

Foreign language anxiety: The case of young learners of English in Swedish primary classrooms

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Although foreign language anxiety is a widely studied construct assumed to develop from negative experiences of language instruction, few researchers have focused on young learners in this regard. This multiple case study investigates levels and triggers of language anxiety in Swedish primary classrooms under rather favorable learning conditions with a supportive, non-competitive atmosphere, and without formal knowledge requirements or grades. A total of 225 learners, aged 8–12, studying English as their first foreign language completed a self-report questionnaire, a modified version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986), eliciting learners' reactions to oral classroom participation. Foreign language anxiety was found along a continuum among learners. To investigate similarities and differences among students of differing anxiety levels, they were grouped into three categories: low, medium and high anxiety. The high anxiety group included 18.2% of learners, and for most of them, this anxiety was situation-specific and closely related to their own oral performance during English lessons. However, many classroom situations triggered language anxiety in other learners as well. It may therefore be advisable for teachers to reflect on common classroom practices that induce anxiety, rather than viewing language anxiety as a disadvantageous characteristic of individual learners. The results call for in-depth studies of classroom contexts where language anxiety develops. Moreover, the study's contribution encompasses new perspectives on research methodology with respect to young learners and in relation to foreign language anxiety.

Keywords: primary language education, questionnaire adaptation, classroom participation, young language learners, FLCAS

1 Introduction

Many language teachers share the experience that some learners in their classrooms choose to remain silent and are more reluctant to engage in communication than their classmates. Such behavior may be the consequence of *foreign language anxiety* (FLA), which refers to feelings of apprehension, frustration and embarrassment resulting from the challenge of self-expression in a new language (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). Teachers thus face the challenge of catering to the needs of anxious young learners, who may withdraw or express frustration, while balancing support and challenge for all learners in a classroom

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of mixed language proficiencies. Children currently constitute an increasing proportion of students learning English throughout the world (Macaro & Lee, 2013). Furthermore, there is a rapid increase of diversity in classrooms as a result of migration and varying amounts of extramural exposure to English (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016). Therefore, a better understanding of the processes of affect and attitude formation, and possible ways of securing positive learning experiences and effective practices in primary language instruction, is needed (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2015).

The dynamic and contextual aspects of FLA have been increasingly acknowledged (Gkonou, Daubney, & Dewaele 2017; Horwitz, 2017), resulting in calls for more studies from varying demographic groups and sociocultural settings on learner experiences of FLA and interaction in their respective classrooms. In response, the current paper sets out to investigate levels of foreign language anxiety in ten Swedish classrooms, with learners aged 8–12, and the extent to which common classroom practices and activities ignite such anxiety. Learners' reactions to a number of classroom procedures were examined using a self-report questionnaire, adapted to this age group and the current setting. Responses of learners with low, medium and high anxiety were compared, to find trends and similarities among students. This study is part of a larger mixed methods project aiming to illuminate young language learners' (YLLs') subjective experiences of foreign language instruction. More qualitative approaches will follow, exploring YLLs' beliefs and experiences, in order to enrich our understanding of the early stages of FLA and how language instruction is perceived by students, to help nuance and problematize the nature of FLA in young learners.

The purpose of the present study is not to arrive at quantitative findings that are generalizable to other contexts. The wide variety of environmental conditions such as extramural target language (TL) exposure, teaching approach, formal examination practices, sociocultural norms, extramural instruction, class size etc., arguably makes generalizations difficult. Nevertheless, the current context represents an interesting case for several reasons. First, there is a linguistic proximity between the L1, Swedish, and the TL, English (Lindgren & Muñoz, 2013), as well as extensive extra-mural TL exposure. Second, the curriculum focuses on inclusion and non-competitiveness, and there are no formal exams or grades awarded for this age group. And third, the teachers, all qualified to teach English in their respective age groups, actively volunteered to let the researcher into their classroom, suggesting that they are confident teachers in charge of well-functioning classrooms. These environmental factors are thought to mitigate or prevent anxiety (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). The context thus offers favorable learning conditions, making it interesting to narrow the focus to classroom practices that may still trigger anxiety. The current study aims to generate insights about the nature of FLA in these primary school cases that will also be valid to consider in relation to language instruction for young learners elsewhere.

2 Background

2.1 Foreign language anxiety

Language anxiety is defined as “the worry and negative emotion aroused when learning and using a second language and is especially relevant in a classroom where

self-expression takes place” (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014, p. 3). It is thus situation-specific and involves cognitive and affective as well as physical and social dimensions (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) claimed FLA to be one of the most prominent factors for predicting success in foreign language learning and to date, there is a general consensus regarding the detrimental effects that FLA has on the learning process and the learning experience (Gkonou, Daubney, & Dewaele, 2017; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014; MacIntyre, 2017; Yan & Horwitz, 2008).

FLA has been found at all levels of instruction investigated worldwide, suggesting that as many as 30–40% of learners share the experience of FLA to at least a moderate degree (Horwitz, 2016). Much research aiming to identify components and establishing causal relationships between FLA and, for example, age and proficiency levels have been conflicting and inconclusive, which may be explained by the contextual and dynamic nature of the construct (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2009). At present, in line with a more dynamic research paradigm (Gkonou, Daubney, & Dewaele, 2017), FLA is regarded as both a cause and as an effect, both as a personal trait and as a situation-specific phenomenon, as stable over time as well as dynamic (Gkonou, 2017), varying in intensity within the same lesson (MacIntyre, 2017). Horwitz (2017) therefore advocates a shift of focus from the psychological to the applied and pragmatic, to generate findings that can inform and have direct implications for language teaching.

FLA is a multilayered construct, related to and interacting with a variety of other similarly complex variables, for example agency (Mercer, 2011; Oxford, 2017) and self-esteem (Rubio-Alcalá, 2017). Such learner-internal aspects are in turn in constant interplay with contextual factors, such as classroom atmosphere and interaction, teaching approach and assessment practices (Gkonou, 2017; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2009; Rubio-Alcalá, 2017). Extensive TL use has been found to cause FLA, at least for beginners (Macaro & Lee, 2013). Another trigger may be heterogeneity in the proficiency levels within groups (Frantzen & Magnan, 2005), whereas multilingualism has been found to reduce FLA (Dewaele, 2010). On a macro level, extramural exposure, cultural and educational norms and curricular demands also impact the instructional context and aggravate or alleviate anxiety (Gkonou, 2017; Yan & Horwitz, 2008).

2.2 Foreign language anxiety and young learners of English

A number of factors may help explain why early English instruction has been left under-researched with regard to FLA and other affective variables. In the past, the construct was assumed to be more applicable in the case of adult beginners, as TL instruction and communication limited their ability to express their identities and maintain their self-image. Such challenges were presumed to be potentially more frustrating for adults than for children (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Furthermore, young learners have been regarded as a rather homogeneous population, with a positive self-perception, which has made research on individual differences appear to be less relevant in this age group (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2015).

