageable anxiety for language learners. Thus, Scovel (1978) advanced the notion that the disparities in these study findings are rooted in the absence of a meticulous and all-encompassing definition of anxiety.

The detrimental impact of anxiety on SLA is widely recognized and maintains a central role among the factors influencing language acquisition. Accordingly, as the quest for a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping foreign language acquisition (FLA) persists, this literature review aims to shed light on various facets of this phenomenon. It will commence by providing concise definitions of anxiety in both its general and language-specific contexts. Subsequent sections will navigate through prominent theories and models that underpin FLA. Since this review will delve into the

roots, effects, and aftermath of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) in both traditional in-person contexts and the digital landscape of online education. In this endeavor, it will construct a comprehensive narrative that intricately explores the connection between anxiety and language acquisition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding Anxiety: Definitions and Classification

Anxiety, encompassing both psychological and physiological responses to perceived threats or stressors, is characterized by a spectrum of emotions, including unease, apprehension, fear, and tension. This intricate phenomenon manifests in diverse forms, comprising conditions like generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and specific phobias.

In other words, within educational contexts, a distinct variant of anxiety emerges: test anxiety. It closely associates with academic assessment scenarios and possesses the potential to wield detrimental effects upon students. Its impact extends beyond academic performance, affecting overall well-being and the quality of the educational journey.

Symptoms of test anxiety span cognitive dimensions, featuring excessive worrying, difficulties in maintaining concentration, and engagement in negative self-talk. Additionally, it gives rise to physiological manifestations, including an elevated heart rate, perspiration, and trembling. Thus, the recognition of anxiety, particularly within the sphere of academic evaluation, assumes critical importance for both educators and students alike as they endeavor to enhance academic performance and enrich the educational experience (Wijaya, 2022).

Furthermore, according to Webster's Dictionary, "anxiety" is precisely defined as a state of apprehensive uneasiness linked to an impending situation. Moreover, in line with Hilgard et al. (cited in Scovel, 1978), anxiety is described as a mental state characterized by elusive fear and apprehension, often indirectly tied to specific situations, places, or objects. Within the realm of psychology, two overarching theories recurrently serve to illuminate anxiety: the expectancy-value theory of anxiety and Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, introduced in 1991. These theoretical frameworks seek to predict individual responses to anxiety by considering both the prevailing context and the perceived ability to confront imminent threats. Pekrun (1992) and Sardi (2022) contributes to this discourse by proposing that individuals evaluate threatening situations, subsequently influencing when they experience tension and anxiety. Conversely, Bandura (1991) posits that when individuals encounter a threat, the degree of anxiety they experience is predominantly influenced by their self-perception of their competency to effectively manage the situation. He also underscores the pivotal role of self-esteem in mitigating the impact of anxiety. That is, a learner's anxiety level is shaped not solely by their perception of self-efficacy but also by their assessment of perceived threats. These theories collectively underscore the significance of self-efficacy and the evaluation of threatening circumstances in understanding anxiety.

Psychologists further classify anxiety into two primary categories: trait anxiety and state anxiety. Trait anxiety, as elucidated by Spielberger in 1983, represents a stable, enduring, and ingrained personality trait. In contrast, state anxiety is a transient form of anxiety typically triggered by temporary stimuli, such as public speaking engagements or exam situations. As for this, Alpert and Haber (1960) further categorize anxiety into debilitating and facilitating types. Some scholars, including Brown (2007), Elliot (1999), Horwitz et al. (1986), and MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), contend that debilitating anxiety hinders students' learning processes and adversely affects their performance when using their second language. Conversely, facilitating anxiety can enhance a learner's focus on a task, potentially leading to improved performance in the classroom, during examinations, or while employing their second language.

