

# **Activating EFL Learners**

*A Case Study Exploring Foreign Language Anxiety*



Author: John Hägg

Supervisor: Dr. Claes Lindskog

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English Teacher Education

Campus Helsingborg

## **Abstract**

Language anxiety is one of the most difficult issues teachers face in the English classroom today. The area is vast and complex and not much research has been done with a practical focus. This study investigates how the Fogg behavior model can be used to identify foreign language anxiety, and how anxiety affects English learners in a Swedish context. I noticed that there was an inadequate amount of research within this specific area. This case study explores these issues in a Swedish secondary school, using four interviews where teachers were asked about their students' participation in class. The participants reported their interpretations of how student participation was affected by factors such as language anxiety and the components presented in the behavior model. The results showed that even through a narrow lens, cognitive aspects of learning are complex. There were some practical solutions to increase classroom participation that could be applied to other cases.

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## 1. Introduction

Research within the areas of cognition and the functions of the human brain has become increasingly common in the last couple of decades. Studies that target behavior specifically is common, yet the topic of anxiety is rather modern. Much research about anxiety has been condensed within our recent history, but just like other cognitive issues, there is always more to learn. This study focuses on language-specific types of anxiety within the English language classroom. Studies have shown that these anxiety types not only disturb the language learning but also learning in general (Horwitz, 2001, p. 113). Although general types of anxiety are problems in Swedish schools, I felt as there was much more substantial information regarding non-language based anxiety compared to language anxiety.

This case study targets the impact that foreign language anxiety has on students' behavior. There are factors and variables that hold students back from an active participation that need to be analyzed in their specific context. By realizing the core of these issues, more teachers could develop practices that prevent them from occurring. If these problems are not addressed, a teacher cannot fairly grade students on their language performance since the variables that damage the student's results might not be related to language proficiency. Validity and fairness are central in education, yet students are constantly judged in the classroom based on what skills they show in class. Without help, they might never succeed because of how destructive their anxiety is. By drawing on previous research that has explored FLA (foreign language anxiety), I aim to define the variables preventing Swedish students at a secondary school from participating in EFL (English as a foreign language) education. The interview questions and the analysis are based on a behavioral model called the Fogg behavior model, and its purpose is to identify what causes a behavior to (not) happen. The model is applied through interviews to provide different components to Swedish EFL students participation. Because a large amount of research has a student-focused

approach, I want to contribute with an underrepresented perspective: the teachers' interpretations of student behavior. If we can define the problems with the willingness to communicate in the EFL classroom we could also, by applying correct methodology, break the cycle of partial classroom participation.

## **2. Theoretical Background and Previous Research**

The theoretical framework for the material and analysis will be that of the Fogg behavior model (FBM). The formula in this behavioral model breaks down the behavior of people through different variables and is, in this study, applied to an EFL context.

### **2.1 Fogg Behavior Model**

The FBM was created in 2009 by Dr. BJ Fogg and was based on the earlier behavioral theory called theory of planned behavior. Although it has shown to be a valid and reliable model, it has not seen much light in the EFL classroom, and even less so in a Swedish context. The model is a prediction for human behavior through three different variables: *motivation*, *ability*, and *triggers* (Fogg, 2009). The premise is that in order for an action to be made, the learner has to have enough motivation and ability. Nonetheless, having low ability or motivation does not make the action impossible, if the subject is above a certain threshold (Necksten, 2016, p. 13). By this definition, having high motivation can compensate for a low ability. In addition, a trigger must be caused by an external source, and it is the most vital part of creating a desired behavior. The action in question depends on a trigger pushing the subject toward that action (Fogg, 2009, p. 3).

There are three different types of motivation according to the FBM. The motivators all share polarities of expected outcomes as in: pleasure / pain, hope / fear, and social acceptance / rejection (Fogg, 2009, p. 4). Motivation is key in overcoming language anxiety since a

higher intention and will to perform an action makes the action more probable (Ajzen, 1991, p. 181). However, motivation does not help the learner if the ability to perform the action is not possible.

Ability, according to the FBM, includes components that are more external and physical than motivation. These components are: time, money, physical effort, *brain-cycles*, *social deviance*, and *non-routine* (Fogg, 2009 p. 5-6). Time, money, and physical effort are self-explanatory; however, brain-cycles is a specific term Fogg (2009) used to explain the difficulties a person has cognitively. A person might have a hard time analyzing material or understanding concepts that require a higher cognitive ability. The social aspect of ability is shown in the social deviance item, which is when a behavior is not within the norm of the person's culture. These types of ability are necessary for the behavior to occur; although, once the person has completed the task, it is important to make it a habit. Non-routine is the effect that new experiences have on a person. The probability of a continuous behavior is relying on the fact that the person stays consistent, considering unfamiliar situations decrease the overall will to perform an action (Fogg, 2009, p. 6). Once the experience becomes habitual, the person is more likely to keep performing that action. Money, social deviance, and physical effort were not included in the analysis because they were not affecting learning in this school.