Teaching YLLs differs in many ways from teaching adolescents or adults. Primary school students are in a sense a captive audience; instruction is compulsory and they are not able to deal with anxiety by dropping out of English courses, skipping classes or changing majors. They are at an age where their rapid cognitive, emotional and linguistic development affect their attitudes and their

metacognitive abilities (Mihaljević Djigunović & Letica Krevelj, 2010). Furthermore, in contrast to most adult learners, YLLs do not have previous experiences of foreign language instruction, making primary classrooms interesting settings for FLA research.

In addition, language anxiety is a highly relevant construct to investigate in primary school. Oral communication is the focus of early language instruction in Europe and a major task for teachers is to create an atmosphere where children develop confidence to communicate in English despite their limited language proficiency as beginners (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2012; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011). Moreover, language anxiety at this young age may have negative long-term effects (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2009), and European policy documents for YLLs are increasingly stressing motivation and confidence as the primary goals of early language instruction (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2012).

Studies involving young learners, predominantly conducted in east Asia (Chan & Wu, 2004; Liu & Chen, 2013; Yim, 2014; Yim & Yu, 2011) and southern Europe (Er, 2015; Gürsoy & Akin, 2013, Mihaljević Djigunović, 2009) have concluded that language anxiety is common in these classrooms settings as well. These studies found fear of exams, failing class and receiving negative evaluations to be top worries for YLLs. Speaking in class was another source of anxiety and Yim and Yu (2011) concluded *oral English classroom anxiety* to be a more important underlying factor than self-confidence. Similarly, a Swedish study, although with older students, aged 15–16 (Thompson & Sylvén, 2015), confirmed that the most salient underlying construct of FLA in a Swedish context was by far *English class performance anxiety*, related to speaking and understanding target language input. Mihaljević Djigunović (2009, referring to her own study in Croatia in 2002) found that more than half of the 7–18-year-olds in her sample experienced anxiety when speaking in class. Students aged 7–10 felt most worried about making mistakes and the teacher was the most cited source of anxiety, by being strict or ironic and making learners nervous. In Turkey Gürsoy and Akin (2013) likewise found fear of making mistakes as well as test anxiety among the 10–14-year-old participants in their study. A general finding is that FLA increases along with proficiency from childhood through teenage years (Er, 2015; MacIntyre & Dewaele, 2014; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2009). An important consideration, however, is that for children, levels of anxiety are often attributed to age factors, when they may just as well prove to be responses to differences in the learning environments (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2009, 2012), and the organization of compulsory education, involving transitions within the school system, changes of teachers and splitting of groups (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2015). In addition, recent studies on YLLs have highlighted the strong idiosyncratic development of emotion and self-concept among young learners within the same context (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2015).

2.3 Primary English education in the Swedish language context

Although not an official language, English enjoys a high status in Swedish society. Along with the main language Swedish, English is present in media and everyday life and thus exhibits less traits of a foreign language compared to many other parts of the world (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2014). The abundance of English input and the linguistic proximity between English and Swedish (Lindgren & Muñoz, 2013) may be contributing factors that explain Sweden's high ranking in international

proficiency surveys (for example, Education First, 2018). Swedish children thus grow up surrounded by English and adults who, in general, master English and where there are cognate words in the two languages. Such linguistic proximity has also been found to reduce FLA (Dewaele, 2010).

English is a compulsory subject from school year 3 (age 9) although many schools teach English from year one (age 7) or earlier. The national syllabus specifies core content of instruction in general terms for school years 1–3 (ages 7–10), 4–6 (ages 10–13) and 7–9 (ages 13–16) and grades are not awarded until year 6, at age 13. Teachers and schools have a lot of freedom when it comes to teaching approach, materials and content. Classroom atmosphere is usually quite informal and supportive and learners are not grouped according to proficiency levels. Competitive elements are reduced and the curricular documents prescribe an explicit focus on equality, solidarity and accepting diversity (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011). As a result, some of the factors found to aggravate anxiety, such as receiving poor grades or failing the course, do not apply to the Swedish primary school setting.

Out-of-school instruction in English for young learners is rare in Sweden. However, many Swedish children receive a lot of English input from films, music, games and social media, making formal instruction a minor contributor to their total English exposure (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2014; Swedish Media Council, 2015). This engagement with online activities naturally varies greatly among individuals. In addition, due to immigration, the classrooms also include a growing number of learners from a variety of language backgrounds, although they are unevenly distributed between schools and areas in Sweden (Ambrose, 2017). Newly arrived learners come to Sweden with differing levels of proficiency in English. Swedish classrooms are therefore becoming increasingly heterogeneous and while some learners are already rather familiar with English, English is more of a foreign language for others.

The Swedish primary school setting therefore offers an educational context where macro level variables such as linguistic proximity, extensive out-of-school exposure and the absence of formal exams and grades are assumed to reduce the prevalence of FLA. Therefore, the focus of investigation in the present study is instead learners' affective responses to potential micro-level triggers, which are closely linked to language learning in a classroom context, such as listening to English, volunteering to speak, and making mistakes.

3 The present study

Against this background, the present study investigates levels and triggers of FLA in English instruction in Swedish primary school, with learners aged 8–12. FLA is conceptualized as negative feelings that relate to oral activities and experiences of communicating in the language classroom. A self-report questionnaire was used to gather data from 225 learners guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent do the young learners participating in this study experience foreign language anxiety, as conceptualized above?
2. What do these learners in general find most anxiety provoking about oral classroom interaction during the English lessons?
3. How do less anxious learners differ from more anxious learners in relation to research question 2?

4. What similarities and differences can be found within the group of high anxiety learners in relation to research question 2?

3.1 Participants

The study was conducted with 225 YLLs in years 2–5, in ten Swedish classrooms taught by seven different teachers in six schools (27 learners in year 2, 51 in year 3, 89 in year 4 and 58 in year 5). Of the learners, 51.6% were girls, 48.4% boys. All of the teachers had Swedish as their L1 and were experienced and certified to teach English in primary school. Four groups were taught by generalists, their class teachers, and the remaining six by language specialists. The schools are situated in similar socio-economically stable urban and suburban areas of Stockholm.

As multilingualism has been found to reduce FLA (Dewaele, 2010), the study sought to limit the number of variables by inviting groups where most learners did not have this benefit. Consequently, no more than a few students in each group of 20–29 children were multilingual. English had been introduced from the beginning of the first or second school year, at age 7–8 (although in practice most often introduced rather gradually). Learners were thus quite homogeneous as far as their sociocultural and educational backgrounds. Still, all learners, teachers, and groups are different and no classrooms environments are exactly the same. In order to get a spread of instructional experiences and to identify a group of learners of a reasonable size who do report higher levels of FLA, ten classrooms were included.

Lesson time varied from 40 minutes per week in year 2 to 120 minutes per week in year 5. The teachers gave active consent to let the researcher into their classrooms. All students were invited to participate in the study by handing in consent forms signed by their guardians. Data were collected from 91% of all the learners.

3.2 Pilot study

The researcher's previous teaching experience, formal and informal discussions with anxious learners aged 9–16 in and out of class, and numerous observations from teacher education practicum served as a point of departure to FLA in the Swedish primary school setting. A pilot study was conducted in two classrooms, with learners aged 9–11, in year 3 and 4, beginning with classroom observations on 2–3 occasions, to get an overview of the classroom routines, environments and learner behavior in general.

