

Revisiting Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) Conceptualization of Foreign Language Anxiety: Contemporary Perspectives

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Abstract

While numerous studies have investigated the emotion of foreign language anxiety through the use of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz et al. 1986), these same studies have rarely engaged with the specific circumstances of the learner population that informed its development. This article revisits Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) conceptualization of FLA and evaluates its applicability in contemporary English as a Foreign Language classrooms situated in English-rich environments. Drawing on the Swedish upper-secondary English classroom as an illustrative case, this article highlights key contextual misalignments between Horwitz et al.'s learner population and instructional context and the classroom context and characteristics of Swedish upper-secondary English learners. It concludes by calling for renewed theoretical engagement concerning FLA at the construct level.

Keywords: Foreign Language Anxiety; Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale; conceptualization; English as a Foreign Language; construct validity; contemporary perspectives

Introduction

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) remains one of the most studied second language (L2) emotions in second language acquisition (SLA) research (Macintyre 2017). The conceptual work by Horwitz et al. (1986) helped cement our understanding of FLA as a phenomenon distinct from other academic anxieties, as well as operationalizing FLA through the formulation of the self-report Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS; Horwitz et al. 1986). Numerous empirical studies have since employed the FLCAS in investigations of FLA across diverse learner

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populations and contexts, including English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. The widespread adoption of the FLCAS has, indeed, contributed to targeted and streamlined research on FLA as an important L2 emotion (Papi and Khajavy 2023). However, theoretical discussion concerning the framing of FLA at the construct level is lacking. The conceptualization of FLA has rarely attracted sustained attention beyond the early years of its inception (e.g., Macintyre and Gardner 1991). In acknowledging that relevant work may exist outside mainstream discourse, the observed scarcity of such engagement is nevertheless surprising. Similar points have been raised in recent critical discussion on the construal and operationalization of the L2 Motivational Self System (Henry and Liu 2024; Teimouri et al. 2025). An increasing awareness has emerged regarding the need to refocus attention on the underlying architecture of the constructs we work with (Liu and Henry, 2025).

Critical engagement with the FLCAS has shown repeated, directed attention to questions of structural validity (e.g., Horwitz 1986; Aida 1994; Park 2014; Botes et al. 2020), including the design of adapted and shortened versions of the original 33-item scale (Liu and Huang 2011; Dewaele and Macintyre 2024; Botes et al. 2022). This type of *instrument-focused thinking* (Liu and Henry 2025: 8) may have contributed to the ways in which the FLCAS appears to have become the de facto instrument of choice in FLA research: limiting any direct engagement with the theoretical assumptions and conceptual premises underpinning its development. The circumstances and context of the learner population for which FLA was originally conceptualized and validated seem to have gone largely unexamined.

The purpose of this article is to revisit Horwitz et al.'s (1986) conceptualization of FLA and to offer a critical discussion of its context-specific nature. Aligned with the guiding theme of this special issue, I focus on the Swedish upper-secondary English classroom as an example to highlight differences between the experiences of Spanish Foreign Language (FL) learners in Horwitz et al.'s (1986) seminal paper and those of contemporary EFL learners in contexts where the target language (TL) plays a dominant role in life beyond the language classroom. The objective here is to offer a starting point for future discussions on how FLA can be understood and operationalized in contemporary EFL research today.

Point of departure

Despite an ever-growing number of studies on FLA in EFL learners across diverse contexts and learner populations, the Scandinavian context—particularly Sweden—remains underexplored. On the one hand, it is possible that this limited body of research hinges on an assumption that people in Sweden are relatively ‘anxiety-free’ English language learners. The pervasive presence of English in Swedish public and social life and the role of English as a core school subject, coupled with the high oral proficiency typically attributed to Swedish learners of English (EP EPI, 2020, 2025), may offer support for such an assumption. On the other hand, it is also possible that the current scale items in the FLCAS, and the underlying conceptualization of FLA, are ill-fitted to capture these specific learners’ anxious experiences in the English classroom. Indeed, it seems highly plausible that such an oversight in FLA studies in Sweden rests on a combination of both.

In the literature, FLA has been linked to a number of learner variables such as education level, general level of FL (i.e., stage of acquisition), gender, age group, learner perceptions of proficiency, instruction context, and cultural background (e.g., Dewaele 2002, 2007; Dewaele and Macintyre 2014). In other words, researchers are generally attentive to the contextual differences (both individual and social) that influence learners’ experiences of FL classroom anxiety. However, the ways in which these same types of *variables* (i.e., education level, stage of acquisition, age group, instruction context, and cultural background) may have shaped the theoretical underpinnings of the conceptualization of FLA warrant attention. As will be addressed and further discussed in subsequent sections of this paper, the 33 items on the FLCAS were curated and designed based on a particular FL learner population’s beliefs, behaviors, and feelings towards FL learning and their FL classrooms. Moreover, Horwitz et al.’s (1986) theorization of the FL classroom (i.e., uniqueness of the FL learning process) seems to have provided a useful and rigorous interpretive lens through which to outline the theoretical contours of FLA. Once this interpretive lens is revisited, it becomes easier to understand why many items on the FLCAS scale seem contextually misaligned with learners’ experiences in contemporary EFL classrooms, including the upper-secondary English classroom in the Swedish context. To exemplify this misalignment, the article first describes the classroom context, learner characteristics, and the role of English beyond educational settings in the

context of Swedish upper-secondary English classrooms. Next, the article offers a re-examination of the original conceptualization of FLA, highlighting its contextual specificity. Lastly, the article discusses FLA in contemporary EFL settings, raising questions about the appropriateness and transferability of Horwitz et al.'s (1986) conceptual framework across settings.

