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Understanding and Coping with Foreign Language Anxiety

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Understanding and Coping with Foreign Language Anxiety

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Abstract

Foreign Language Anxiety or FLA has become one of the most constant and persistent issues to be faced in the English classroom; thus, FLA is currently a complex obstacle for students to achieve a meaningful learning experience. Research has shown how students who undergo FLA are able to understand what they are doing in the classroom; nevertheless, “understanding” a topic or activity in class does not equate to going through a significant learning process. Considering the effect FLA can have in the students’ learning experience in addition to the rise in the public’s interest for concepts such as “mental health” and “anxiety” in recent years, it is of uttermost importance for teachers to be up-to-date with regard to this issue. This paper is based on current literature about the meaning behind FLA, its causes, its effects, and coping strategies for it. The analysis of the literature demonstrated all EFL students can experience FLA if one or more factors intertwine and trigger a crisis. This is because age, gender, proficiency, or emotional intelligence level do not contribute to a learner undergoing FLA. Moreover, it was clear that learning about the causes of FLA is the first step for an educator to create an anxiety-free classroom. Getting to know the triggering factors can not only help a teacher identify anxious students, but also inspire them to question their own pedagogical praxis. Finally, it is important to highlight that the inquiry indicated the relevancy of teachers instructing students on coping strategies for FLA since this can make a difference not only in class but in the learner’s life.

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Introduction

The possibilities for students to experience a variety of feelings while learning a new language are countless and unstoppable; nevertheless, it is how those feelings will affect the learning process long-term that should be a main concern for both students and teachers. This is because students who experience negative feelings may be able to understand the provided input, but they would not necessarily undergo a language acquisition process. For instance, a student who feels anxious during class may be able to understand a topic or an activity; however, it is necessary to emphasize that “understanding” does not equate to going through a meaningful learning experience. Krashen (2013) referred to this phenomenon by explaining that “affective variables do not impact language acquisition directly but prevent input from reaching what Chomsky called ‘language acquisition device,’ the part of the brain responsible for language acquisition” (p. 4). Taking into consideration the impact of negative feelings in class and the rise of the public’s interest in concepts such as “mental health” and “anxiety” during the past 10 years (Google Trends, 2022), it is of utmost importance to keep oneself up-to-date with regard to these topics. In fact, a recent survey conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA) has shown how—in comparison—people born between 1995 and 2010 (Gen Z) are more likely to report mental health concerns than older generations (Bethune, 2020). This aspect portrays Gen Z as the most anxious generation and, consequently, alerts experts from all fields about the rapid decline in mental health younger generations are experiencing.

Due to the rise of mental health awareness during modern times, alarming precedents are being set for what it is to come for new generations; hence, preparing teachers and others to deal with this issue is necessary. For this, it is important to highlight that anxiety feelings are triggered by one or more factors (Bethune, 2020) which may vary depending on the field of study. For instance, in language learning, this matter has its own name: *Foreign Language Anxiety* or FLA.

The reality is that there are multiple factors that can make an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) student feel embarrassed of speaking in the target language in front of their peers; however, in this specific field, all these factors tie together in the same issue—FLA. Furthermore, due to the prevalence of this matter and how much it can affect the learning process of students, it is not surprising that this has become an indispensable research topic for EFL teachers and researchers nowadays. As a result, the purpose of this essay is to seek a better understanding of FLA and propose strategies that English teachers can implement in their classroom to help their students cope with this condition.

What is Foreign Language Anxiety?

Before going into the causes and effects of FLA in the English classroom, it is essential to establish what FLA exactly means as well as the reason why it is important for teachers to explore, acknowledge, and tackle it—if encountered in their classroom. In this particular case, the definition of the concept not only expresses what it is, but also sheds light on the major problem FLA represents for students. According to Horwitz (2001), “anxiety when associated with learning a foreign language is termed as ‘second/foreign language anxiety’ related to the negative emotional reactions of the learners towards foreign language acquisition” (p. 113).

As established in the definition, FLA is the apprehension toward Second Language Acquisition (SLA), which represents a major setback for the students’ learning process. For this, it is extremely important for teachers to take action to address this matter with the seriousness it requires. If this issue is not properly tackled by the educator, the results can be detrimental for the students’ second language acquisition since their linguistic skills could be restrained from being fully developed. As a matter of fact, Brown (2008) provided a great example of how FLA can prevent students from learning and taking advantage of the target language in scenarios which would be considered a “must” to make use of English.