Both groups had English lessons in their home classrooms. The teachers made use of both English and Swedish to differing degrees during different lesson routines and activities. Lessons were rather teacher-centered where the teacher spoke to the whole group or interacted with one learner at a time. In the year 3 classroom, volunteering answers was optional. From the observations, it was obvious that some learners never volunteered. The teacher in year 4 sometimes called on students, for example to check on homework. The atmosphere in both classrooms was very supportive. Learner mistakes were not commented on and students were never observed laughing or teasing others. A range of activities was used during the lessons. Learners worked in pairs and groups, for example to read or translate texts or prepare to act out short scenes. As could be expected, some learners engaged with enthusiasm while others were more reluctant. Some young learners had difficulties concentrating.

The data collection procedure, using the self-report questionnaire described below, adapted for the present context, was conducted in the two classrooms. Judging by this pilot, the items and procedure were valid, appropriate and meaningful for the participants. The two teachers confirmed the face validity of the questionnaire. Therefore, data collection, with observations and questionnaires, was conducted without changes in eight additional groups.

3.3 Observations – Classroom contexts

Observations revealed many similarities among the ten classrooms, such as a warm and supportive atmosphere. The teacher-learner relationships were informal and the children approached their teachers for chats and hugs or to ask for various kinds of help. The teachers gave a lot of positive feedback, mistakes were most often disregarded and children were never caught laughing or teasing their peers about a mistake or a wrong answer.

The lessons followed certain routines but also involved variety and a range of different activities. There were more playful elements in the earlier years, with an increasing focus on literacy skills and focus on form in the later years, although pronunciation and basic grammar were briefly highlighted by all the teachers. The older learners used course books to differing degrees and received homework.

As observed in the pilot classrooms, teacher-centered instruction was predominant. In some groups in year 4 and 5 learners were at times called on randomly by the teacher. Most often, however, learners volunteered by raising their hands and in many classrooms speaking to the whole group was therefore optional. Students were engaged in oral pair or group work to differing degrees in the various classrooms. The amount of pair or group work was higher for the older learners and included activities such as reading dialogues, practicing simple conversations or working with oral activities or games.

All teachers had a good command of English which they spoke fluently. Two of the teachers, in years 3 and 4, spoke only English during the lessons. One of them allowed the learners to make use of their L1 (Swedish) while this was not accepted by the other. The rest of the teachers primarily used the TL although the amount varied throughout different lesson elements and activities. These teachers used the L1 to enhance understanding by translating certain words or to focus on form and raise awareness of differences between the TL and the L1. Procedural instructions for how to carry out activities often involved both languages, where most of the teachers would include words or brief explanations in Swedish before or after the same instruction in English. FLA was not addressed during the observed lessons but the teachers often used facial expressions or verbal cues to encourage hesitant learners to try and to guess.

3.4 Adaptation of questionnaire

To tap into the subjective experiences of young learners in a non-threatening and efficient way, a questionnaire was used. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz et al., 1986), FLCAS, used to operationalize FLA in numerous studies and contexts, served as a frame of reference. It was, however, designed for learners at university level, and needed modification for this age group in the Swedish context. More specifically, a questionnaire had to be aligned with not only learners' experiences but also their maturity and linguistic

development. In addition, the data collection procedure itself needed to be efficient, requiring it to include a limited number of items in order for learners to maintain concentration. The risk of making the scope of a questionnaire either too broad or too narrow (Messick, 1993) was therefore obvious. The aim was thus to target important components of FLA in these classrooms while excluding behavior not related to the construct. For example, difficulties concentrating and staying focused on a task may not necessarily indicate anxiety for a 9-year-old.

Based on the observations and previous studies suggesting that FLA is most related to oral performance in compulsory school (Thompson & Sylvén, 2015; Yim & Yu, 2011), the research questions, and thus the questionnaire, focused on oral interaction. Each of the 33 FLCAS items (see Appendix 1) was considered. Statements found irrelevant for these YLLs in general, referring to tests, homework, corrective feedback, walking to English class etc., were excluded (items 3, 5, 8, 10, 15, 16, 17, 19, 21, 22, 25, 28, 30). Items related to feeling distracted (6, 12) were ruled out (see above discussion). As the observations revealed that for many YLLs, oral TL production was limited to pair or group work, an item concerning affect in such situations was added.

Aiming for a survey with clear and comprehensible statements, following the guidelines for data collection with children prescribed by de Leeuw, Borgers and Smits (2004), all remaining FLCAS-items that were judged vague (with abstractions such as e.g., *feeling self-conscious*, 1, 9, 18, 24, 27) were taken out. Hypothetical statements asking children to estimate their degree of confidence while interacting with native speakers of English (14, 32) were also eliminated.

Furthermore, considering the developmental variance in the age group, items involving comparison to or understanding of peers (e.g. *I don't understand why some people get so upset over English lessons*, 7, 11, 23) were not regarded as appropriate. In accordance with the recommendations (de Leeuw et al., 2004; Scott, 2008), the instrument was designed to target learners' actual experiences. All statements were worded affirmatively and in Swedish. The questionnaire included the following seven items:

1. *I am afraid of making mistakes in English*¹. (FLCAS item 2, without the negation)
2. *It makes me nervous when I do not understand everything the teacher says in English.* (FLCAS items 4, 29)
3. *It feels ok to speak English in pairs or small groups.* (New item)
4. *I feel more nervous during English lessons than while working with other school subjects.* (FLCAS item 26, simplified)
5. *I gladly volunteer to answer questions in English.* (FLCAS item 13, rephrased to address all learners, including those who do not volunteer)
6. *I am afraid the others will giggle or tease me when I speak English.* (FLCAS item 31, rephrased to include reactions more subtle than laughter)
7. *I feel nervous if I am asked to speak in English without having prepared or practiced first.* (Modification of FLCAS items 9, 18, 20, 24, 27, 33 but without assuming that learners are called on, or asked to speak in front of the class)

3.5 Adaptation of response sheet and data collection procedure

For the two items referring to willingness to interact (items 3 and 5), response options were reversed, making higher scores, on the right hand side of the response sheet, indicate higher anxiety for all items. Thus, the risk of learners exaggerating anxiety by choosing answers that appear first on a list (Scott, 2008), was avoided.

Some researchers suggest using only a 3-step scale when working with young participants (Tymms, 2012). Contrary to this recommendation, anticipating questions from these 8–12-year-olds such as *What if it's in between often and never?* and aiming to be very precise, a 7-step scale was used. Response options were not based on agreement (e.g., *strongly agree/neither agree nor disagree*), as in the FLCAS, but on frequency (*never/almost never/rarely/sometimes/often/ almost always/always*) as this was considered to be easier for YLLs to relate to. The limited scope of the questionnaire makes it a rather crude measurement, although with more nuanced responses than in the FLCAS.

