



# Speaking Anxiety in Foreign Language Learners

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## ABSTRACT

Many language researchers have studied the effects of anxiety on foreign language (FL) learning since 1970's, in spite of the concrete advanced teaching methodologies and techniques, apprehension continues to exist in foreign language classrooms. This review provided the general construct of learners' most anxiety-provoking skill, that is, speaking skill resulted in learners' FL proficiency and acquisition. In addition, it could be noted that teachers play an important role in helping anxious learners and giving them a positive reinforcement which could lessen their speaking anxiety. However, in some extent, some anxiety—positive or negative effects—might also actually enhance learners' FL learning and performance. FL speaking anxiety could be seen as a big problem for language learners to overcome in order to succeed in language learning. Language teachers needed to concern about their students' native languages, level of their education, their capacities, abilities, strengths and weaknesses, and their experiences that might affect their learning. All these points affected both learners' success in SLA (Second Language Acquisition) and teachers' abilities to enable learners to reach that language acquisition.

**Keywords:** *Speaking anxiety, Foreign language (FL) learners, Language learning*

## KEY CONCEPTS

Considering the specific scope of learning, learning a foreign language was, according to Brown (1994), a long and complicated procedure. That is to say, the foreign language learners had to reach beyond the limits of their first language knowledge into a new language, a new culture, and a new way of thinking, feeling,



and performing. Therefore, learning a foreign language, learners could experience anxiety, which inhibited them to succeed in that target language.

The effect of anxiety has been studied extensively in many years (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Saito & Samimy, 1996; MacIntyre, Noels, & Clément, 1997; Vogely, 1998; Saito, Horwitz & Garza, 1999; Cheng, 2002; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Gregersen, 2003, 2005; Frantzen & Magnan, 2005; D. Ewald, 2007), the construct of anxiety played a crucial affective role in a second language acquisition (SLA), and anxiety was related to feelings of worry, agitation, irritation or tension. This notion was supported by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986). They defined foreign language (FL) anxiety as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors. Moreover, this complexity related to classroom language learning developing from the uniqueness of the language learning procedure. Moreover, FL anxiety could be identified by physiological symptoms such as learners' tense facial muscles, limiting the movement of brow, blinking more, and smiling less (Gregersen, 2005).

In addition, FL anxiety might show itself through psycholinguistic factors as distortion sounds, an inability to reproduce the intonation and rhythm of the language, a freezing up when called on to perform in that target language, forgetting of words or phrases that just learned, or simply refusing to speak and remaining in silence (Young, 1992). Behavioral factors such as learners' limited eye contact with the teacher and sometimes kept their eyes closed completely, sat upright, or leaned backward against the chairs and kept a closed-body position (Gregersen, 2005). Besides, avoidance and postponing homework might be other evidences of anxiety (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). It should be noted that language teachers should try to pay attention to their learners closely. Moreover, it was teachers' duties that should detect the cause of FL anxiety and try to help them, or create the affective classroom environment so that learners would learn to communicate rather than fear the language. Therefore, FL anxiety was not only a common stage of mind within language learners, but it could give a notable negative impact on their performance (Saito & Samimy, 1996). For that reason, language teachers should be aware of the



importance of anxiety in language classrooms. It could be noted that teachers seemed to be the important one who could help anxious learners and gave them a positive reinforcement which could lessen their anxiety.

In contrast, Spielmann and Radnofsky (2001), preferred to recognize tension as an impartial notion to explain the possibility of both beneficial and destructive effects in FL learning. In these researchers' notions of tension were unstable phenomena that might be generated by any situations and might be perceived differently by each individual. Therefore, in some extent, some anxiety—positive or negative effects—might actually enhance learners' FL learning and performance.