Another category, known as situation-specific anxiety, was introduced by MacIntyre and Gardner (1991), sharing similarities with Spielberger's state anxiety. Situation-specific anxiety is a persistent form of anxiety triggered by specific circumstances, such as anxiety arising from a lack of knowledge or fear of public speaking (Ellis, 1994). This type of anxiety is defined as the apprehension experienced by English learners (ELs) when required to complete an activity in a language in which they are not proficient (e.g., Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Hasanzadeh et al., 2023). While foreign language anxiety (FLA) was once considered a form of trait anxiety, contemporary research acknowledges it as an independent, multidimensional, and distinct form of anxiety with its unique characteristics (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA): Theoretical Frameworks and Concepts

In the realm of literature focused on delving into Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), various theoretical frameworks and models have been utilized to investigate and clarify this complex phenomenon. This study delves into several theoretical models and hypotheses that pertain to FLA, which include:

- 1) Krashen's Input or Monitor Model (1976, 1981), alongside the associated Affective Filter Hypothesis.
- 2) The Tobias Model (1979).
- 3) The Theory of Foreign Language Anxiety proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986).

Krashen's Input-Processing Model and the Theory of Emotional Filter

Stephen Krashen, a prominent figure in the field of second language acquisition, has made significant contributions to our comprehension of the factors that influence language learning. One of his noteworthy propositions, the Input Hypothesis (1976), draws a distinction between second language acquisition and second language learning. According to Krashen (1976, 1981), "acquisition" transpires unconsciously and effortlessly, while "learning" is a conscious and labor-intensive process. Typically, second languages are learned in formal classroom settings, necessitating conscious attention and effort. In contrast, acquisition occurs naturally with minimal anxiety. Krashen argues that even second languages can be acquired naturally when used in real-

life contexts. Nevertheless, he emphasizes the value of language learning, as it allows learners to monitor their progress (Krashen, 1981).

Within the framework of the Input Hypothesis, Krashen asserts that learning takes place when new information is presented to learners at a level slightly beyond what they have previously grasped or absorbed. He articulates this concept as "I + 1," with "I" denoting the input. Ideally, learning occurs by adding only "1" unit of new information to what has already been assimilated. If the input proves excessively challenging, it can induce anxiety, potentially impeding the learning process. Expanding upon Krashen's framework, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) formulated a three-part model: Input, Process, and Output. In this model, the input corresponds to Krashen's Input Hypothesis. The input phase involves the initial reception of information, followed by processing, during which learners analyze new information. Anxiety can disrupt memorization during this phase. Finally, the output phase encompasses language production, with anxiety potentially hindering learners from accessing the information they processed earlier. MacIntyre and Gardner observed that anxious students exhibited lower proficiency levels and encountered greater difficulties in applying their knowledge of the target language.

Also, Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1981), building upon the groundwork laid by Dulay and Burt (1977), is particularly pertinent to the study of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). Affective filters include elements like motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety, constituting an imperceptible psychological barrier that hinders the language learning process. These filters, exacerbated in artificial linguistic environments such as classrooms, give rise to a mental obstacle that obstructs the assimilation of new information. Krashen's conceptual framework has provided a basis for subsequent theories within the field of second language acquisition.

The anxiety model proposed by Tobias

In 1979, Tobias introduced a comprehensive anxiety model that delves into the influence of anxiety on the instructional learning process. It is noteworthy that this model extends beyond addressing Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and provides a framework for understanding the broader learning process. Tobias identifies three crucial stages where anxiety can significantly impact learning: (a) preprocessing, (b) during processing, and (c) post-processing (prior to generating output).

In the initial preprocessing phase, individuals experiencing heightened anxiety often find themselves dividing their focus between the immediate task and concerns unrelated to the task at hand. These concerns may involve apprehensions about test outcomes or a fear of judgment from others. Such distractions can negatively impact their performance. According to Tobias' model, offering students a way to review the initial input, such as replaying an audio or video prompt or having access to pertinent texts, can be beneficial for those with high anxiety levels.

During the processing phase, three pivotal factors significantly influence the cognitive processing of task instructions: "difficulty, reliance on memory, and task organization" (Tobias, 1986). Anxiety is believed to have a more pronounced negative

impact when dealing with tasks of higher difficulty. Consequently, simplifying the task can enhance cognitive processing for highly anxious students. Additionally, depending on short- or intermediate-term memory to retain information can increase anxiety levels, ultimately impairing performance. The third factor influencing the processing stage is organization. According to Tobias' (1986) model, well-structured stimuli lead to lower anxiety levels and, consequently, improved performance among learners.