To secure internal validity further, response sheets with the Likert scale options, but without the statements, were handed out to all participants. The items were read aloud in Swedish by the researcher, to avoid any negative effect of varying levels of literacy. This procedure made it possible to clarify the statements in case something was unclear and also prevented the children from rushing through the activity. Considering the possibly sensitive topic of FLA, it was important to stress that their responses would only be read by the researcher, and that their thoughts and experiences were equally important and interesting for this study. The teacher was not present during the data collection procedure. To maintain confidentiality, learners covered their answers with a blank sheet of paper. The children were allowed to draw on these cover sheets while waiting for their classmates to take the time they needed to respond thoughtfully. The entire procedure, including instructions and the completion of the questionnaire, thus took 20–30 minutes.

The students were very eager to participate, took their time and asked for clarifications if needed. Using a 7-step Likert scale proved not to be a problem. In fact, some learners used arrows and other ways of enhancing their circled answers to be even more nuanced. All response sheets were completed correctly. The internal consistency of the scale, with the seven items referring to FLA, was good (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$).

3.6 Data analysis

Each answer to the seven items was awarded 1–7 points, making the total possible score range from 7 (indicating no anxiety at all) to 49 (the maximum level of FLA). Data were analyzed in SPSS. The results from the questionnaire are presented using descriptive statistics in which learners were assigned to a low, medium or high anxiety group based on their total score, where cut-off points for low and high anxiety learners were set to 1 SD below and above the mean, respectively. The medium anxiety group were thus learners within 1 SD of the mean. The analysis focused on anxiety levels of the full group, and the three subgroups, in relation to each item.

4 Results

This section first illustrates the total FLA scores in the full group and the distribution across classrooms. Responses to each questionnaire item addressing specific classroom practices are then presented, in the order of increasing mean scores, followed by the item that compared English to other school subjects.

Results reveal that learners were spread along a continuum of anxiety levels, rather than belonging to three distinct groups. However, for the sake of illustrating this continuum and making comparisons between students with different levels of reported anxiety, the learners were divided into three subgroups. Table 1 illustrates the distribution of FLA in the full group. Many learners reported a low total score, on the less anxious part of the scale, and 7 learners, 3.1%, reported a total score of 7, the theoretical minimum. Interestingly, the threshold for the high anxiety group therefore coincided with the theoretical mean of the questionnaire, which was 28. In other words, a total score of 29 or above represents a learner generally opting for *often*, *almost always* or *always* on the questionnaire items (or *rarely*, *almost never* or *never* in relation to positive statements), arguably a very reasonable definition of high anxiety.

Table 1. Questionnaire results in the full group.

	scores	N	%	Mean (M)	SD
Low anxiety learners	7-12	41	18.2	9.9	1.63
Medium anxiety learners	13-28	143	63.6	20.0	4.36
High anxiety learners	29-45	41	18.2	33.8	4.20
Total	7-45	225	100%	20.69	8.27

FLA scores were distributed unevenly across classrooms (Figure 1). In some classrooms, (E, H and I) there was only one high anxiety learner (4–8%) while there were 11 learners (38%), in classroom C. Two other groups in year 4, classroom F and G, were taught by the same teacher and reported rather similar results. This may suggest that anxiety levels are strongly dependent on the individual teacher. However, the three groups in year 5 (classrooms H, I and J) all had the same teacher, who planned and carried out the lessons in the three groups in the same way but reported widely varying levels of anxiety. While the teacher has been suggested to be an important contextual variable related to FLA, these classrooms suggest the relationship is far from straightforward.

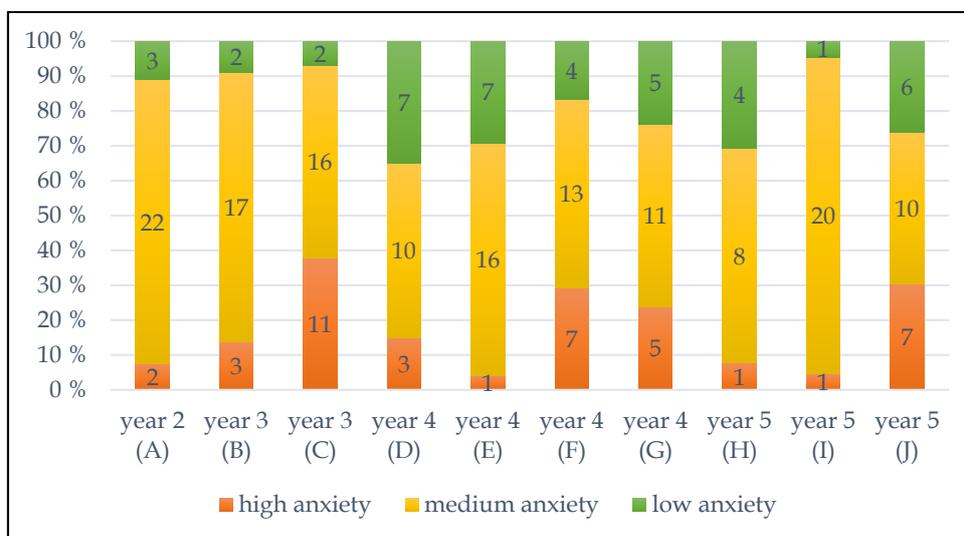


Figure 1. Distribution of learners in the ten classrooms according to levels of anxiety.

Graphs illustrating the distribution of responses to each questionnaire item are included below. (Note however, that the scale indicating the number of learners differ between graphs.) To complement the mean value and standard deviation for each item, the percentage of so-called anxious responses, is added, referring to the the proportion of learners who chose one of the options on the anxious part of the Likert scale, opting for *often*, *almost always* or *always* (or *rarely*, *almost never* or *never* for positive statements). Looking at potentially anxiety-provoking situations included in the questionnaire, the lowest levels were reported for talking in pairs and fear of negative reactions from peers (see Figures 2 and 3).

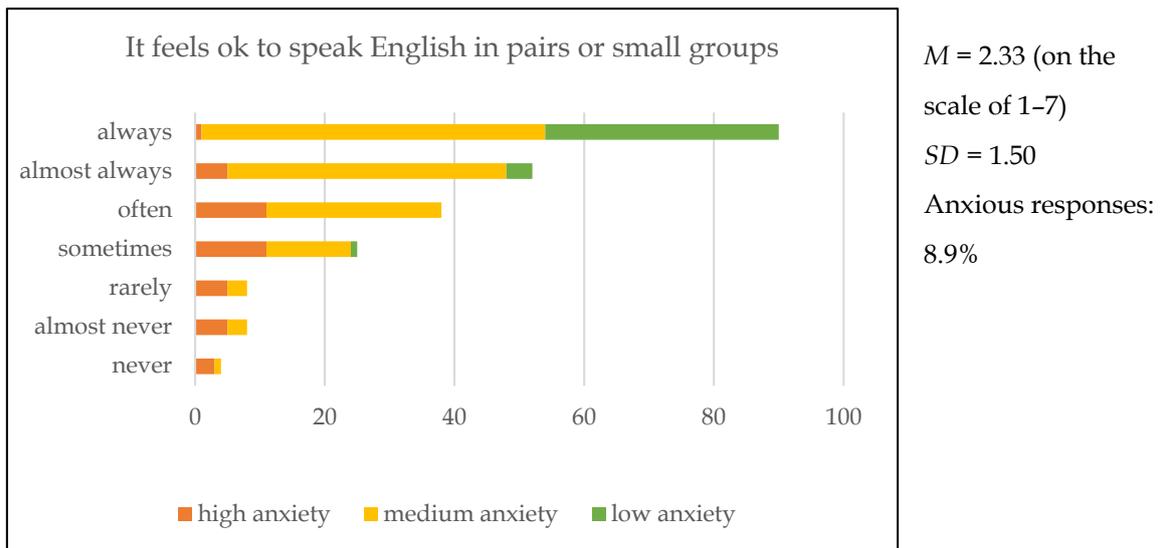


Figure 2. Responses to questionnaire item 3.