Brown (2008) conducted research which showed how FLA prevented multiple international students from not only gaining a high proficiency in the target language due to

their immersion but also undergoing “culture shock” after moving to a foreign country. The twelve-month project allowed the author to observe the struggles the students went through as well as the progress they made.

Because of the nature of the study—ethnographic investigation—it would be expected that most findings in it were about the “culture shock” aspect and not as much about the language; nevertheless, that was not the case. Throughout the research, the results showed that students were more concerned about their language skills than about the cultural differences they were facing. This finding undeniably shows that without the appropriate language skills, adjusting to a new culture is nearly impossible (Hofstede, 2005). Owing to this factor, it is possible to reinforce the importance of acknowledging FLA in the English classroom. Brown’s research (2008) made it clear that, no matter the context, students who are suffering from FLA are missing minor and major experiences alike during their learning process; thus, the relevance of informing educators and learners about this condition as much as possible emerges.

Causes and Effects of FLA in the English Classroom

Causes of FLA in the English Classroom

As was previously stated, because feelings of stress and anxiety are provoked by specific elements, the first step to be taken by a teacher who wants to keep FLA out of their classroom is to get to know which are the most common triggering factors. Later on, by carefully studying their current group, teachers should be able to discard some of those stressing factors and identify the aspects which trigger their students the most.

Before diving into the factors, it is critical for teachers to take into consideration that all students are susceptible to FLA. To support this fact, first, Fallah and Movahed (2014) established that there is no correlation between age, gender and FLA. This was later confirmed by Drakulić (2015) since her study determined that “FLA is equally relevant to language learning among children, adolescents, and adults” (p. 127). Furthermore, Martínez (2013) stated that the level of proficiency will not interfere with whether the student will

experience FLA or not. That is to say, not only do beginners experience FLA, but so do advanced learners. Lastly, according to Shao et al. (2013), it is also important for educators to avoid assuming that FLA—and anxiety itself—is related to an under-developed emotional intelligence. The reality is that no matter how developed one's emotional intelligence is, anxiety can be experienced by anybody under the “right” circumstances.

With that being said, there are various authors who have listed the same aspects as the most “common” triggering factors for FLA despite their diverse backgrounds. For instance, Gkonou (2013, p. 65) listed “self-efficacy, language skills, the teacher, mistakes made in class, high reliance on marks (grades), tests, and extrinsic motivation” as the most common triggering factors for students who suffer from FLA. Further, in a more recent study, those factors were supported when the author listed “the teacher, error correction, fear of negative evaluation, low proficiency, the lack of discipline, and test anxiety” (Drakulić, 2015, p. 127) as the most influential triggers for her students. All these factors were also supported by another author who not only mentioned the factors listed above but also brought to the table students experiencing FLA due to their fear of being “left behind,” and emphasized that “oral production in L2 is viewed as one of the greatest sources of anxiety in the classroom context” (Martínez, 2013, p. 831) in his specific study group. In addition, most of the sources consulted presented parallels in terms of the harm negative emotions can have on the students' learning process as well as emphasized “the teacher” as one of the key agents influencing students experiencing FLA (Drakulić, 2015; Fallah & Movahed, 2014; Gkonou, 2013; Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012; Shao et al., 2013).

Effects of FLA in the English Classroom

After studying the causes that may trigger FLA in an English classroom, it is decisive for teachers to learn about its harmful effects on their students' learning process to understand the urgency to address it. Even when such authors as Hewitt and Stephenson (2012) have tried to look for proof to support theories that pose FLA as a tool to boost the students' learning process, they have been unable to do so. On the contrary, Dewaele et al.

(2017, p. 11) declared that “FLA may have negative academic, cognitive, and social effects on learners.”

The truth is that most of the outcomes a student gets from experiencing FLA are negative. A significant example of this is how high-anxiety learners are more likely to stop their studies than low-anxiety ones (Fallah & Movahed, 2014). Besides, it is not surprising to see low performance as a consequence of FLA since anxiety is perceived as a negative factor in the English classroom because of its direct effects on the learning process (Martínez, 2013). As reported by Hewitt and Stephenson (2012), “the higher the levels of anxiety experienced by learners, the poorer their language skills tend to be” (p. 172).