Lastly, the post-processing stage is influenced by interference in the retrieval process of previously acquired content. In other words, students may have mastered the material, but anxious learners may struggle to recall this knowledge due to the fear of judgment or the prospect of providing incorrect answers.

The FLA theory developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope

In 1986, Horwitz et al. presented the Theory of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), providing a precise definition of FLA as a unique form of anxiety specific to language learning contexts. They define FLA as "a complex interplay of self-perceptions, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors related to the distinctive nature of language learning within a classroom setting" (Horwitz et al., 1986). Importantly, they underscore that FLA is not a mere generic manifestation of academic anxiety but rather a distinct experience primarily encountered in foreign language classrooms, even by students who do not experience anxiety in other academic situations.

Within their theoretical framework, Horwitz et al. (1986), identify three closely associated situation-specific anxieties directly linked to FLA: (a) communication apprehension (CA), (b) fear of negative evaluation (FNE), and (c) test anxiety (TA). They emphasize that FLA is a separate construct from these anxieties, although they share some connections.

The assessment of anxiety in applied psychology involves three principal methods: (a) observation of participant behaviors (behavioral tests), (b) participants' self-reported fears, and (c) physiological measurements such as monitoring blood pressure or sweat responses (Scovel, 1978). Evaluating the anxiety experienced by students in foreign language classrooms presented challenges due to individual variability, and the other assessment methods were less quantifiable. A significant contribution of Horwitz and her colleagues (1986) was the development of an instrument to measure the level and nature of anxiety in second or foreign language classes.

Also, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) is a 33-item Likert scale that employs a 5-point rating system to gauge anxiety levels. Scores on the FLCAS range from 33 to 132 points, with highly anxious learners typically scoring higher (Horwitz et al., 1986). Many subsequent studies have adopted Horwitz and colleagues' FLA theory and scale, consistently offering empirical support for the theory. However, some research has failed to establish significant correlations among communication apprehension (CA), fear of negative evaluation (FNE), and test anxiety (TA). For instance, while Gardner and MacIntyre's (1993) findings broadly supported Horwitz and colleagues' theory, they could not identify a strong connection between test anxiety and

the other FLA components. Aida (1994) attempted to replicate the theory with a non-Western language (Japanese) and only partially confirmed FLA theory, as test anxiety did not seem closely tied to FLA.

It is important to acknowledge that FLA is not a fixed or universal construct. Its manifestation can vary depending on factors such as the language being learned, cultural influences, and individual differences among learners (Gkonou et al., 2019; Price, 1999).

The hypothesis proposed by Sparks and Ganschow known as the Linguistic Coding Differences Hypothesis (LCDH)

In 1991, Sparks and Ganschow introduced the Linguistic Coding Differences Hypothesis (LCDH), which challenges the conventional understanding of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) as proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986). They advocate for a more nuanced perspective, cautioning against attributing anxiety as the sole cause of second language learning difficulties. Sparks and Ganschow argue that Horwitz et al.'s study failed to sufficiently assess participants' native language issues and lacked a comparison group to evaluate anxiety's role in Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

In this regard, the LCDH is built upon earlier research into learning disorders related to neurolinguistic and physiological language disabilities, such as dyslexia, and the challenges faced by underachieving students in acquiring their native language. Sparks and Ganschow contend that children with subtle or overt language learning difficulties may ultimately become proficient in their first language but encounter obstacles when learning a second language.

The hypothesis is influenced by the research conducted by Vellutino and Scanlon (1986), who noted that even within native speaker populations, individuals with poor reading and writing skills encounter difficulties in processing the structure of written or spoken words. Their observation led them to suggest that skilled readers have the ability to decode semantic, syntactic, and phonological elements of language, whereas individuals with reading disabilities are limited to decoding semantic structures and lack proficiency in phonological decoding skills.