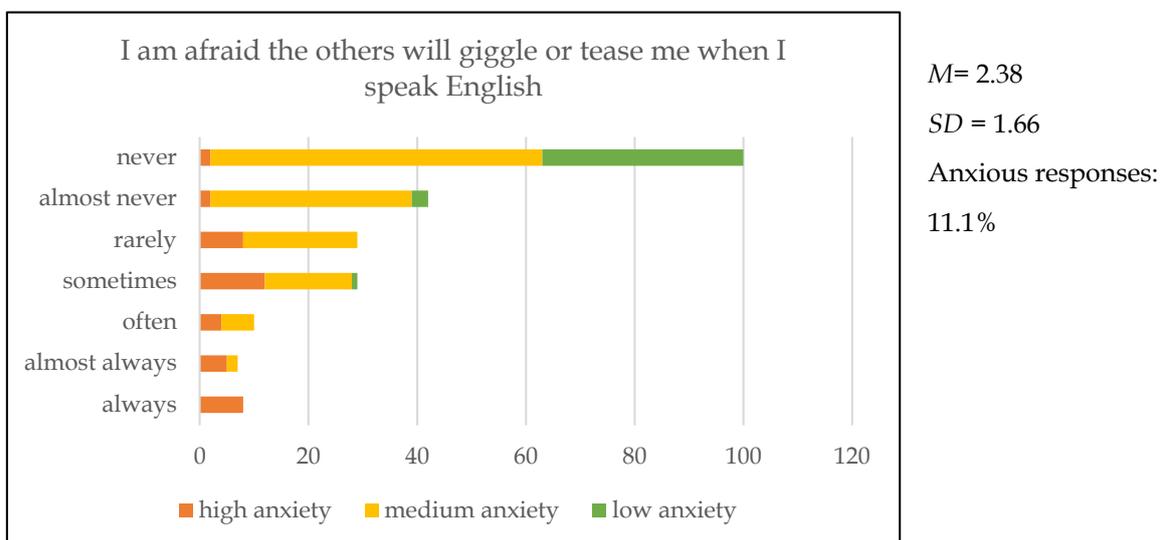


Figure 3. Responses to questionnaire item 6.

For most learners these aspects did not appear to cause negative emotions. The high anxiety learners, however, were distributed across all response options.

According to Figure 4, not understanding TL input generated more anxiety.

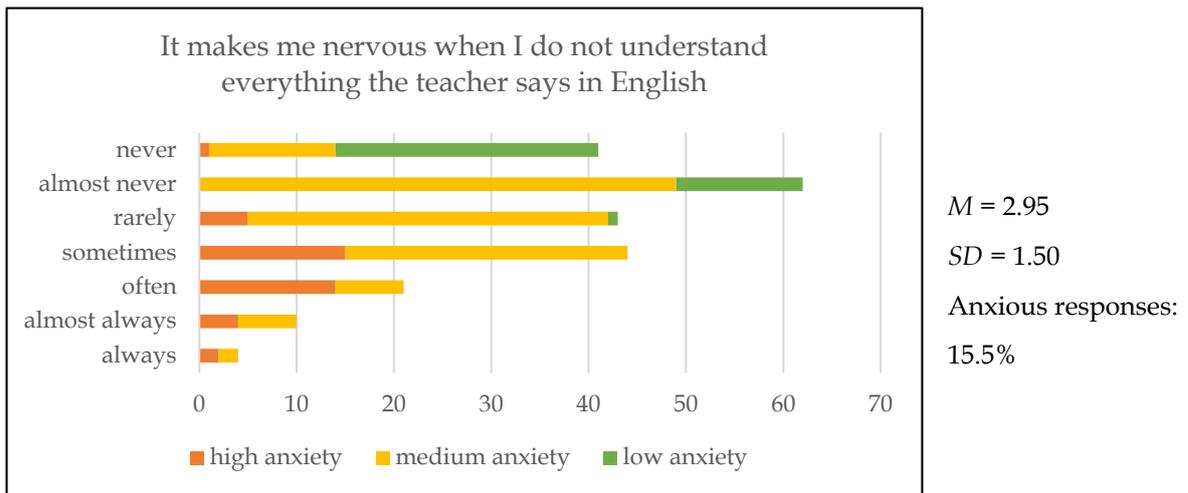


Figure 4. Responses to questionnaire item 2.

The highest levels of anxiety were reported in relation to oral production: fear of making mistakes, volunteering answers in class, and being asked to speak without preparation, as illustrated by Figures 5, 6 and 7.

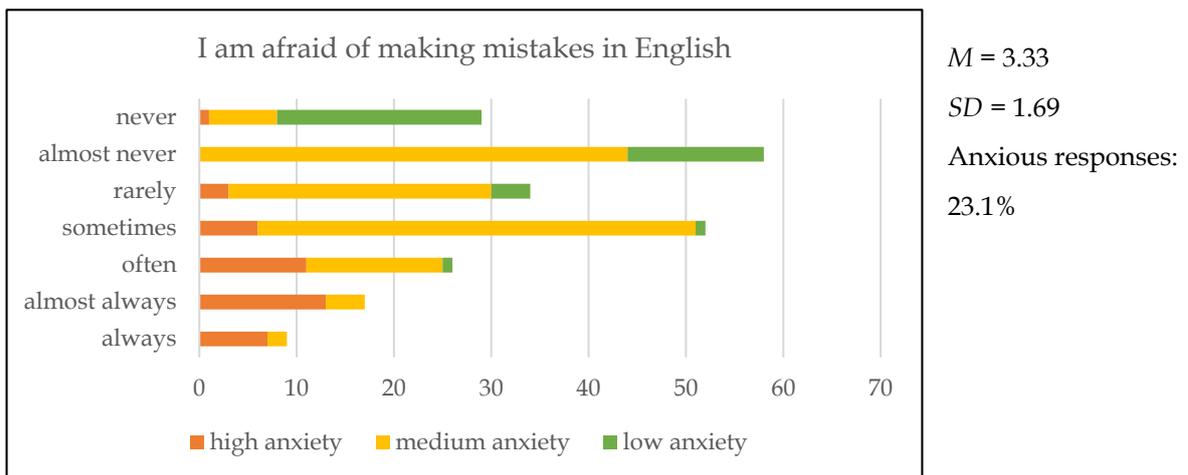


Figure 5. Responses to questionnaire item 1.