Nonetheless, for this section, it is also relevant to point out that most students tend to be motivated when starting to learn a new language; however, negative experiences can—and most likely will—affect the students’ perception of the class, and, subsequently, the language. As Drakulić (2015) affirmed, “early negative experiences may affect the quality of further language acquisition” (p. 127). This illustrates how, even when students may have had a “strong” start, triggering factors intertwining will result in a “domino effect” letting the learners experience FLA and its negative effects.

Strategies to Overcome FLA

As was contemplated before, all students can experience FLA no matter their age, proficiency, or level of development in terms of emotional intelligence. This is why it is very important for all educators to be prepared with effective tools to help students overcome FLA. Although all cases are different and one should always research which are the strategies that fit best the group or student who one is trying to help, getting to know some “standard” strategies can save some time until the specific ones are found. Thereby, this essay will cover four basic strategies: one to help students prevent FLA, two to help students overcome a FLA crisis, and one for teachers to help reduce FLA in their classroom.

Strategy to prevent FLA

Mindfulness and Coping Self-Efficacy (CSE). Due to all the implications FLA can have on the students' learning process, it is important to look for ways in which learners can avoid getting those feelings if possible. Aside from only looking for relaxation in one specific moment of anxiety, "Mindfulness" is a strategy that can be used for helping students avoid stress and anxiety altogether. Further, instead of separating "Mindfulness" and "Coping Self-Efficacy" (CSE), it is preferable to keep them together since one is likely to improve the other. For instance, "Mindfulness" is a strategy that helps the subject calm when anxious; nonetheless, it seeks to prevent this situation from happening as well. Organization techniques; for example, are used as a way to prevent learners from being anxious in class (Corti & Gelati, 2020). Study planning and time management are two organization techniques students can be instructed in so that they can better organize their study activities. This way, students are not only going to be preventing themselves from feeling overwhelmed or lost in class, but also—because of the nature of these techniques—they are going to be improving their self-efficacy beliefs. Both techniques help students acquire effective tools that will allow them to feel prepared for their classes which improves their confidence in terms of the class (Fallah, 2016). Furthermore, if they are prepared for their classes, students are more likely to feel calm during the sessions (Corti & Gelati, 2020). As Fallah (2016) mentioned, "it is expected that higher levels of mindfulness will be associated with lower levels of FLA including communication anxiety, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation" (p. 4). In simpler words, helping students feel prepared for their classes will ultimately make them feel more confident in terms of self-efficacy which will, undeniably, lower their chances of experiencing FLA.

Strategies to Overcome a FLA Crisis

Self-Soothing Strategies. Firstly, it is important to highlight that although this paper is focused on FLA, Self-Soothing Strategies can work on any anxiety-provoking situation since they are self-reliant. Moreover, this is also a relevant detail to mention because, as students grow older, they tend to seek mental and behavioral independence, which stresses

the importance of students learning and implementing this type of strategies to regulate their emotions whenever they feel stress or anxiety (Dewaele et al., 2017).

Having said that, in the English classroom, these strategies are intended for the student to leave behind the feelings of stress and anxiety triggered by one or more of the factors previously established. These type of strategies can include—but are not limited to—taking deep breaths, progressively relaxing their muscles, and applying techniques such as the “five, four, three, two, one method” which consists of acknowledging five things they see, four things they can feel, three things they can hear, two things they can smell and one thing they can taste (Smith, 2018).

Positive Self-Talk. When students are instructed to carry out a difficult task or take an exam, there is a high possibility that they will engage in the process of self-talk that could either be positive or negative. As a matter of fact, it is necessary to remark that internal dialogue is commonly used to better understand feelings and beliefs to later instruct oneself on how to properly proceed (Sánchez, 2015). When it comes to FLA, students could eventually find implementing “Positive Self-Talk” useful in order to carry out the activities and having, as a result, decreased their levels of anxiety, not to mention that because this action plan is supposed to lower their levels of FLA, it would also be preventing their learning process from being negatively affected. Wolters (1999) pointed out that

Regarding the purpose of motivational self-talk, the self-affirmations expressed by students help them to maintain or improve their degree of motivation in academic situations by emphasizing the main objective or goal of their learning efforts and the reasons to persist in, or complete, the task. (p. 290)

Moreover, not only can “Positive Self-Talk” be used to increase motivation and reduce anxiety, but also to have students reconfirm the process they need to follow to carry out a task. For instance, DeCaro et al. (2010) stated that instructional dialogue helps students control anxiety and stress when facing a difficult task. Overall, guiding students towards implementing “Positive Self-Talk” can be highly beneficial for the learning process whenever they experience FLA.