Triggers are external factors that set off a behavior when motivation and ability are over certain thresholds, and they come in the form of sounds, signs, or feelings (Fogg, 2009 p. 3). The behavior can be affected immediately after a trigger, as shown by the classic example of Pavlov and his dog. However, a trigger can also be set a long time before the behavior is observable, like when someone has had insufficient sleep and shows signs of frustration hours after waking up (Rooks & Graybill). Three types of triggers are explained in the FBM. *Sparks*, are triggers designed to help if the person has low motivation; although, it requires

material designed to either visualize fear or boost a sense of hope (Fogg, 2013, p. 6).

*Facilitator* triggers show the subject that the action is easy, which can be presented by breaking down the behavior into simple components. The final triggers are called *signals* and are used for people who both have enough motivation and ability. It is mostly utilized to remind someone that have both ability and motivation, that they are capable of performing the action.

### **2.1.1 FBM in a school context**

To apply FBM into practice, we have to look at which variables have the most impact on the learners. If the behavior that is analyzed is an engagement in English production, we need to specify what motivation, ability, and trigger mean in this specific context. In this study, I focus on immediate triggers that could be made by the teacher to engage a willingness to communicate. The pleasure / pain motivator is based on our basic human drives, where we avoid pain as much as possible through instincts and strive towards getting rewarded. This would be relevant in a school context if we translate the concept to an aspect of enjoyment in the subject, content, or learning in general and compare it to the effects of boredom. The hope / fear motivator should be the most probable prediction for Swedish EFL students. According to Fogg (2009) hope is the greatest motivator and fear the biggest obstacle for persuasion (p. 4). The teacher's aim could be to trigger a sense of hope in the students which might negate the fear of speaking or writing. Fear in an educational perspective generally comes from high expectations, a worry of feeling judged, being evaluated negatively, and in some cases from the risk of not being socially accepted (rejection), which is the last motivator in the FBM (He, 2018; Szyszka, 2017; Granberg, 2001).

Ability is based more on the teacher practices than on the student's internal feelings.

The amount of time the teacher allows students to prepare for tasks could be a relevant



variable, considering some students like to take their time preparing speeches or proofreading, but also because they have time to formulate themselves mentally. Moreover, creating material suitable for each student should be a mission for every teacher, as brain-cycles in English education are represented in students' understanding of material and the content. Difficult material could be challenging, especially in another language than the L1. Some students might be comfortable with the language if it is done with familiar topics but get anxious using it in unexplored contexts. Non-routine is a lack of methodology for making English production a habitual behavior to the extent that students no longer see it as a new experience.

Triggers are the pedagogical methods teachers use to include students in communication. Things like eye contact, encouraging words, or individual talks could be factors that impact classroom behavior. The spark trigger is hard to utilize since it would require extensive work and has to be adjusted for personal needs, which is unrealistic for teachers. Instead, the other types of triggers: facilitators and signals are preferable. They do not require more than a quick message to remind or encourage, and they can be used throughout the lessons by the teacher.

## **2.2 Anxiety**

The Oxford Dictionary explains anxiety as “a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease about something with an uncertain outcome”, and “a nervous disorder marked by excessive uneasiness and apprehension, typically with compulsive behaviour or panic attacks” (English Oxford living dictionaries), and these are the definitions which will be used in this study. This study focuses on the role anxiety has on the lack of communicative behavior in the English classroom, in relation to the FBM.

### **2.2.1 Trait and state anxiety**

There are two different types of anxiety, as categorized by psychologists: trait anxiety, and state anxiety. They have been explained as “a result of a temporal sequence of interacting internal and external stimuli, cognitive factors, and defense mechanisms” (Cai, 2018, p. 48-49).

Trait anxiety is a continuous, stable emotion with no specific connection to the situation (Horwitz, 2001, p. 113). Disregarding the context, this type of anxiety is the probability of an individual being anxious in any situation based on that individual's experiences and presumptions (Szyszka, 2017, p. 55). It should therefore be categorized as general anxiety and it is based more on internal factors than external situational triggers. State anxiety, also referred to as situation-specific anxiety, on the other hand, is fluxional and short-lived (Zheng, as cited in Karami & Rastegar, 2015, p. 2387). Karami and Rastegar (2015) explain state anxiety as a sudden change in the subject's emotions which can be predicted by locating the specific situation that triggered the behavior (p. 2387).

Macintyre (1998) suggests that language anxiety is a form of situational anxiety and should therefore be observed in a classroom context (as cited in Zheng & Cheng, 2018, p. 2). By realizing the differences between these two types of anxiety we can more easily observe learners and judge what issues they have in the classroom. Sudden changes in behavior indicate situation-specific triggers that could be prevented in order for the learner to be more comfortable in future situations. If the student is generally not talkative regardless of the task or setting, it is likely that a general anxiety, such as social anxiety, causes the student to be quiet. Trait anxiety has also shown to be a reason for more frequent intervals of state anxiety (Szyszka, 2017, p. 56). Personal traits and general attitudes cannot predict situational human behavior. They are not likely the underlying factors for situation-specific behaviors occurring,

but should rather be seen as contributors to FLA (Ajzen, 1991, p. 181). This suggests that different types of trait anxiety may play a part in language anxiety because it could decrease the learners' motivation, although it is not to be classed as the prime variable.