An English classroom in an English-rich environment

Learners in the upper-secondary EFL classroom find themselves in a context far removed from the context in which Horwitz et al.'s (1986) learners were situated. Because the ideas presented in this section require some grounding, I invite the reader to consider the following vignette, designed to illustrate the experiences of learners in Swedish upper-secondary English classroom settings:

Alex sometimes feels that English class is quite boring and that it is quite silly that she has to go to these classes. She speaks English well already and is pretty confident using English outside of the classroom. She really enjoys it, and at this point, English is as much a part of her sociolinguistic identity as Swedish. However, she often feels her confidence waning in the classroom. Speaking English in the classroom does not come as freely to her as when she is not in school, and she feels a pressure to live up to certain expectations when speaking in the classroom. She thinks that someone like her should be able to sound right speaking English in the classroom. She feels that sounding Swedish is embarrassing and fears that her peers will laugh at her or think she is stupid if she makes pronunciation mistakes or sounds too accented. The cool students are those who can really sound right all the time. Even though her English is pretty good, she is sometimes apprehensive about contributing to class discussion, because it requires her to self-monitor her production. She ends up fixating on the smallest mistakes she makes, which gives rise to some physical and emotional discomfort. She believes that she should not be making these mistakes at this level.

The illustrative power of Alex's learner experience lies in the way it foregrounds the current socio-cultural demands and expectations for English language use in Sweden and the resulting emotional complexities of participation and interaction in the upper-secondary English classroom. Reference to Alex will recur throughout the paper to exemplify key points.

For many Swedish English-language learners, exposure to and engagement with English are not confined to the classroom. Rather the opposite can be the case. In fact, these learners are provided with countless opportunities for informal, out-of-school exposure to and use of English, for example through English-language-mediated (social) media consumption and participation. For many learners, sustained and continual exposure to and use of English allow them to leverage existing competences towards even higher levels of proficiency (e.g., Sylvén and Sundqvist 2012; Lindgren and Muñoz 2013; Sundqvist 2019, 2024). While the mandatory core subject of English is introduced in grade 1 of primary school, exposure to and engagement with English for some learners begin already at pre-school age (Sylvén 2022).

Throughout primary and secondary school, the English language becomes, for many learners, a growing part of everyday social and linguistic practice. English-mediated leisure time activities and communication in English are important (if not integral) parts of the shared social fabric among many adolescent peers (Henry 2013). Accordingly, the use of English can serve as an important linguistic and social resource tied to identity development and performance.

By the time learners reach the upper-secondary level, institutional expectations placed on the level of English proficiency can often be high (Mežek 2024). This is mirrored in the national curriculum for the subject of English at upper-secondary level (Swedish National Agency for Education 2022, 2025). Curriculum contents and activities are dependent on incoming learners' intermediate and/or advanced oral skills in English. Learners are expected to take part in and contribute to oral discussions of societal issues—cultural, political, and historical conditions in various contexts and regions where English is used (2022: 5). Learners are also expected to reason and argue for own perspectives with nuance, clarity and fluency, as well as synthesize content from a variety of different spoken and written sources in oral production (2022: 6). Such curriculum goals place high demands on the L2 English learners, particularly in terms of oral proficiency in what can best be described as a highly interactive

classroom. At the same time, institutional expectations for high proficiency may not be the only expectations learners *carry with them* into the classroom. The belief that people in Sweden have (or should have) strong command of English has a long-standing presence in popular as well as academic discourse (Mežek 2024). It is likely that such forms of societal expectations are also carried by learners into the classroom and internalized as expectations to be met (Henry and Liu 2025, 2026a).

With these observations in mind, one may consider upper-secondary English classrooms in English-rich environments, including Sweden, not only as spaces for language learning, but more importantly as spaces for social positioning. In recognizing the English classroom as a space which may involve social performance through language use, participation, then, has the potential of being either a socially validating or threatening activity. Akin to other performative social situations marked by social standards (Higgins 1990), English classrooms in English-rich environments may lie particularly open to processes of self-evaluation (Henry and Liu 2026a, 2026b), making learners highly attuned to how they are perceived by their peers and to the anticipation of judgement, real or imagined, in the classroom. Once we consider how the display of advanced English proficiency in classroom settings may reflect learners' cultural capital and social standing, anxiety tied to performance in the English classroom may rest on social rather than purely linguistic challenges. These contextual conditions are important to explore. There are a number of ways in which English classrooms like these are different from those of Horwitz et al.'s (1986) FL classrooms. The learners that Horwitz et al. studied were enrolled in beginner-level Spanish courses at the tertiary level and engaged in formal language learning. In contrast, participation in the Swedish upper-secondary English classrooms requires at least intermediate proficiency and extends beyond that of a structured FL course. With less emphasis on general language proficiency, it more closely resembles an English language arts general-education course, focusing on composition, literary analysis, and the development of language and literacy skills through diverse multimodal texts, communication practice, and analytical activities (Swedish National Agency for Education 2022, 2025).

