Foreign Language Anxiety: some conceptual and methodological issues

Jean-Marc Dewaele & Taghreed M. Al-Saraj
Birkbeck College, University of London

Introduction

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) has been defined as "the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language" (MacIntyre 1994, p. 27). MacIntyre and Gardner (1991: 297) argue that FLA develops over time after the first contact in the foreign language (FL) classroom: "initially, anxiety is an undifferentiated, negative affective response to some experience in language class", if this negative response is repeated, "anxiety becomes reliably associated with the language class and differentiated from other contexts." FLA is thus situation-specific; it can become particularly acute in the FL Class where it has the power to freeze students (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope 1986, p. 125). This Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) has been defined as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 128). Horwitz et al. (1986) distinguished three dimensions with FLCA: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Gregersen and MacIntyre (to appear) explain that the causes of FLCA can be associated either with the learner or with the teacher or can develop from the interaction between both, or more specifically, from the incompatibility of styles of both. MacIntyre & Gardner (1991a, b) noted that FLCA can be exacerbated by excessive self-evaluation, worries over potential failure, and concern over the opinion of peers. All this leads learners to waste precious cognitive energy necessary for the task itself, disrupting information processing, and as result slowing down the FL performance and acquisition (Dewaele, 2007a; Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre, 1999; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a, b; Lu & Liu, 2011). MacIntyre and Gardner even claim that in FL learning "anxiety is one of the best predictors of success" (1991:96). A study by Dewaele and Thirtle (2009) showed that young teenagers with high levels of FLCA were significantly more likely to drop languages when considering future module choices.

Inter- and intra-individual variation in FLA/FLCA

FLA and FLCA are among the most frequently studied psychological variables in the FL literature. Researchers have focused either on inter-individual variation (i.e. which type of individuals suffer more from FLA/FLCA?) and intra-individual variation (i.e. what type of task, situation, type of interlocutor/s are most anxiety-provoking?).

The first studies on inter-individual variation have investigated to what extent FLA/FLCA is linked to global personality traits. In other words, the researcher looked whether certain personality profiles were likely to report higher levels of FLA/FLCA.

Influential early Canadian research reported that General Anxiety and FLA are independent dimensions of anxiety (MacIntyre & Gardner 1989). The authors carried out a Principal Components analysis which resulted in a two-factor solution: General Anxiety on which both state and trait anxiety loaded, and a second factor, Communicative Anxiety which was linked to the communicative aspects of language (p. 268). The authors concluded that the two factors are independent of each other and can hence "be considered as two separate traits" (p. 268). This view has become dominant in FLL research (Dörnyei, 2009). However, three studies outside the Canadian context have reported significant correlations between Trait Anxiety, Test Anxiety and FLCAS (Horwitz, 1986), between FLA and Neuroticism (Dewaele, 2002) and between FLCA and Neuroticism, Psychoticism, Extraversion (Dewaele, 2013), which raises the question of the independence of both dimensions.

Recent research has revealed that other personality traits predict levels of FLCA/FLA: high levels of Trait Emotional Intelligence are linked to lower FLA (Dewaele, Petrides & Furnham, 2008; higher levels of Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity are linked to lower levels of FLCA (Dewaele & Shan Ip, 2013), higher levels of Perfectionism are linked to higher levels of FLCA (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002); Dewaele, Finney, Kubota & Almutlaq, in preparation), higher levels of Risk-taking are linked to lower levels of FLCA (Dewaele & Alfonzan, in preparation).

Levels of FLCA/FLA have also been linked to a range of sociobiographical variables, including the language learning history and current language practices, and educational variables. FLA/FLCA was found to be linked to age, academic and FL achievement, previous contact with FLs, perceived scholastic competence, self-worth, intellectual ability and job competence (Onwuegbuzie, Bailey & Daley, 1999, Onwuegbuzie, Bailey & Daley, 2000). The effect of age and gender on FLA/FLCA have yielded inconsistent results (Dewaele, 2007b; Dewaele et al.,

2008; Donovan & MacIntyre, 2005, MacIntyre et al., 2002, Matsuda & Gobel, 2004; Woodrow, 2008). Dewaele (2010b) reported that FLA seems to peak for participants in their twenties, after which it drops consistently across age groups.

Knowing more languages has been linked to lower levels of anxiety in all languages (Dewaele, 2007b; Dewaele et al. 2008; Dewaele 2010a, b; Thompson & Lee, 2012).