### **2.2.2 Language anxiety**

The symptoms learners experience when they are in situations that causes a high level of anxiety to impact their cognitive ability not only through distractions such as dizziness and panic attacks, but also by limiting their working memory (Zheng, & Cheng, 2018, p. 3). Even more alarming, the neuromuscular effects of tensing up in uncomfortable situations could lead to problems with pronunciation (Szyszka, 2017, p. 53). The symptoms set them up for failure and through the mistakes regarding pronunciation the students become discouraged from speaking again. Thus, the fear of speaking becomes a cycle of self-confirmation of their fears through proficiency mistakes that are based on their anxiety. A study by Horwitz et al (1986) showed that students in the language classroom did not have an issue with speaking in front of a large group as long as their speeches were prepared, but experienced anxiety when they had to analyze information and give a response before having time to think (p. 126).

Production is not always the prime reason for language anxiety, as reception has shown to be the most anxiety provoking area in some cases. He (2018) did a study on several areas within FLA in China where 19 out of 30 students shared that the spoken form of the foreign language was, according to them, the most important part of the language. However, 16 out of the same 30 students stated that listening was the most anxiety provoking area (p. 128-129). These results suggest that by engaging in a discussion, the learner is forced to to interpret what the speaker is saying, analyze it, and give a response drawing on the previously given information. This is a rather complex task when done in a language that the learner has yet to perfect, which could cause them to feel uncomfortable and stressed.

Being exposed to language and constantly being forced to speak the language could be anxiety provoking in general terms but might help with specific types of anxiety. Dewey, Belnap, & Steffen (2018) did a study with one group of *study abroad* students and another group of foreign language students in their home country, using a cortisol test to measure FLA. The cortisol levels indicated that study abroad students showed less classroom language anxiety after they had been exposed to the other culture and had increased their proficiency despite having a higher level of trait anxiety (p. 157). This suggests that fear of negative evaluation and overall language proficiency have a direct impact on language anxiety, and that trait anxiety is not always included in FLA. Be that as it may, many cases of foreign language anxiety are results of cultural expectations. Different cultures have different interpretations of what correct English should sound or look like. These studies might not necessarily be applicable to Swedish students, considering generalizations cannot be made cross-culture because of culture-specific factors such as expectation from parents and teachers (Zheng & Cheng, 2018, p. 2). With that in mind, my study was not meant as a tool for falsification of other studies within this area, but rather a complement to the current research.

### **2.2.3 Fear of negative evaluation**

The fear of negative evaluation is closely connected with trait anxiety. People with trait anxiety are likely to not participate in situations where they can be judged or be viewed negatively (Szyszka, 2017, p. 56). Expectations from the school or teacher also impact students' behaviors and anxiety levels. In one of the earlier studies of FLA, Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope suggest 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" (1986, p. 127). This might not be a universal claim or even generalizable beyond this sampling, but it is at least a constituent to keep in mind. The motivator of hope /

fear is closely connected to the fear of negative evaluation, but it could also be an issue of ability. Increasing the time variable might also help students, as they would have time to think and prepare an answer. A group of Chinese students was asked about what made them experience anxiety when speaking a FL, and a majority of the factors could be linked to proficiency and a risk of negative evaluation. Some of these factors were: fear of losing face, lack of vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, having too high self-expectations, and poor FL proficiency (He, 2018, p. 133).

#### **2.2.4 Test anxiety**

According to Salehi & Marefat (2014) test anxiety is a general feeling of worry towards tests and does not affect the learners' foreign language listening ability, and that it should be excluded entirely from the analysis of FLA (2014, p. 941). Similar to the fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety is the fear of feeling judged based on performance. Although, it does not account for factors such as losing one's face because of mistakes in the classroom, as it is simply connected to assessment and not the social factors. Liu & Jackson (2008) argued that the fear of negative evaluation has a direct impact on test performance (as cited in Rastegar & Karami, 2015, p. 2388). Rouhani's (2008) approach to test anxiety differs from the belief that it stems from personal traits and a general worry; but Instead, he suggests that the English classroom has a specific type of test anxiety where students are aware of the constant evaluation of language throughout the lessons (p. 44). This would make foreign languages a specific case where test anxiety is incorporated within the subject.

#### **2.2.5 Willingness to communicate**

The reasons for students not participating in written or oral production does not necessarily have to be a lack of motivation, but rather a feeling of seclusion. In a classroom, there will always be a specific culture expected to be followed with certain

arrangements that “occur as intertwined – or enmeshed – dimensions of the practice, enabling and constraining particular kinds of sayings” (Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2017, p. 36). A case study following a Greek student learning Swedish as a foreign language showed that a normally talkative and extroverted student was reluctant to speak in the language classroom. She admitted to not being afraid of making mistakes and she seldom felt uncomfortable in the classroom, yet she held back in discussions because she wanted to process the information given and prepare an answer with thorough thought behind it (Granberg, 2001, p. 104). The aspect of time, as discussed through the FBM, is important in this case, because some students might get categorized as FLA students when they are just taking their time to develop correct answers. Another reason for students not participating could be their own self-perceived language proficiency (Rastegar & Karami, 2015, p. 2388). This would instead put the learners’ anxiety and unwillingness to speak in the motivation category.