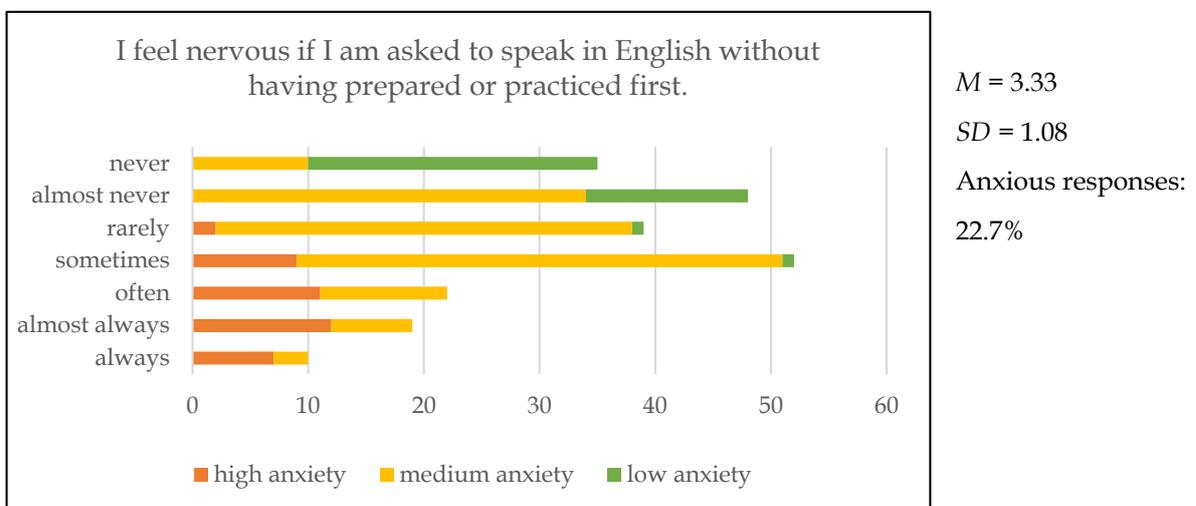


Figure 6. Responses to questionnaire item 7.

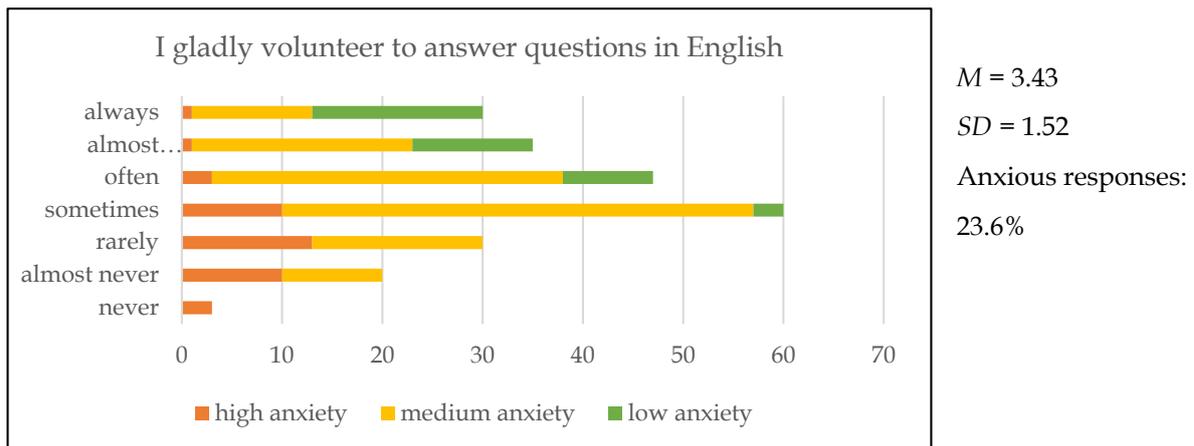


Figure 7. Responses to questionnaire item 5.

Speaking in full class thus triggers anxiety levels that are higher and more evenly distributed across the whole group. Hence, the top worries in the group as a whole revolve around their own oral production in class and less around fear of not understanding, speaking in smaller groups or fearing negative reactions from peers. As portrayed in the graphs, the learners, grouped according to certain questionnaire cut-off points, are spread along a continuum, where responses of low anxiety learners and high anxiety learners often overlap, and with medium anxiety learners most often distributed across all response options. In sum, the levels of anxiety differ among students although the factors that trigger anxiety follow the same trends in the group as a whole.

The statement *I feel more nervous during English lessons than while working with other school subjects* differs from the other items, as it does not refer to aspects of English lesson *per se*, but compares English to other subjects, aiming to capture the situation-specific aspect of FLA. Although the mean and the percentage of anxious responses are lower than for most of the other items, the results do indeed show the most apparent divide between the three subgroups (see Figure 8), as most high anxiety learners have opted for an anxious response while the medium and low anxiety students have not endorsed this statement.

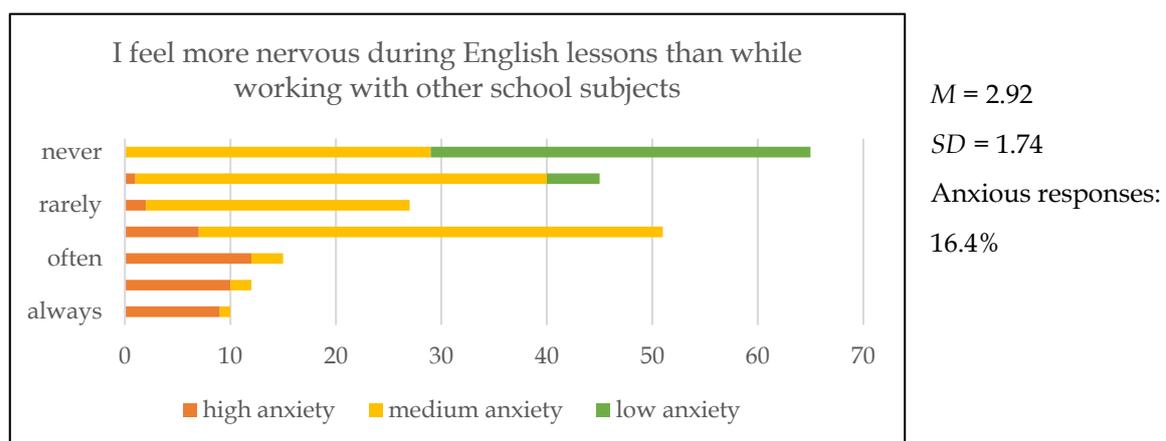


Figure 8. Responses to questionnaire item 4.

Table 2 compares the distribution of responses of each group and item in more detail, revealing that 75.6% of high anxiety learners find English more anxiety-provoking than other subjects, compared to only 4.2% in the medium anxiety group and none in the low anxiety group.

Table 2. Comparison of the three subgroups in relation to each questionnaire item.