Typological distance between known languages and the target language also determine FLA. If the target language belongs to a familiar linguistic family (Romance or Germanic languages for example), levels of FLA tend to be lower (Dewaele, 2010a).

Levels of FLA have also been found to increase significantly, and linearly, from the L1 to the L5 of pentalinguals (Dewaele, 2010b). Participants who had started learning a FL at a later age reported higher levels of FLA in different situations. The context in which an FL had been acquired also played a role: participants who had acquired a FL only through formal classroom instruction felt significantly more anxious than mixed and naturalistic learners. Frequency of use of the FL was the independent variable with the strongest effect on FLA. Frequent users of an FL had become sufficiently confident to stop worrying about their foreign accent or possible grammatical errors and reported lower levels of FLA across situations. Highly socialized FL users and participants with larger networks of interlocutors in a FL also reported significantly lower levels of FLA across situations (Dewaele, 2010b).

Intra-individual variation has been linked to the type of interaction in the FL. FL users are much more relaxed in private speech with friends compared to interactions with strangers in various languages (Dewaele, 2007). Using a FL on the phone or in public speech also push up levels of FLA in all languages (Dewaele, 2010a, 2010b).

Developing a culturally appropriate instrument to measure FLCA

To develop a more complete understanding of FLA, the sociocultural background of the learners must be taken into account. Several cultural factors (e.g., teaching methods, cultural attitudes towards language learning), situational factors (e.g., teacher, teaching methods), and personal factors (e.g., motivation, self-concept, beliefs) may be important in when and how students experience FLA and how symptoms of FLA are exhibited (Yan & Horwitz, 2008).

To study FLA, being able to measure it is key. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, or FLCAS (Horwitz et al, 1986), is a popular tool. It is a paper-and-pencil questionnaire designed

to obtain students' self-reported ratings of their anxiety in the FL classroom. The development of the FLCAS, and thus the content of its questions, was informed by pre-existing anxiety measures and by the discussion of language-learning experiences of 78 University of Texas students (Horwitz et al., 1986), in other words, it was developed in a Western culture for Western learners. Brown (2007) raised concerns about the cultural appropriateness of adopting questionnaires across cultures, because questionnaires often include content or items that are difficult to accurately construe in different cultures or that may draw on norms that differ cross-culturally. Therefore, whether a questionnaire developed in the West is suitable for use in different cultures must be considered (Brown, 2007).

Language researchers have begun to recognise the importance of the broader, social context in which people learn languages, and have found that acquisition of a new language is impacted not only by each individual and his or her cognitive processes, but also by the social and cultural setting in which the language is studied (Block, 2003).
Al-Saraj (2011) has thus developed an Arabic version of the FLCAS which was used to gather data in a private, all-female, English medium college in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The college had a preparatory program for students whose English language skills were adequate for entering the college but not yet sufficient for taking main stream English classes. The students who took part in this research were in the English preparatory program. They were young (18-19 years old), Muslim women; most were from Saudi Arabia; and all were native Arabic speakers.
As the phenomenon of FLA had not yet been examined in the Arab world or specifically in Saudi Arabia, there was a lack of information about FLA or measurement of FLA in Arab cultures. Due to concerns regarding the cultural appropriateness of a questionnaire from the West being used in Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries, Al-Saraj (under review) argued that the FLCAS could not simply be translated and used in the Arab world. She thus developed a questionnaire, baptized Arabic Foreign Language Anxiety Questionnaire (AFLAQ), which was based on the FLCAS but culturally adapted to suit students from Saudi Arabia.

The development of the questionnaire was preceded by information gathering among Saudi Arabian students about their perspectives and anxiety-related experiences while learning a FL. This happened in the students' first language, Arabic. A single, open-ended question in an

anonymous written questionnaire prompted students to describe anxiety-provoking situations and anxiety-related experiences that they faced in their FL classes. The open-ended format was chosen so that students could freely discuss any issues, worries, or concerns.

How similar were the anxiety-causing situations discussed in the FLCAS to the situations discussed by the Saudi Arabian students? Were there marked differences? To address these questions, the issues raised by the Saudi Arabian students were grouped by topics, then compared to the items included in the FLCAS (Horwitz et al., 1986). The students in Saudi Arabia discussed some anxiety-provoking situations that were not addressed in the FLCAS.