### **2.2.6 Research questions**

The purpose of this study was to interview EFL teachers in a Swedish secondary school about their students’ behavior. Their interpretations were analyzed in relation to the FBM. By drawing on behavioral models, questions were asked regarding the students’ unwillingness to speak or write using the foreign language in school. This research project indicated how common issues in the Swedish EFL classroom were approached, and if the FBM was a useful tool to prevent FLA. The study was motivated by two research questions regarding behavior.

- How do teachers interpret the effect foreign language anxiety has on their students’ willingness to communicate?
- How well can the Fogg behavior model be used to analyze students’ behaviors?

### 3. Method: The Case Study

There were many factors that required a narrow approach to this study. Therefore, a case study was the optimal solution in regard to the limitations. According to Nunan (1992), a case study is the investigation of a specific phenomenon, place, or person in their usual context (p.75). As this project was limited in time, the case study fit my aims of viewing a specific instance. Case studies also function as a tool to find new hypotheses or testing already existing ones (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 20). Through my research, I not only interpreted the results from interviews dealing with FLA, but also the use of the FBM in a Swedish EFL classroom context. The theory, to my knowledge, had not yet been applied in this area which made this case study an example, even though not generalizable, on how the theory can be used. Stake (2000) argues for the usefulness of patterns in behavior and that context-bound phenomena are central for case studies (p. 436). By identifying behaviors, this study was indeed very context-specific in its nature, which validated the use of a case study.

Generally, researchers are sceptical towards case studies that are not applicable in other contexts or cases. Even though the study itself does not speak for a larger demographic, the procedure should inspire further research within the subject. (Stake, 2000, p. 439). Considering the model that was used in this study has been proven to be reliable and had a clear method for application, reliability was not an issue. I cannot ensure that facts and reality were being mirrored through their answers. Nevertheless, there is value and reliability in interpretations as a concept, such as the use of case studies to expand a researched area with new experiences and interpretations, rather than to narrow it down (Stake, 2000, p. 24).

There are six different types of case studies according to Bennett and George (2005), and this study was a mixture of what they call *theory testing* and a *plausibility probe* (p. 75). The plausibility probe is the piloting of a hypothesis or theory in a study, and theory testing is seeing if existing theories work in different contexts. By testing the FBM in the Swedish EFL

classroom context, I tested if the theory worked and how it should be used, but considering it is a rather untested theory, it fell into the category of plausibility probes as well. Through the use of the theory testing focus, one should see in what way the theory is best applied to a language learner's context (Bennett & George, p. 75). The interviews were analyzed by relating the teachers' interpretations to the different motivators, the degree of ability for the students and to what extent triggers are used to help them.

### **3.1 Interviews**

Interviews are great tools for expanding current research, considering each conversation is unique. Silverman (2000) raised an issue with interviews, arguing that observations could be a more valid way of understanding people compared to interviewing them. (p. 825). This is something I have contemplated. To really understand a student's behavior, I feel like observations are required and that interviews, although helpful, do not give a detailed picture. Nevertheless, I made the decision to not include the observation method in the study because of the limitations to this project. As shown in the previous research, there are various ways to identify language anxiety, and all of them add a layer of understanding to this complex phenomenon. This study followed a semi-structured interview approach because of how common research within the concept of anxiety in the classroom has been. Adding a layer of interpretation and subjectivity through semi-structured interviews gave the previous research another angle instead of more quantifiable data. The interviewees, in this case, answered questions based on the definitions of the phenomenon created by the interviewer.

The interview questions focused on student motivation, ability and the external triggers made by the teacher in both oral and written production. These questions were constructed to focus on the time limit given students, the pleasure / pain component, the brain-cycles, the risk of social rejection, the hope / fear motivator, triggers from the teacher and



lastly the habitual aspect of behavior. The topic of the study was explained before the interview was started, but information about the theoretical framework was left out to ensure that I did not persuade the interviewees into agreeing with the research. The interview only contained factual questions, because a non-factual opinion could alter the results of the analysis. Even though subjectivity is preferred, I want it to be based on the objective facts the teachers have collected over time and not on a hypothetical argument. Furthermore, considering this is a rather complex area, factual questions let the interviewer elaborate on the meaning of the questions without risking a biased answer, which is not the case in opinion questions (May, 2001, p. 102).