Sparks and Ganschow (1991) conducted empirical studies to explore the role of semantic, syntactic, and phonological decoding in SLA. Their research compared successful and unsuccessful English learners, examining factors like IQ, second language aptitude, and, importantly, native language reading and writing abilities. Their findings revealed that unsuccessful language learners faced challenges in phonological and syntactic dimensions but not in the semantic aspect.

While native language difficulties in phonological and syntactic areas can often be managed through compensatory strategies, these strategies become less effective when learners encounter a new and unfamiliar linguistic system, such as a second language. Therefore, they conclude that issues in second language learning should be considered within the context of learners' native language abilities and disabilities.

The introduction of the LCDH hypothesis sparked debates among FLA scholars, notably involving MacIntyre, Sparks, Horwitz, and others, with differing viewpoints on

the origins of FLA. While Sparks and Ganschow (1991) suggest that poor native language skills could lead to learning anxiety, MacIntyre and Horwitz argue that FLA is a more significant contributor to poor second language learning performance than native language disabilities.

Identifying the potential causes of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) remains a significant challenge in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Addressing these causes is essential for creating a low-anxiety learning environment. Early studies, such as Horwitz et al. (1986), identified three performance-related factors linked to FLA: (a) fear of negative evaluation, (b) communication apprehension, and (c) test anxiety. However, it is crucial to note that these factors were considered related to FLA rather than direct causes.

Over time, scholars conducted empirical studies to explore the practical aspects of FLA theories. Young (1991) identified six primary sources of anxiety for language learners, i.e., personal and interpersonal anxieties, learner beliefs about language learning, instructor beliefs about language teaching, instructor-learner interactions, classroom procedures, and language examinations. Zhang and Zhong (2012) categorized FLA causes into four broad groups: learner-induced anxiety, classroom-related anxiety, skill-specific anxiety, and society-related anxiety.

Furthermore, Onwuegbuzie et al. (1999) identified seven predictors of FLA, including age, academic accomplishments, previous language learning experience, and self-esteem. Then, Rubio (2004) emphasized self-esteem-related issues as significant FLA causes, categorizing them into student, teacher, and context-induced elements. Overall, a comprehensive examination of FLA causes reveals three overarching categories: student-centered causes, teacher and instruction-centered causes, and interaction-centered causes. These factors collectively contribute to the complex phenomenon of FLA and must be considered when developing effective strategies for reducing anxiety and promoting successful second language learning.

Causes of FLA Stemming from Students

Anxiety in language learners can be attributed to several factors originating from the students themselves, including unrealistic expectations, low self-esteem, language ability issues, and differences in learning styles.

Besides, unrealistic expectations often lead to frustration and disappointment, which are potent sources of anxiety. Many students hold the mistaken belief that they must consistently produce perfect language forms and avoid making mistakes. Research by Horwitz (2000) highlights that students often experience high levels of anxiety concerning the accuracy of their spoken sentences in the target language. Some students even doubt their innate capacity to improve in learning the target language, mistakenly believing that they lack the necessary talent. For instance, Kitano (2001) argues that setting unreasonably high standards for achieving native-like proficiency results in unrealistic and unjustifiable expectations. Conversely, some students may underestimate

the complexities of learning a foreign language, and when faced with the harsh reality of this challenging journey, they experience heightened anxiety.

Low self-esteem is another significant source of anxiety. According to Dörnyei (2005), low self-esteem arises when individuals evaluate their characteristics and achievements in a way that contradicts their self-concept. Students with low self-esteem fear judgment from teachers and peers because of this disconnect between their self-evaluation and how others perceive their language proficiency. To avoid this situation, students may choose silence as a defense mechanism, exacerbating their anxiety (Afdalia et al., 2023; Dewaele et al., 2008; Horwitz et al., 1986; Krashen, 1981; Onwuegbuzie, 1999; Young, 1991).

What is more, for some students, language learning challenges may have their roots in early childhood. As suggested by Sparks and Ganschow (1991) in their Linguistic Coding Differences Hypothesis (LCDH), language disabilities during childhood and while acquiring the native language can often be managed through compensatory strategies. However, these same issues can resurface during foreign language learning and trigger anxiety in students.