Questionnaire items	Anxiety level groups	Anxious responses in the group	Likert			Likert responses*						
			Mean	SD	range	never	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. I am afraid of making mistakes in English.	low	2.4%	1.71	0.92	1-5	51.2	34.1	9.8	2.4	2.4	0.0	0.0
	medium	14.0%	3.24	1.28	1-7	4.9	30.8	18.9	31.5	9.8	2.8	1.4
	high	75.6%	5.27	1.34	1-7	2.4	0.0	7.3	14.6	26.8	31.7	17.1
2. It makes me nervous when I do not understand everything the teacher says in English.	low	0%	1.37	0.54	1-3	65.9	31.7	2.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	medium	10.5%	2.96	1.31	1-7	9.1	34.3	25.9	20.3	4.9	4.2	1.4
	high	48.8%	4.49	1.14	1-7	2.4	0.0	12.2	36.6	34.1	9.8	4.9
3. It does not feel ok to speak English in pairs or small groups.**	low	0%	1.17	0.54	1-4	87.8	9.8	0.0	2.4	0.0	0.0	0.0
	medium	4.9%	2.18	1.26	1-7	37.1	30.1	18.9	9.1	2.1	2.1	0.7
	high	31.7%	4.00	1.52	1-7	2.4	12.2	26.8	26.8	12.2	12.2	7.3
4. I feel more nervous during English lessons than while working with other school subjects.	low	0%	1.12	0.33	1-2	97.8	12.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	medium	4.1%	2.74	1.29	1-7	20.3	27.3	17.5	30.8	2.1	1.4	0.7
	high	75.6%	5.34	1.28	2-7	0.0	2.4	4.9	17.1	29.3	24.4	22.0
5. I do not gladly volunteer to answer questions in English.**	low	0%	1.95	0.93	1-4	41.5	29.3	22.0	7.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
	medium	18.9%	3.45	1.31	1-6	8.4	15.4	24.5	32.9	11.9	7.0	0.0
	high	63.4%	4.83	1.30	1-7	2.4	2.4	7.3	24.4	31.7	24.4	7.3
6. I am afraid the others will giggle or tease me when I speak English.	low	0%	1.15	0.53	1-4	90.2	7.3	0.0	2.4	9.8	0.0	0.0
	medium	5.6%	2.13	1.27	1-6	42.7	25.9	14.7	11.2	4.2	1.4	0.0
	high	41.5%	4.49	1.73	1-7	4.9	4.9	19.8	29.3	9.8	12.2	19.5
7. I feel nervous if I am asked to speak in English without having prepared or practiced first.	low	0%	1.46	0.67	1-4	61.0	34.1	2.4	2.4	0.0	0.0	0.0
	medium	14.7%	3.30	1.35	1-7	7.0	23.8	25.2	29.4	7.7	4.9	2.1
	high	73.1%	5.32	1.15	3-7	0.0	0.0	4.9	22.0	26.8	29.3	17.1

*The numbers refer to the following response options: 1 = never, 2 = almost never, 3 = rarely, 4 = sometimes, 5 = often, 6 = almost always, 7 = always

** Item 3 and 5 were positively worded in the questionnaire, with reversed coding.

To summarize the results of the questionnaire, practically all items prompted responses on the whole scale in the medium and high anxiety groups, as almost half of all learners (48.4% of the students) gave an anxious response to at least one item. The results indicate that anxiety is best understood along a continuum among learners, although this could only be illustrated by assigning learners to three groups according to their total scores. Making oral contributions in class generated the highest levels of FLA for the group as a whole.

A closer look at the similarities within the group of high anxiety learners reveals highly idiosyncratic learner perceptions of what triggers FLA. Their answers vary substantially and they have all contributed with a unique set of results. Only 24.4% of these students circled neutral and anxious responses exclusively. Just as many, 24.4%, gave answers that spread across six or seven steps on the 7-step Likert scale. What makes the group of highly anxious learners stand out, however, apart from their more frequent experiences of FLA, is that a majority of them perceive English to be the most anxiety-provoking school subject.

5 Discussion

In this section, findings will be addressed according to the research questions and discussed in relation to previous studies and the present context, followed by practical implications.

5.1 To what extent do the young learners participating in this study experience foreign language anxiety?

Learners in these ten classrooms of 8–12-year-olds reported anxiety levels along a continuum, ranging from none to high, as indicated by the questionnaire. The high anxiety group consisted of 18.2% of the students. When compared to mean scores and responses to similar items in previous studies, these participants reported lower levels of anxiety than in other contexts with young learners (e.g. Chan & Wu, 2004; Liu & Chen, 2013) or adults (Horwitz et al., 1986). In the case of young learners, the educational setting has been found to impact FLA more than the individual teacher (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2015). Many contextual factors previously found to induce anxiety, such as the possibility of failing classes or receiving poor grades, do not apply to the present context, which may help explain these lower levels. Other contributing factors may be the status of the TL, in this case English, the high amount of exposure and the linguistic proximity to Swedish. Furthermore, these learners were students in informal classroom environments where they generally did not fear being teased by classmates. Many learners confirmed that for them, FLA was not an issue. Nevertheless, 18.2% (almost one in five learners) belong to the high anxiety group with frequent experiences of FLA. Moreover, 16.4% of all learners reported that English made them more nervous than other school subjects. In this regard, given the favorable conditions with many contextual variables known to reduce anxiety, these percentages can be regarded as rather high, and thus an important finding.

Unsurprisingly, reported levels of FLA varied substantially between classrooms. Two classrooms taught by the same teacher revealed rather similar anxiety levels. This may suggest the impact of the teacher and the teaching approach, which are both variables related to FLA (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2009). However, anxiety levels were spread quite unevenly within and among the three classrooms taught by another teacher. To what extent such variation depends on individual differences and the wide range of factors related to personal characteristics (Dewaele, 2017), group dynamics, or both, is of course impossible to conclude from the data collected. Another possibility to consider is that FLA may spread within a classroom due to group internal factors.

5.2 What do these learners in general find most anxiety provoking about oral classroom performance during the English lessons?

The findings offer support for FLA as a situation-specific construct, most closely related to oral classroom performance for these YLLs in general. Speaking in class made many learners uneasy, echoing findings from previous studies (Chan & Wu, 2004; Liu & Chen, 2013; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2009; Yim & Yu, 2011), and thus supporting *English class performance anxiety* as the strongest underlying construct of FLA in a Swedish context (Thompson & Sylvén, 2015). In spite of the positive classroom atmosphere, and even though social factors such as fear of negative evaluation were not a primary concern for these participants, oral performance in class generated considerably more FLA than speaking in smaller group constellations. Consistent with the descriptions of FLA as negative feelings related to self-expression and unique to the process of language learning (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014; Horwitz et al., 1986), there seems to be something

about language classroom performance itself that makes learners, even young ones, uncomfortable to a certain degree.