The process of identifying unique topics discussed by the Saudi Arabian students yielded a list of 36 unique topics or themes. When the issues addressed were extremely similar to those in the FLCAS, terminology from the FLCAS was adopted, based on the belief that adopting existing terminology and items would facilitate comparisons across cultures. However, some issues were unique. In particular, giving presentations was a popular anxiety prompt for the Saudi student sample. Indeed, giving a presentation in front of the class was the most frequently discussed situation associated with nervousness or anxiety in the students. Of the 48 students who completed and returned the questionnaire, 20 discussed this situation as anxiety-provoking. Additional, frequently discussed topics included taking exams (mentioned by 10 students), having a hard time writing or expressing ideas in the foreign language (mentioned by 10 students), and wanting to volunteer to speak in class but being unable to find the proper words (mentioned by 7 students).

After careful consideration of the 36 topics, three were eliminated because they addressed issues that were not central to the topic at hand. One topic, raised by only one of 48 students, was anxiety during the first class period for a new foreign language course. The item addressing this issue was removed because anxiety during a first class may not be specific to foreign language class. If FLA is situation specific, and the foreign language context or situation may not be fully developed until after the student has been in the classroom for a while, then anxiety in the first class period is not central to FLA. The second topic to be removed from the item pool regarded being anxious about writing on the board in class. The topic was removed because writing on the board is not a common practice in college classes, though it is common in lower levels of the educational system in Saudi Arabia. The final topic to be removed from the questionnaire item pool was anxiety prompted by having students in class not be all on the same level. This topic

was removed because the issue is unlikely to occur in the EFL program, which places students based on language abilities.

After scrutiny, the remaining 33 themes were adopted as items in a newly formulated questionnaire. Some FLCAS items were consistent with topics discussed by the Saudi students, and so the original items from the FLCAS were translated with careful attention to meaning. Seventeen of the questions from the original FLCAS were retained with minimal modification or only adaptation through careful translation. For example, FLCAS item 4, "It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language" (Horwitz et al., 1986) was reworded to avoid connotations with the Arabic word that would translate to "frightens". The modification is small but very important, and the new item reads simply (translated from Arabic), "I feel anxious when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language." Five other items were more heavily adapted to make them clearer to the Arab students while maintaining the general content.

The AFLAQ, like the FLCAS, uses a Likert scale with responses ranging from one ("strongly disagree") to five ("strongly agree"). In the final form of the questionnaire, three items were reverse coded, or worded such that a response of "strongly agree" was expected to indicate low anxiety, and "strongly disagree" was expected to indicate high anxiety. Items that were reverse coded were rekeyed (so that a response of "1" was considered a response of "5", for example) prior to calculating mean scores on the questionnaire. Possible scores range from 33 (the lowest score possible) to 165 (the highest score possible, indicating the highest anxiety level). Al-Saraj (2011) found that the scores of her students were slightly higher (M = 106.9; SD = 17.4) than a group of students at the University of Texas (M = 94.5, SD = 21.4) (Horwitz, 1986). The internal consistency of the AFLAQ was high: Cronbach's alpha: .89.

The students who scored the highest on the AFLAQ tended to indicate at least moderate anxiety associated with all items on the AFLAQ. The students who experience anxiety in response to all of the classroom and learning situations appear to have developed a pervasive response to learning English. Other students reported they were generally not anxious in language-learning situations, but a few specific scenarios – particularly speaking in front of the class, whether rehearsed or extemporaneous – would cause them anxiety. Generally speaking, teaching style,

teacher interactions, and speaking in front of the class elicited anxiety in all of the students. For some, anxiety was limited to those situations, but for others, anxiety appeared to be provoked simply at the thought of attending English classes.

To conclude, we wanted to present a range of conceptual and methodological issues addressed by FLA researchers. In order to gain a better understanding of this multi-facetted and dynamic concept, it is important to locate the sources of intra- and inter-individual variation, but it is equally important to raise questions about the instruments used, and to make sure they are appropriate for the target group. The next step is then to devise ways to create low-anxiety language classrooms (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014).

References

Al-Saraj, T. M. (2011). Exploring Foreign Language Anxiety in Saudi Arabia: A Study of Female English as Foreign Language College Students. Unpublished thesis.

Al-Saraj, T. M. (under review). A measure of Foreign Language Anxiety in female Arab learners of English in Saudi Arabia.

Block, D. (2003). *The social turn in Second Language Acquisition*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

Brown, H. D. (2007). *Principles of language learning and teaching* (5th ed.). White Plains, NY: Pearson Education, Inc.

Dewaele, J.-M. (2002). Psychological and sociodemographic correlates of communicative anxiety in L2 and L3 production. *The International Journal of Bilingualism*, 6, 23-39.