Different learning preferences and habits can also contribute to anxiety. Teaching methods that do not align with students' preferred learning styles can lead to frustration and stress. Additionally, students with a low tolerance for complexity and ambiguity may experience heightened anxiety (Ehrman, 1996; Gkonou et al., 2019; Kianinezhad, 2024).

Causes of FLA Related to Teachers and Instruction

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) can also be influenced by factors centered on teachers and instructional methods. These elements can contribute to the emergence and intensification of anxiety in foreign language learning contexts (Liu & Jackson, 2008; Young, 1991; MacIntyre & Gardner 1994).

Many anxiety-provoking situations related to language learning can be attributed directly or indirectly to teachers and instructional methods. That is, the manner in which teachers provide feedback and correct mistakes can be a significant source of anxiety (e.g., Aydin, 2008, 2016; Kruk, 2018; Naser Oteir & Nijr Al-Otaibi, 2019; Sammephet & Wanphet, 2013). Recent research has unveiled that teachers' attitudes and personalities can serve as indicators of FLA. For example, when teachers lack patience and do not provide students with adequate time to comprehend and respond to questions, students are more likely to experience increased anxiety. Instructors' beliefs about teaching and their role as educators also play a role (Young, 1991), i.e., instructors who prioritize error correction over facilitating learning can significantly contribute to students' anxiety (Young 1991; Zhang & Zhong, 2012).

Besides, teacher-centered methodologies can also contribute to FLA. Teaching strategies that do not encourage oral interaction between students and their teachers or peers can exacerbate language anxiety (Aida, 1994; Oxford, 1999). Besides, certain types of activities that foster a competitive climate, especially when students are compared to

one another, can negatively impact students' self-concept and self-esteem, potentially leading to increased anxiety (De Andrés & Arnold, 2009; Rubio, 2004).

One of the most potent sources of anxiety is evaluation, especially in the form of exams, which is often perceived as anxiety-provoking regardless of the subject. However, FLA can be intensified when evaluation assesses a skill that is not adequately taught by the teacher. For instance, when the teaching methodology emphasizes oral skills but the assessment is in a written format, or when students are unfamiliar with a specific assessment method, anxiety can increase (Rubio & Tamayo-Rodríguez, 2012; Young, 1991, Kianinezhad, 2023). Teachers with perfectionist tendencies may also transmit these attitudes to their students, further amplifying anxiety levels (Young 1991; Zhang & Zhong, 2012).

Causes of FLA Related to Society and Interaction

Peer-induced anxiety often arises from a fear of judgment or evaluation by peers, characterized by apprehension about making mistakes and a desire to avoid appearing unintelligent in front of classmates. Students often express their fear of making mistakes and the associated dread of "looking and sounding dumb" (Young, 1991, p. 429) and being judged by their peers (Gregersen, 2003). Even highly proficient students can experience this form of anxiety differently. Allwright et al. (1991) revealed in their study that some competent students feel peer pressure because their linguistic superiority may provoke jealousy and resentment among their peers. Consequently, these students may deliberately make mistakes or withdraw from class interactions, both of which can result in more anxiety-provoking situations. Moreover, excessive competitiveness among students and an undue emphasis on grades, including performance comparisons, can heighten anxiety levels (Young, 1991).

In addition, identity-related anxieties often arise from the subtractive bilingualism process, where learners perceive aspects of their ethnic identity and native language attrition as threats to their self-identity (Zhang & Zhong, 2012). Cultural factors play a significant role in FLA; differences observed across cultural groups influence beliefs, customs, communication styles, values, and behavior. Cultural backgrounds shape the types and levels of FLA experienced by students. For example, students from East Asia may have different experiences compared to those from European countries due to cultural norms and expectations regarding classroom behavior and interaction. To conclude, FLA is a complex phenomenon influenced by various factors; identifying and understanding these sources of anxiety is crucial for creating effective strategies to reduce anxiety and promote successful language learning.