### **3.2 Participants**

Three out of the four teachers that were interviewed had at some point taught the same group of students in the English subject. They were all employed at a Swedish secondary school and were interviewed using a semi-structured approach. One of the participants had not yet graduated and had less than two months of experience, one was newly graduated with almost a year of experience, and the other two had graduated with at least 10 years of English teaching experience. The comparative choice for the participants was made to see if there were any contrasts between teachers that still are influenced by academia and theory and the teachers who have created their own routines based on practices. However, this study did not evaluate which teachers provided the most valuable information, but rather searched for patterns in how they approach their students' behaviors. I intended to create as broad of a perspective as possible in a single case, and the biggest disparity between the participants was teaching experience. If best practices are shown to be important to this topic, then this is a problem for newly examined teachers who have not developed their own practices yet. There could be differences in the interpretation in the classroom based on experience, and a different

approach to practices might be the result of that. Correspondingly, by doing this, I should avoid the issues of validity and reliability that come with biographical factors (Nunan, 1992, p. 150). This specific school has traditionally had high performing students, especially in the English subject. This has caused a very specific school culture where social status is affected by the performance in class. This caused students to experience different types of anxiety because of high expectations, compared to schools with lower average performance.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed based on their context. Through the semi-structured questions in the interviews, the interviewees' subjective opinions on the matter were encouraged. The questions were open-ended, because I value the subjective interpretation of the teachers and I wanted to go in depth into the area. Moreover, because all four teachers had taught the same students in the EFL classroom, a comparative approach to the results made the most sense. Focusing on contrasting results also made the semi-structured interview a reliable approach (May, 2001, p. 137). Although the subjectivity is important in this study, the answers must be related to FLA in some way and the questions in the interview help guide the participants. A qualitative approach was applied to this case study because of the interpretative nature of these issues. Seeing as language anxiety is a commonly researched area, I found the qualitative research useful since it also aims to set guidelines for phenomena that have already been explored (Alami, 2015, p. 1332). Practitioners within qualitative studies are "committed to the naturalistic perspective and to the interpretive understanding of human experience" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 7), which further validated a qualitative approach to this study. According to Alami (2015), qualitative research is based on finding patterns instead of creating hypotheses, and it focuses on describing and exploring new areas (p. 1334-1335).

## **4. Analysis**

All the interviewees have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity. The less experienced teachers have been given the names Bert, who has completed the teacher education program, and Elise who has not yet graduated. The teachers with more experience will be called Zack and Kassandra.

### **4.1 Participation**

All interviewees, except one, reported that 15-20% of their students were actively participating in the classroom. This does not mean that the rest of the class suffered from language anxiety, but could instead be related to other issues within the FBM such as boredom or difficult content. The result that differed was Elise, who reported that close to 50% of the students actively participated. It is difficult to say why this estimation differed from the rest of the interviewees as the teachers shared a common approach to teaching and the groups of students were the same. Even though the percentage of students participating in oral and written communication varied between the teachers, their interpretations of FLA were relatively similar.

### **4.2 Motivators in the Classroom**

Personal interests in content or the subject itself seemed to be a meaningful part of motivating students. Being knowledgeable within the topic that was discussed increased the chance of oral participation. This has led to students only speaking occasionally when they were dealing with familiar content:

Interviewer: If a student participates once, are they more likely to keep participating?

Bert: It depends on the subject. Because if the students have a personal interest when you teach them, they are much more likely to raise their hand.

This quote highlights how the use of content in the classroom can be a very critical issue. The material should not be created solely with a language focused approach. Of course, aspects such as vocabulary, grammar, and even the directives from the Swedish national agency for education need to be included. Yet, if we want to include the learners in discussions, an integration between their interest and the school system's expectation would be preferred. Cassandra's results also revealed that the choice of content was imperative: "If there is someone who is interested in a subject, they usually excel in this area which is why the broad use of content helps". Moreover, she argued that it was the playful environment that made students become more active. This does not only suggest that easier or more familiar content increases participation, but also that using games or roleplay could be a good introduction to productive language.

Fear was arguably a significant element by increasing FLA at this school. It did not seem to originate from high expectations from the teachers, but rather from the students' thoughts of embarrassing themselves in front of their friends.

Kassandra: I asked students to write down what made them uncomfortable while speaking and they answered that quiet giggling or whispering in the classroom while they were speaking made them anxious.

This comment supports the argument that a fear of evaluation comes from several directions in the English classroom. The fear could be expectations of mispronunciation, not knowing how to structure sentences in the target language, or giving the wrong answer. Elise proposed that this issue was partially linked to students constantly being under scrutiny, but also

because of the different levels of proficiency: “They are more comfortable speaking when they are not judged by everyone. Of course, it depends on whom they are grouped with. Sometimes, I place them based on their proficiency so they are equally ‘good’”. According to her, talking with someone with the same language knowledge as themselves suggested to help them become more comfortable.

In contrast to fear, hope showed to not be as good of a motivator as in other general behavioral aspects. The only positive outcome in the English classroom the students hoped for was better grades. However, Cassandra pointed out that at the end of each year students gradually became more involved: “I have students who do not like to raise their hands to answer but do it anyway when they feel like they need to prove themselves. As an example: if a student has performed badly on a listening test, they will be more engaged in lessons dealing with listening”. The negative aspect of this statement is that students do not show to be motivated for their own futuristic hopes. There were no indications from students to actually perform well and improve for their own benefits. It is difficult to say if this is a fault within the education for not encouraging students, or if learners of that age are simply living in the present without much thought directed towards their future.