Dewaele, J.-M. (2007a). Predicting language learners' grades in the L1, L2, L3 and L4: The effect of some psychological and sociocognitive variables. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 4, 169-197.

Dewaele, J.-M. (2007b). The effect of multilingualism, sociobiographical, and situational factors on communicative anxiety and foreign language anxiety of mature language learners. *The International Journal of Bilingualism*, 11, 391-409.

Dewaele, J.-M. (2010a). Multilingualism and affordances: Variation in self-perceived communicative competence and communicative anxiety in French L1, L2, L3 and L4. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 48, 105–129.

Dewaele, J.-M. (2010b). *Emotions in Multiple Languages*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
Dewaele, J.-M. & Alfonsan, I. (in preparation). Risk-taking and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety among Saudi EFL students.
Dewaele, J.-M., Finney, R., Kubota, T. & Almutlaq, S. (in preparation). Perfectionism and Foreign Language Anxiety among multilingual Londoners, Japanese and Saudi EFL students.
Dewaele, J.-M., Petrides, K. V., & Furnham, A. (2008). The effects of trait emotional intelligence and sociobiographical variables on communicative anxiety and foreign language anxiety among adult multilinguals: A review and empirical investigation. *Language Learning*, 58, 911-960.
Dewaele, J.-M., & Thirtle, H. (2009) Why do some young learners drop Foreign Languages? A focus on learner-internal variables. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 12, 635-649.
Dewaele, J.-M. & Tsui Shan Ip (2013) The link between Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety, Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity and self-rated English proficiency among Chinese learners. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching* 3 (1), 47-66.
Donovan, L. A., & Macintyre, P. D. (2005). Age and sex differences in willingness to communicate, communication apprehension and self-perceived competence. *Communication Research Reports*, 21, 420-427.
Dörnyei, Z. (2009). *Personality in Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Gregersen, T., & MacIntyre, P. D. (2014). *Capitalizing on Individual Differences: From Premise to Practice*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
Gregersen, T., & Horwitz, E. K. (2002). Language learning and perfectionism: Anxious and non-anxious language learners' reactions to their own oral performance. *The Modern Language Journal*, 86, 562-570.
Horwitz, E. K. (1986). Preliminary evidence for the reliability and validity of a foreign language anxiety scale. *TESOL Quarterly*, 20, 559-562.
Horwitz, E. K. (2001). Language anxiety and achievement. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 21, 112-126.
Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal, 70*(2), 125-132.

Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70, 125-132.

Lu, Z., & Liu, M. (2011). Foreign Language Anxiety and strategy use: A study with Chinese undergraduate EFL learners. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 2, 1298-1305.

MacIntyre, P. D. (1994). Variables underlying willingness to communicate: A causal analysis. *Communication Research Reports*, 11, 135-142.

Macintyre, P. D. (1999). Language anxiety: a review of the research for language teachers. In D. J. Young (Ed.), *Affect in foreign language and second language teaching: A practical guide to creating a low-anxiety classroom atmosphere* (pp. 24-45). Boston: Mc Graw-Hill.

MacIntyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1989). Anxiety and second language learning: Towards a theoretical clarification. *Language Learning*, 39, 251-275.

MacIntyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1991a). Methods and results in the study of foreign language anxiety: a review of the literature. *Language Learning*, 41, 25-57.

MacIntyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1991b). Language anxiety: its relationship to other anxieties and to processing in native and second language. *Language Learning*, 41, 513-534.

MacIntyre, P. D., Baker, S. C., Clément, R., & Donovan, L. A. (2002). Sex and age effects on willingness to communicate, anxiety, perceived competence, and L2 motivation among junior high school French immersion students. *Language Learning*, 52, 537-564.

Matsuda, S., & Gobel, P. (2004). Anxiety and predictors of performance in the foreign language classroom. *System*, 32, 21-36.

Onwuegbuzie, A., Bailey, P., & Daley, C. E. (1999). Factors associated with foreign language anxiety. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 20, 217-239.

Onwuegbuzie, A., Bailey, P., & Daley, C. E. (2000). Cognitive, affective, personality, and demographic predictors of foreign-language achievement. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 94, 3-15.

Thompson, A. S. & Lee, J. (2012). Anxiety and EFL: does multilingualism matter? *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 15, 1-20.

Yan, J. X. & Horwitz, E. K. (2008). Learners' perceptions of how anxiety interacts with personal and instructional factors to influence their achievement in English: A qualitative analysis of EFL learners in China. *Language Learning, 58*, 151-183.