Consequences of Foreign Language Anxiety

The relationship between Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and language learning difficulties has sparked debates on causality. Some researchers argue that FLA is a consequence of language learning challenges (Ganschow et al., 1994; Sparks & Ganschow, 1991, 1995), while others consider it a cause of these difficulties (Horwitz et

al., 1986). Recent studies, however, highlight that even advanced and successful students can experience FLA (Horwitz, 2000). This disagreement on the direction of causality underscores the complexity of FLA's effects. In this review, we focus on discussing the effects of FLA.

MacIntyre (2017) categorizes the effects of FLA into three main areas: academic effects, cognitive effects, and social effects. Moreover, academic effects encompass lower grades in second language learning, which may result in excessive studying and diminishing returns. Additionally, individuals experiencing FLA may have a reduced self-perception of competence, leading to poorer performance on subsequent assessments. Furthermore, there is a higher likelihood of dropping out from language classes (Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999).

Also, cognitive effects involve impaired performance in cognitively demanding tasks. Thoughts of failure in using the second language are a significant detriment. These effects impact all stages of language learning, obstructing information processing, slowing processing speed, affecting information accuracy, and impeding the retrieval of stored information in long and short-term memory (MacIntyre, 2017).

At the social level, FLA can negatively impact learners' communication abilities. It may lead to decreased linguistic confidence, resulting in heightened apprehension in environments where the target language is predominantly spoken. Highly anxious students may become disinterested in communicating with peers, further exacerbating their anxiety by affecting motivation and attitude (Price, 1991).

Research on gender differences and FLA presents conflicting findings, with no consensus on a universal explanation for gender effects on FLA and its impact on second or foreign language learning. Early studies like Campbell and Shaw (1994) found that males experienced higher FLA levels than females when learning different languages, including Spanish, Russian, German, and Korean. Zhang (2000) later confirmed these results in Chinese ESL students, with males reporting higher reading anxiety attributed to peer pressure and the perception that females were better English learners.

However, Aida (1994) and Elkhafaihi (2005) found no significant gender differences in FLA. Similar studies also failed to identify significant gender-based variations in FLA among Japanese students learning English as a foreign language or students in a French immersion program in Canada (MacIntyre et al., 2003).

In contrast, Abu-Rabia (2004) explored FLA, teacher roles, and gender differences among seventh-grade students learning English as a foreign language in Israel and discovered that gender was a predictor of FLA. Female students exhibited both higher anxiety scores and poorer linguistic competency compared to their male counterparts.

Geçkin (2020) examined gender differences in FLA and oral corrective feedback among Turkish students learning English as a foreign language and found that female students experienced higher anxiety levels than males, a conclusion that is not consistent with all studies. In this instance, Koul et al. (2009) reported that females experienced more FLA but performed better in learning English compared to males. This finding was later supported by Park and French (2013), who observed that while females had higher

FLA levels, they also achieved better final grades. These varying results underscore the complexity of gender-related factors in FLA, emphasizing the need for further research to better understand this phenomenon's nuanced effects on language learners.

Online and Virtual Learning Environments and Their Impact on Foreign Language Anxiety

The transformation of teaching methods in recent decades has witnessed a significant shift towards online and virtual learning environments. Computer-assisted language learning, encompassing various forms of distance education, fully or partially online classes, as well as asynchronous and synchronous courses, has gained increasing prominence. Besides, the integration of technology, the Internet, and computers into education has been extensively explored since the early 21st century (Howard & Mozejko, 2015). However, the investigation of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) among language learners in online or distance language courses has been relatively limited (Kianinezhad, 2023, 2024).

In a broader context, online language learning is often regarded as offering greater flexibility, heightened engagement, and improved attendance (e.g., Felix, 2008; Gacs et al., 2020; Maican & Cocoradă, 2021; Liu & Wang, 2023). Nonetheless, it is essential to recognize that many students have been compelled to transition to online language learning, and among them, some may exhibit reduced enthusiasm or discomfort with the virtual environment. This discomfort can stem from feelings of disconnection from their teachers and peers, especially as they encounter challenges such as limited access to appropriate technology or unfamiliarity with computer-based learning platforms (Russell, 2020).