One key element to the unwillingness to communicate in this study was argued to stem from the motivator of social acceptance / rejection in combination with the other demotivator: fear of negative evaluation. The teachers based their statements on their own observations over a long period of time and from talking to students. Zack suggested that English in this specific school was linked to status. Being proficient and fluent in a foreign language would increase your social status, whereas if you make mistakes the other students might see you as inferior. The solution according to him was to split the classes into smaller groups to reduce the amount of pressure on the students:

Zack: I think that the reason is the security in smaller numbers. You do not have the risk of making a fool out of yourself in the 'big room'. The other students don't glare at you when you speak, and making mistakes is obvious in the English classroom.

Considering that students' content mistakes while answering questions do not affect their grade, this unwillingness to speak was not likely a link to evaluation, making the thought of being socially rejected essential. The impact of social rejection, Zack thought, could be massively destructive to teenagers. He also stressed the importance of students being accepted and how they were perceived by their peers. When students are making mistakes in the classroom, they might not damage their grades, but instead, put their social status at risk. If they compare the results of making mistakes to the rewards of being right, the positive outcome is not enough to make them risk being wrong

#### **4.3 Content, cognition and creativity**

The material used in the English classroom stretches over several subjects and requires a large vocabulary to be understood. Not only could the language be difficult, but understanding specific concepts is also an obstacle for learners. One thing that stood out in the interview with Bert was regarding the use of open questions in the classroom:

Bert: It is usually easier for them (the students) to answer questions with a specific expected answer. The open questions require them to have more language proficiency in order to answer in front of the whole class, which makes it harder for them.

Contrary to the research which suggests that open questions put less pressure on students because of the lack of restriction on an expected answer, this teacher argued that

unopinionated answers might require less language proficiency (Cai, 2018, p. 63). Zack also argued against open questions with regards to FLA, because too much freedom and interpretation in the answer engages the students' creative abilities. Thus, it creates a vast amount of choices of what is socially acceptable to say. The issue is no longer who can give a right or wrong answer, but rather who linguistically can articulate their opinions on topics that are abstract or interpretative.

Teachers should engage low-performing students by using easily processed information to reduce the impact on the brain-cycles variable, and also give them enough time to analyze it. According to Fogg (2009), making the ability easier will increase the subject's likelihood to perform the action (p. 3). Therefore, difficult material could be the mental block for students that want to participate in the language classroom but are afraid to make mistakes regarding content. Zack explained how common this was in his class:

Zack: If you speak about something that you are interested in or know much about it becomes easier to speak since you can focus only on the linguistic area. You have to help them a lot when they are using difficult content, not with the language, but with the definitions.

This statement raises an issue within the EFL education. The anxiety could have come from either social rejection or a fear of negative evaluation; although, the problem did not seem to stem from speaking the language. This is important, because if misinterpreted it might affect the students' English grades when the issue has nothing to do with the language itself, but rather the content. Cassandra commented on these problems as well:

Kassandra: Students act differently depending on the situation. If they are going to answer a right / wrong question even the proficient students could be

quiet because they are unsure of the content. On the other hand, weaker language performing students might raise their hands because they know the answer.

This statement suggests that the highest motivator, in this case, was pleasure rather than hope. Nonetheless, it might also mean that the students with high ability could have been compensating for low motivation, and therefore participated more. However, Students showed to be much more likely to participate when they had a personal interest in the subject. No definite statement about if this is a result of students knowing the topic or being interested can be made; but nevertheless, the two largest factors for FLA remains to be pleasure and brain-cycles. If the teacher can approach insecure students with content that is familiar, they seemed to be more motivated to engage the topic; and thus, started to create a habit for speaking.

The factor of time in this case study was not as relevant as I had previously anticipated. The interviews suggested that given time to prepare a speech or a text would not increase the quality of either the language or the content. The only effect time had on students was to increase the probability and willingness of them producing something. Notwithstanding, this did not seem to be a long-term solution as students would go back to not participating after this specific assignment was completed. Cassandra suggested that the increased participation is not based on time, but rather because the students get a chance to become familiar with the subject:

Kassandra: By letting students prepare something, you usually get the insecure students to speak, but when they are in a different situation, they will still resort to not speaking. The more they know about the subject the more they usually speak.



This observation would explain why students go back to being quiet when new areas are explored. As an English teacher, the goal is not simply to get students to produce material without any purpose. The quality needs to be addressed as well, which would make this type of exercise pointless in this school regarding long term linguistic learning outcomes.

#### **4.4 Becoming Familiar with Speaking and Writing**

Becoming familiar with the language and one's own voice could decrease overall language anxiety. Elise shared an example of a student who started speaking on a regular basis just because the student was encouraged to answer one question in class. The second time she was just slightly less reluctant, and gradually she improved and realized that participation was easy. She used the facilitator trigger, which showed to work in this particular situation. This was a rare case; however, as Zack argues for a longer period of habitual training:

Zack: I think it requires more than one occasion, I feel, before they start talking more. I think that if the students in their spare time practice English along with my advice, they might come back to the classroom more confident. They have to get comfortable over a longer period of time.