In further interviews, Omaggio Hadley mentioned that having some tension might create the desire to learn, and to motivate. Moreover, she concluded that “There is a good kind of tension” (p. 161). It seemed that Krashen (1992); Omaggio Hadley (1992); and Spielmann and Radnofsky (2001) agreed that some anxiety might be one of the keys to success and might generate the eager feelings to learn or to improve some learners' abilities in language learning. Hence, language teachers should be aware of learners' anxiety, and considered that this anxiety really made some trouble in learners. It could be that a little bit of tension in the process of learning might be a good thing. However, too much and too little of anxiety might inhibit the second language learning process more or less.

In second language learning, the part of communication with others was the most important part that could provide speaking anxiety to learners. That is, there was an interrelation of skills in speaking to participate in the negotiation of meaning (Savignon, 1991). It seemed like foreign language anxiety was most concerned with oral aspects of communication in language use, which was speaking. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), in their article, “Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety” argued that FL anxiety could have an influence on learners' communication strategies in language classrooms. That is, the high anxious learners seemed to avoid making an effort on difficult messages in the target language. In the Learning Skills Center (LSC) at the



University of Texas suggested that FL anxiety centered on the two fundamental task necessity of FL learning, that is, listening and speaking. Although, difficulty in speaking was the big problems for learners, they might feel comfortable to respond a drill or uttering prepared speeches in FL classes. In the same way, Horwitz et al. reinforced that learners were anxious or tended to “freeze” (p.126) in role-play situation; reported they “know” (p.126) a certain grammar point, but “forget” (p.126) it in a test or an oral exercise when many grammar points must be remembered. Moreover, they complained of difficulties discriminating the sound and structures of a FL message, they confessed that they knew the correct answer on a test, but put down the wrong one because of nervousness, and they over studied without any improvement in grades. In addition, most language learners always felt that they wanted to be ready before speaking in target language and guessing or trying in the unknown words could make them ashamed in front of other learners. Horwitz et al. similarly contended that “a number of students believe nothing should be said in the foreign language until it can be said correctly and that it is not okay to guess an unknown foreign language word” (p.127). This misleading belief of learning language could produce anxiety, because learners were expected to communicate in target language before fluency, and making errors was not accepted (see Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002 for more detail), and viewed as a kind of failure.

Steinberg and Horwitz (1986) found that students who were more anxious used less interpretation in describing vague prospect than did those relaxed or less anxious students. That is, high-anxious students made less of an attempt to speak the difficult or personal messages in foreign language. It appeared that anxious students experienced the fundamental problems in vocabulary acquisition and retrieval (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a). In addition, Gardner and Lalonde et al. (1987) found that the word production of anxious students tended to be smaller than the less anxious students, and their speech seemed to be less complex (Steinberg & Horwitz, 1986).



Overall, FL speaking anxiety seemed to be the big problem for language learners to overcome in order to succeed in language learning. Language teachers should be aware of who their learners were, what their native languages were, what levels of their education were, how their experiences that might affect their learning, what their capacities, abilities, and strengths and weaknesses were, and how teachers described learners' personality. All these points aimed to focus on the important variables affecting both learners' success in SLA and teachers' abilities to enable learners to reach that acquisition.

As mentioned above, the overall information could show that FL speaking anxiety was very important in language learning and in a second language acquisition (SLA). FL speaking anxiety had an influence on the process of language learning. That is, speaking anxiety played a crucial role in acquiring the productive or active skill in language learning, that is, speaking and writing skills. Therefore, learners' speaking anxiety should be the important and big issues that had an influence on the area of language learning in order to find the solutions for learners who suffered from FL speaking anxiety.

The further research should be conducted in Thai context which focuses on the factors associated with foreign language speaking anxiety, the overall specific language anxiety-provoking skill, not only speaking skill, that is to say, listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills could not be separated. This notion was supported by Savignon (1991). She suggested that there was an interrelation of skills in writing and speaking to participate in the negotiation of meaning. In addition, listening, and reading skills were not regarded as passive skills, but as receptive skill in the same negotiation of meaning.



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