Recent research has suggested that the mode of instruction, whether online or in a traditional classroom setting, may not have a significant impact on FLA. Pichette's (2009) study, involving 186 French-speaking English and Spanish learners in Canada, found that general foreign language anxiety profiles were similar among language learners in virtual and classroom settings. Distance learning, once considered a refuge for highly anxious language learners, now caters to students with anxiety profiles resembling those in face-to-face instruction (Maican & Cocoradă, 2021). However, Pichette's findings indicated that anxiety levels tended to decrease among advanced online learners compared to their face-to-face counterparts. This suggests an advantage for virtual platforms among students who have become accustomed to the online environment and instructional technologies after completing their initial semester.

Along the same lines, Russell (2018), in a study investigating the effects of pedagogical intervention on perceived levels of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) in a virtual Spanish class, similarly noted a significant decrease in anxiety levels by the end of the semester compared to the beginning. Despite the promising nature of these findings, it is crucial to consider that the observed decline in FLA at the course's conclusion may be linked to heightened familiarity with the virtual platform, technologies, or other class activities.

The factors contributing to students' anxiety in virtual classes closely mirror those in face-to-face classes, as discussed earlier in the section on Potential Causes of FLA. Hence, for instance, Nur and Baa (2022) investigated speaking anxiety among students in online classes and identified two primary categories of factors contributing to FLA: internal and external. Internal factors encompassed concerns about making mistakes, shyness, lack of confidence, and insecurity. External factors included instructor teaching styles, limited language proficiency, and peer-related embarrassment. Additionally, according to Maican and Cocoradă (2021), technological issues (e.g., computer familiarity), reduced interaction with peers and teachers, and the absence of immediate feedback from instructors could exacerbate problems in virtual language learning.

Strategies for Managing Stress and Implications for Teaching

Before empirical studies on actual coping strategies used by students to alleviate anxiety emerged, it was believed that cognitive, affective, and behavioral approaches could be employed to address this type of anxiety (Hembree, 1988). The cognitive approach operated under the assumption that thinking disturbances lead to anxiety. Consequently, interventions included rational-emotive therapy. Affective approaches focused on strategies like systematic desensitization and relaxation, while advocates of behavioral approaches believed that anxiety stemmed from poor academic skills. Therefore, they emphasized efficient training in study skills (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004).

Further to that, recent empirical studies on coping strategies have, however, provided insights into how anxious language learners commonly address anxiety and its associated consequences. A prevalent coping strategy employed by such students is avoidance behavior, which includes denial, giving up, wishful thinking, and avoiding interactions with native speakers (Oxford, 2017). Additional coping strategies identified in other studies include positive thinking, relaxation techniques, and perseverance (Woodrow, 2011; Young, 1991).

Educators wield a pivotal influence in alleviating students' anxiety levels, and they generally have two approaches at their disposal for managing that anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986). Firstly, educators can assist students in discovering effective coping mechanisms tailored to their anxiety; alternatively, they can cultivate a less stressful learning environment by modifying their teaching techniques and class context. That may involve providing relaxation exercises and personalized guidance on suitable learning strategies. Boosting students' confidence and self-esteem through positive reinforcement, emphasizing their positive personality traits, is another supportive measure (Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999). Furthermore, educators may consider referring highly anxious students to specialists or counselors with expertise in anxiety management. The more challenging option for educators involves reducing anxiety by adjusting their techniques and the classroom context (Horwitz et al., 1986; Atai-Tabar et al., 2023).

Besides that, Hashemi (2011), in examining Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) among undergraduate students, offers valuable recommendations for educators. For

instance, one effective technique is acknowledging the presence of anxiety among students. Additionally, adopting a communicative approach in teaching proves particularly beneficial for students with limited exposure to the English language, i.e., providing ample opportunities for students to practice their language skills and creating a friendly and informal classroom atmosphere to foster student comfort are crucial steps in mitigating classroom stress.