A singular moment of class participation is a good start, but if teachers do not capitalize on that moment, learners will not become used to the behavior. According to him, students should instead practice at home where no one can hear them.

Overall the teachers in this study were uniform in their opinion on forming habits for participation. Although, these habits do not seem to cross over into other areas or situations. According to Kassandra, there were students who participated regularly in group discussions or individual tasks and had grown comfortable in that specific situation. But transcending that stage to the next level in a full class was occasionally an issue. To combat this, she had

requirements of each group to present at least one key point they had discussed. Following this structure, the students knew what was expected of them, and they could choose the areas which they were most familiar or secure with. Naturally, implementing her strategy will require more engagement from the teacher. For students to get used to speaking and writing, the teacher must push them individually. The trigger in the case of the pleasure motivator requires the student to feel personally connected to the content and have a genuine interest. For teachers to achieve a positive outcome, they must first realize what that trigger is for each student. Through individual conversations or listening to group discussions, the teacher can see patterns in topics that generate an active discussion.

#### **4.5 Practical Solutions**

Defining central issues within FLA is difficult seeing as many students have different reasons for not wanting or daring to participate. Thus, having one planned approach will not work. Cassandra shared a certain example of a student whom she could not get to produce anything orally. The student needed to show some form of spoken skills or they would not get a grade. The way she solved this was to talk to the student individually and tell them in advance what questions she would ask in the whole class, and the student could choose which one they would like to answer. They then had the opportunity to research the topic and therefore not have to worry about giving the wrong answer. By removing the factors of brain-cycles and the fear of negative evaluation which were shown to be central in these students' anxiety, the student was left with only the motivator of social acceptance or rejection. Having one obstacle to conquer is easier than three which made the behavior easier.

Of course, this method has to change eventually if we want the students to be autonomous and able to engage in conversations, but the first step according to Cassandra and Zack was to make the student comfortable in the situation and create habits for speaking. Bert

promoted the idea of incorporating personal interest in the content language. He argued that by distracting students from language expectations and evaluation, learners would be more engaged: “Often when you take away the pressure of the exercise being evaluated there are a lot of students who let it (the pressure) go because they do not have to worry if they are correct, and suddenly more students are participating than usual. You trick them into speaking sometimes it feels like”. Following his method, it is required of the teacher to be aware of timing in education. Forcing students to speak in an exercise dealing with complex grammar could just be destructive for future behavior. A better solution would instead be to disguise the practices and evaluation by engaging personal or interesting content for the students. As the interpretation of what is enjoyable is subjective, numerous areas should be covered. Alternatively, the teacher can talk to the anxious learners during or after the lessons to find topics that could help them become more engaged.

## **5. Discussion**

Even though the interviews were successful, and the theoretical framework was reliable, the spectrum of variables was still too vast to summarize the solution to FLA with one type of methodology. However, this study’s aim was not to solve the issues of foreign language anxiety, but rather share a new perspective on the topic. Based on the experiences of the teachers in this study, other teachers could expand the range of their practices to be more prepared in their own cases. According to the interviewees in this study, it appeared as though the pleasure / pain motivator was partly responsible for the lack of participation. Boredom did not seem to be an issue as neither the interviews nor previous research viewed it as a major contributor to FLA. Pleasure, on the other hand, showed to impact behavior in a more dramatic way, according to the interviewees. Personal interest has shown to be supportive for students’ motivation and participation and thus proficiency as well (Cai, 2018, p. 18-19). The

hope / fear motivator; however, had a larger significance. Hope was not a common theme in the interviews, except for one instance where Cassandra mentioned students being more active if it could raise their grades at the end of the semester. Contrastively, fear has shown to be far more impactful in the English classroom. Szyszka (2017) argued that fear not only stems from the fact that learners are constantly being evaluated by both peers and the teacher but rather from the fact that they cannot fully express their thoughts in the target language (p. 68).

Social rejection appeared to be one of the most consistent components in the classes with low participation. In spite of this, FLA can affect areas where the communication is one-dimensional as in written tasks, which indicates that the social aspect is not solely dominant (He, 2018, p. 30). Considering these results, this component can vary based on school culture and the teachers' methodology. In this specific case, proficiency in the English language was argued to be a sign of status. The students risked their place in the social hierarchy if they made mistakes. This is very culture-specific and does not necessarily resonate with other schools. The most effective approach to solving this issue was suggested by all participants to group students either based on their connection with their peers, or their proficiency.

Many areas within the English education in Sweden has difficult content, and not only linguistically. Similar to the students in this study, a study by Zheng and Cheng (2018) suggested that students were less likely to answer questions when they were unsure of the content (p. 11). There is data that suggests a negative correlation between FLA and difficult learning material. Bahmani and Farvardin (2017) argued that English reading performance is influenced by anxiety, which causes both written and oral production to be at risk (p. 188). Bert explained how dense topics like law and order or the environment decreased the overall participation. One could argue that these areas were not as interesting, pushing the problem towards the pleasure / pain motivator rather than brain-cycles. However, the interviews

showed that students were less likely to speak even in a one-on-one discussion with the teacher when they had additional encouragement. An unmotivated student would generally provide an answer they are sure of if the teacher asks them directly, but seeing as this was not the case, this would suggest a brain-cycle related issue. Content that is interpretive and requires creativity should be postponed if participation is overall low. Of course, being able to articulate one's opinion and discuss different topics are expected at the end of their education; however, those types of exercises should be introduced when students have already become used to speaking the foreign language.