5.3 How do less anxious learners and more anxious learners in these groups differ with regards to FLA?

To complement previous research on YLLs, this study sought to gain deeper and a more nuanced understanding of the high anxiety learners by investigating their experiences separately and comparing them to their less anxious peers reporting low or medium levels of FLA. The most salient difference is that for high anxiety learners, this anxiety was more associated with English than other school subjects. Potential triggers of anxiety were ranked similarly by the three groups in general, but differing in frequency. In other words, these negative reactions were experienced by learners along a continuum, rather than residing in specific individuals.

5.4 What similarities and differences can be found within the group of more anxious learners in relation to FLA?

Not only are YLLs as diverse as any other group of language learners, in support of findings by Mihaljević Djigunović and Letica Kregelj (2010), but even “anxious young language learners” are quite a heterogeneous group. In investigating language anxiety and possible measures to counteract it, it is important not to overlook that a total score that indicates anxiety represents a range of attitudes and experiences with different classroom procedures, as highlighted by Horwitz (2001).

The fact that a majority in the high anxiety subgroup felt that English lessons generated more anxiety than lessons in other school subjects supports FLA as a situation-specific construct (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Nevertheless, while language instruction is stress-provoking for many, 24.3% of the high anxiety learners did *not* report a difference compared to other school subjects, possibly suggesting that for them, anxiety in the language classroom may be a transfer of a more general anxiety, rather than the language learning situation as such. Whether or not this is the case, it remains an obstacle for them, and their teachers, in language instruction.

A great majority of high anxiety learners in this study felt nervous about speaking unprepared and making mistakes, echoing findings by Mihaljević Djigunović (2009). Social factors such as fear of being teased was however not reported as a primary concern, although it was more of a concern for them than for their peers. Yet without having the full class listening, learners felt considerably less anxious. Whether this anxiety can be attributed to learners' beliefs, expectations, perfectionism or the feeling of being evaluated by the teacher is not possible to say from this data. It may suggest that these young students do not consider making mistakes a natural part of language learning. Such learner beliefs may be a major contributor to FLA (Horwitz, 1988; Liu & Chen, 2013). Like language anxiety, beliefs about the process of language learning are thought to be formed early on and it may be the case that high anxiety YLLs hold beliefs different than those of less anxious learners.

5.5 Implications

The range of anxiety levels among classrooms and learners in this study confirm the complexity of FLA even in primary education. On the one hand, findings underscore the diversity even among high anxiety learners, who differed substantially in their responses to specific classroom practices for reasons that may be connected to both personal and contextual variables. On the other hand, learners across the whole spectrum of anxiety levels agreed to a large extent about which classroom situations that make them most uncomfortable. It may therefore be fruitful for teachers to focus more on aspects of their teaching that may spark or increase anxiety, and less on identifying anxious or non-anxious learners, as this is a false dichotomy.

As stated by Horwitz et al. (1986), teachers striving to counteract FLA have two options, either to reduce anxiety-provoking situations or to boost students' ability to cope with negative emotions. Considering the fact that speaking is the most frequent trigger of FLA, it is ironic that despite the abundance of out-of-school exposure to English, oral production is the skill that young learners generally get to practice least through online media. Therefore, it is vital that lesson time offers plenty of opportunities to speak. As working in smaller groups was found to spark considerably less anxiety than speaking to the whole group, arranging and scaffolding such activities may be a way of increasing time for all learners to practice their oral skills while also alleviating the cognitive and emotional hurdles of FLA.

Teacher-led discussions acknowledging affective aspects of communicating in the foreign language in order to reduce or counteract the development of FLA have been suggested by several researchers (Gkonou, Dewaele & Daubney, 2017; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014; Oxford, 2017). Horwitz (1988) advocates addressing learners' beliefs about language learning, and pointing out that making mistakes is a natural part in that process, to help reduce anxiety. Such activities are worth exploring in the primary classroom, for teachers and researchers alike.

6 Conclusion

This study offers a snapshot illustration of language anxiety in ten Swedish primary classrooms. Although numerical results from these cases cannot be extrapolated to other instructional contexts the study nevertheless provides interesting findings related to FLA. The complex nature of FLA even for young learners was confirmed. Language anxiety was present and unevenly distributed across classrooms and among learners, who experienced FLA with varying frequency, but most often in relation to oral performance. In spite of beneficial learning conditions, with supportive and non-threatening language instruction and large influx of extramural input in the TL, one student in five reported frequent experiences of FLA. These participants had no previous experience of language instruction; therefore, any FLA has developed within (but not necessarily due to) these specific groups and classrooms. Arguably, it may in fact be young learners in regular compulsory schools who can help further our understanding of how language anxiety develops and operates within language classrooms. Some degree of language anxiety may be inherent in the process of foreign language learning. Nevertheless, it is problematic that speaking the target

language and making mistakes, which must be considered unavoidable and necessary in L2 instruction, lie at the core of FLA for this age group where confidence is a goal in its own right.

Considering the limited scope of this study, variables such as proficiency, special needs and group dynamics were left out, making it impossible to draw any conclusions with certainty. Moreover, the design does not consider the dynamic character of FLA, but aims to address learners' anxiety levels in general, and not at any specific time. Furthermore, learners' perceptions of their own negative reactions is likely to fluctuate considerably.

More research on FLA involving the perspectives of YLLs is needed, and results need to be contextualized to give an overview of the environment where anxiety is manifested. The present study serves as a backdrop to upcoming investigations about learner beliefs in the participating classrooms, and more specifically, any possible connections between the beliefs expressed by high anxiety learners and the negative emotions they experience. The potential effects of addressing learner beliefs in early language instruction also merit further investigation.

These findings hope to inspire teachers to explore ways of meeting cognitive and emotional needs of learners in primary language education and develop effective teaching approaches without inducing or reinforcing anxiety in YLLs. Furthermore, since early language instruction has a long-term impact on the way children perceive themselves as language learners and users, finding ways of reducing anxiety at both an individual and a group level at this age may arguably be the best way to prevent FLA as learners get older.

Endnote

¹ In Swedish, this can be worded to refer to making a mistake, in general, or to making oral mistakes. The latter option, *såga fel*, was chosen, to focus on speaking.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. The FLCAS (Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale).

1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my English class.
2. I don't worry about making mistakes in English class.
3. I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in English class.
4. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in English.
5. It wouldn't bother me at all to take more English classes.
6. During English class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.
7. I keep thinking that the other students are better at English than I am.
8. I am usually at ease during tests in my English class.
9. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class.
10. I worry about the consequences of failing my English class.
11. I don't understand why some people get so upset over English classes.
12. In English class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.
13. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class.
14. I would not be nervous speaking English with native speakers.
15. I get upset when I don't understand what the teachers is correcting.
16. Even if I am well prepared for English class, I feel anxious about it.
17. I often feel like not going to my English class.
18. I feel confident when I speak in English class.
19. I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.
20. I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in English class.
21. The more I study for an English test, the more confused I get.
22. I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for English class.
23. I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do.
24. I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students.
25. The English class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.
26. I feel more tense and nervous in my English class than in my other classes.
27. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English class.
28. When I'm on my way to English class, I feel very sure and relaxed.
29. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teachers says.
30. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak English
31. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English.
32. I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of English.
33. I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.

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