Strategy to Reduce FLA in the ESL Classroom

Collaborative Activities. “Collaborative Learning” or “Collaborative Activities” are currently and widely used in education due to the benefits they have brought to class. In fact, according to Srinivas (2019),

Collaborative teaching as well as learning creates a situation where learners aggressively cooperate by sharing their experiences and undertake various roles. In collaborative learning, the learners work on the main tasks including problem-solving, collaborative writing, study groups, discussions, group projects and some other activities that are related to finding a solution. (p. 4)

Students need to share their work, socialize, support each other, and exchange ideas in order to achieve certain goals in a collaborative class. Hence, when these conditions are met within a classroom, a relaxing environment for students to work can be created. “A pleasant, congenial and harmonious climate in the English classroom will help the English teachers not only to reduce the anxiety of their learners but also to grab the focus of their learners when they are learning English” (Srinivas, 2019, p. 6). Additionally, since students’ are supposed to be in charge of their own learning process, teachers should play the role of facilitators which creates a learner-centered class so that students can develop critical thinking, solve difficult assignments, share knowledge with others, and improve their public speaking skills (Srinivas, 2019). Everything considered, carrying out collaborative activities can bring several benefits to students’ learning process regarding their anxiety, self-confidence, and language skills.

Conclusions

Although it has been mentioned throughout the paper that all cases are different, this is not to say that it is likely for all teachers to find a group of students who are immune to FLA. In reality, many educators—if not all of them—have felt that anxiety related to language

learning is more of a “constant” than a “variable” in the language classroom (Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012). As a matter of fact, it should not be considered “alarmist” to expect anxious students in one’s classroom in this day and age, especially considering it is such a prevalent issue to be faced in EFL classes. As was previously mentioned, students’ experiencing FLA is a matter of having the “appropriate” circumstances to trigger it. Age, gender, proficiency or emotional intelligence level will not interfere if one or more factors intertwine and trigger a crisis for a student (Drakulić, 2015; Fallah & Movahed, 2014; Martínez, 2013; Shao et al., 2013). As a result, it is not an understatement to classify anxiety as a negative factor in the classroom that all teachers should know about due to its obstructive effect on the students’ learning process.

With that being said, getting to know the most impactful triggers for FLA in the English classroom is truly the first step to create an anxiety-free space for learners. The truth is that it is impossible to avoid FLA, but it is every teacher’s responsibility to prevent it or tackle it in the best way possible. This could be done in various ways. Firstly, as a teacher, self-reflection always comes in handy. It was seen in the “causes” section that most studies pointed at “the teacher” as one of the main anxiety-provoking factors. This does not mean that all teachers are “mean” or “spiteful,” but it calls them to have moments of introspection in which they can question if they are being kind, if they are using the proper words to convey what they want to say, among others. Some of the cited authors in this paper even affirmed that the teacher’s emotional intelligence directly affects the students’ learning process due to an assertive communication aspect (Shao et al., 2013). This conclusion is not to be taken as an impossible standard for teachers since they are constantly learning from research and their experiences on the job, but it is intended to encourage educators to do the most every time they try to improve their praxis.

Moreover, speaking of the coping strategies proposed in the paper, it is of the utmost importance for teachers to be able to instruct students on strategies which will help them cope with a crisis; however, encouraging students to constantly work on overcoming FLA is equally relevant—if not more significant. As has been mentioned, neither teachers nor

students can escape FLA; nonetheless, giving students the proper tools to prevent it is always a reachable option, not to mention that this tactic will be more helpful long term for anxious students since it will help them reduce their anxiety levels.

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DECLARACIÓN JURADA

Yo, María José Paniagua Camacho, cédula de identidad 117500606, estudiante de la Universidad Nacional, declaro bajo fe de juramento y consciente de la responsabilidades penales de este acto, que soy autor intelectual del Trabajo Final de Graduación Titulado **“Understanding and Coping with Foreign Language Anxiety”** , para optar por el grado de Maestría en Educación con énfasis en Aprendizaje del Inglés.



Heredia, a los 04 días del mes de setiembre del año 2022.

Refrendo

Los abajo firmantes avalamos el Trabajo de Graduación de la estudiante María José Paniagua Camacho, cédula 117500606, que lleva como título **Understanding and Coping with Foreign Language Anxiety**, dado que cumple con las disposiciones vigentes y la calidad académica requerida por el posgrado.

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