Time restrictions were in this case not considered threats to the students, according to the teachers. The main argument for time being a highly consistent item in FLA is that students need to have time analyzing what the teacher has said, and then formulate an answer in their mind. Nonetheless, I would argue that discussions in smaller groups was a better way to impede this issue, rather than giving students more time in whole class situations. The students would have time to evaluate the content; and furthermore, have the opportunity to verbalize their thoughts. Therefore, discussions were more prioritized by the interviewees in comparison to having full class questions and answers, because the students need to practice in order to reduce their fear of speaking.

Additionally, removing the non-routine aspect of learning by constantly activating the students was suggested to reduce FLA over time. Numerous research show that being exposed to a second language in a natural environment decreases overall language anxiety (Dewey et al., 2018; Allen & Herron, 2003; Lee, 2015). By constantly being forced to speak another language, learners could create habits which become easier every time they participate (Fogg, 2013, p. 5). Before habits are formed, the students would have to engage a commitment to participation. They need to take the first step, and without the teacher's help, it is less likely to happen. Students studying abroad have reported that they felt high levels of state anxiety

before being exposed to the culture and language, yet they would be more accustomed to the language after the tests (Allen & Herron, 2003). Much like Zack suggested that feedback decreased overall anxiety, Lee (2015) promotes the use of corrective feedback in the classroom (p. 85). Horwitz argued that being honest yet supportive with students seemed to have a positive effect on the willingness to communicate and a negative effect on FLA (as cited in Dewey, 2018, p. 145).

### **Conclusion**

Based on the results of this study, some variables showed to affect FLA more negatively than others. Yet, the issues of FLA were too complex in even this single class to narrow down the spectrum to a single factor. Because of the intricacy of this topic, there is no specific method a teacher can implement that will solve the issues. Nevertheless, by using the FBM and being aware of the impact of FLA, teachers should be able to find the most common variables in their classrooms.

The interviewees argued that the motivator of pleasure was the most effective tool for engaging students. Approaching English education by trying to spike personal interest with specific content will not only engage the pleasure motivator, which was suggestively effective in this case, but also distract students from the fear of failing or being evaluated. There seemed to be a link between personal interests and content knowledge, where the inadequacy of participation was affected by either the content or the students' interests. Having a high interest according to the FBM should be enough to compensate for the lack of content-knowledge and vice-versa.

Social acceptance was only relevant in the sense that it was the opposite of social rejection. The students' behaviors weren't motivated by the thought of being accepted, but rather by the chance to avoid being rejected. The highest demotivator, on the other hand,

seemed to be a balance between social rejection and a fear of either failure or negative evaluation. Specifically in this case, speaking English was a status marker, and being improficient in the language could damage your social status at the school. In accordance with current research, fear seemed to be the largest motivation related variable for a lack of participation. The constant evaluation in the English classroom caused students to be afraid of giving incorrect answers, partially because of content, but also because of factors such as mispronunciation or not knowing certain words.

Time showed to cause a slight increase in the percentage of participation (5-10%), which means that in other cases this might be more of an issue. Even so, time in this case did not show to be a result of students needing time to think in order to overcome anxiety, but more so because of difficult content. The most problematic area within the English learning classroom in relation to learners' ability, as reported by the interviewees, was related to brain-cycles. Content should suggestively be simplified at times where student participation is low. When students knew enough information about the subject they were more likely to answer. If this shows to be a general issue, then teachers need to take responsibility for creating material that is accessible for students who are less proficient.

Finally, disregarding the reason for FLA, the aspect of routine was shown to help students become more confident and participate more. No matter if the focus on the classroom is to increase social acceptance, hope, or social acceptance, the end procedure is to capitalize on behaviors. As argued by the interviews, using the target language once does not change the students' attitudes or anxiety levels, because a routine is necessary. Considering FLA has shown to be affecting students' test performance, these issues need to be addressed (Zheng & Cheng, 2018, p. 14). Corrective and positive feedback, creating habits, and engaging one-to-one discussions with students were all practical and valid solutions from the interviewees.

Only by actively trying to improve attitudes in the classroom can the teacher help those who are too afraid to try.

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### **Appendix A: Interview questions**

- How many students are actively participating in the classroom?
- Are students who do not participate in class more likely to participate in smaller groups?
- Do you as a teacher do anything differently when talking to students in groups or individually?
- Do you get different responses when you asked open compared to closed questions?
- Do you get different results from having students talk in pairs or smaller groups before including the whole class?
- Are they more likely to talk or write when they are not being evaluated, as in roleplay or talking with friends?
- How much time is given to students before they are expected to give an answer?
- Is the material or language used challenging or difficult?
- If a student participates once, are they more likely to keep participating?

1.