Moreover, also, educators can enhance their awareness of students' ethnic and cultural backgrounds to identify potential anxiety triggers. It is crucial to communicate to students that making mistakes is a natural part of the learning process and that they will not face judgment based on their errors from teachers or peers. To alleviate students' fear of making mistakes, greater emphasis should be placed on formative assessment and feedback, rather than relying solely on end-of-semester summative assessments.

Furthermore, teachers should steer clear of activities that may cause frustration at the beginning of the class, i.e., presenting students with excessively challenging tasks, as this can lead to anxiety and impede the learning process, aligning with Krashen's (1981) input hypothesis. Therefore, the introduction of new material should be gradual.

DISCUSSION

Indeed, as elucidated in this comprehensive review, Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) emerges as a multifaceted and intricate phenomenon; rather than existing as a singular concept, it thrives within a complex interplay of diverse factors. These factors encompass individual predispositions, instructional methodologies, and societal norms—all converging to incite and modulate anxiety levels among language learners. Recognizing this intricate tapestry of influences is imperative for effectively addressing and mitigating the multifarious effects of FLA.

The impact of FLA on language learners is profound and far-reaching, transcending the confines of the academic domain; it casts a shadow over their educational journey, resulting in diminished performance, hindered language acquisition, and, in some instances, dissuading students from pursuing further language studies. Moreover, FLA infiltrates the social fabric of the learning environment, compelling anxious learners to retreat from interactions; thereby adversely affecting their engagement, motivation, and overall learning experience. Thus, acknowledging FLA as a multidimensional concern holds utmost significance for both educators and learners alike.

In addition, the exploration undertaken in this review has unveiled the rich tapestry of language learners and their distinctive encounters with FLA. While extant research predominantly fixates on English language learners, there exists a compelling imperative to broaden our purview; language learners of advanced age, those immersed in intensive language programs, and international students represent distinct cohorts, each beset with unique challenges and coping mechanisms. Rigorous investigation into FLA within these diverse demographics is indispensable to tailor interventions effectively and ensure the provision of equitable learning experiences.

Moreover, the contemporary landscape of education is undergoing a rapid transformation, marked by a discernible shift towards online and virtual learning modalities; this transition necessitates a novel perspective on FLA, particularly within the digital realm. Understanding the nuanced dynamics of FLA in online settings and devising strategies to assuage anxiety among virtual language learners emerge as paramount areas warranting future exploration.

Next, in this context, the imperative of collaboration among educators, researchers, and policymakers looms large; effectively addressing the intricate tapestry of FLA demands a concerted effort. Acknowledging FLA's multifaceted nature, comprehending its manifold impacts, and adapting to the evolving contours of educational modalities will serve as guiding principles in the development of holistic approaches aimed at nurturing and supporting language learners on their quest towards linguistic proficiency.

Finally, these collaborative efforts and holistic approaches will not only mitigate the adverse effects of FLA but also contribute to a more inclusive and effective language learning environment.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the extensive body of research on foreign language anxiety (FLA) has provided valuable insights into its intricate origins and its potential impact on language learning; that is, FLA significantly influences students' academic and social achievements. While this review has covered notable findings from previous FLA research, it is essential to recognize the existence of unexplored facets of FLA that await further exploration. Future research should consider conducting longitudinal studies to track FLA development across diverse contexts, offering insights into anxiety's trajectory and the factors influencing its endurance.

Moreover, comparative research across languages, cultures, and educational settings can pinpoint commonalities and disparities in FLA experiences, providing a nuanced understanding. Besides this, incorporating neuroscientific methodologies, such as neuroimaging and psychophysiological assessments, holds promise for a deeper understanding of the neural aspects of FLA. Exploring the physiological dimensions of anxiety can bridge the gap between psychological and neurological perspectives.

Furthermore, the formulation and evaluation of targeted intervention strategies, encompassing cognitive-behavioral and pedagogical approaches, can equip educators with evidence-based tools to help learners manage and mitigate anxiety. Finally, in the rapidly evolving landscape of modern education, the urgent need for additional empirical evidence, especially in contemporary educational modalities like distance and online learning, underscores the importance of ongoing research; that is, advancements in these areas will undoubtedly contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of FLA and its implications for both language learners and educators.

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