The following section re-examines Horwitz et al.'s original conceptualization of FLA, their theorization of the FL classroom, and

emphasizes its dependence on contextual conditions far removed from those of EFL classrooms in English-rich environments.

Revisiting the conceptualization and operationalization of FLA

In their seminal paper, Horwitz et al. (1986) introduce their conceptualization of FLA and operationalize the construct through use of the 33-item FLCAS. The conceptual development of FLA emerged during a period in which psychology research was marked by the identification and formalization of situation-specific anxieties, including academic anxieties such as test anxiety (for an overview, see Roos et al. 2021) and math anxiety (for an overview, see Rada and Lucietto 2022). This trend gained traction as researchers became increasingly interested in differentiating between trait anxiety, a generally stable predisposition to experience anxiety, and state anxiety, situational and contextual occurrences of anxiety (Spielberger 1966). This distinction allowed for a more nuanced understanding of why some individuals who are not generally anxious may consistently experience acute anxiety in specific situations and academic settings. Building on this as a foundation, Horwitz et al. propose FLA as a situation-specific anxiety that some learners experience in direct response to the language learning process. Horwitz (2017: 33) later clarified that FLA should be understood as ‘having the trait of feeling state anxiety when participating (or sometimes even thinking about) language learning and/or use’. From an SLA perspective, the FLCAS, modeled after other diagnostic self-report instruments and designed to identify learners who were highly anxious about FL learning, addressed growing concerns about the inhibitory effects of anxiety on language acquisition and achievement. Moreover, it facilitated a more systematic recognition of learners’ anxious experiences in the FL classroom, prompting closer theoretical attention to the phenomenon.

The FLCAS continues to be widely used to conduct research on FLA across a range of learner populations and educational settings, including EFL settings. Considering the extensive empirical application of the FLCAS today, it seems fitting to critically engage with the theoretical underpinnings upon which operationalization of FLA rest.

This critical engagement requires us, first, to consider two specific aspects about the conceptualization of FLA. The conceptualization of FLA, which is operationalized in the FLCAS items, seem to a) be shaped by the lived experiences of a particular learner population and instructors

and b) rest on a specific theorization of the FL classroom (i.e., characteristics of *an* FL classroom).

Horwitz et al. (1986) emphasize that the perceptions, beliefs, behaviors, and emotional responses of their learners in the FL classroom contributed to the development of the FLCAS. These learners were Spanish beginner-level students at the University of Texas who had shared classroom-related concerns and emotional challenges of FL learning in support groups. While the reports of such learners shared in the support groups are not detailed in the 1986 paper, the authors refer to unpublished work (inaccessible) that preceded conceptual development of FLA and the construction of the FLCAS (Horwitz 1983, 1984). In an adjacent paper by Horwitz (1986: 560), she notes that the FLCAS items were, indeed, ‘developed to reflect these students’ experiences in their own classes’. She further explains that her own encounters with anxious FL learners, together with the experiences of university-internal counselors, also contributed to the development of relevant items (1986: 560), alongside insights drawn from related anxiety instruments (e.g., test anxiety: Sarason 1978; speech anxiety: Paul 1966; and CA: McCroskey 1970).

The source of influence behind each FLCAS item is difficult to pinpoint. Nonetheless, once we consider that the influences informing item development were drawn from student narratives, teacher observations, and counselor experiences within one instructional context, we cannot rule out that the conceptual development of FLA was contingent upon the specific instructional context from which it emerged. In fact, Horwitz also reported that administering the FLCAS in multiple undergraduate FL classrooms at the tertiary level ‘demonstrated satisfactory reliability *within this population*’ (1986: 561, emphasis added), further emphasizing the context-bound nature of her and colleagues’ instrument.

In Horwitz et al.’s (1986) theorization of FLA as a situation-specific anxiety phenomenon, the characteristics of the FL classroom are thoroughly considered. The authors discuss the unique demands of FL classroom participation, including the affective pressures and performance expectations, and other characteristics that they identify as central to the FL learning process. In many ways, it seems that the conceptualization of FLA and its theoretical underpinnings rest on a particular theorization of *an* FL classroom context. The authors’ engagement with three well-established performance anxieties as foundational ‘building blocks’

(1986: 127) for a conceptualization of FLA, as well as for the development of relevant FLCAS items (Horwitz 1986: 560), demonstrates this clearly.

- 1) Communicative apprehension (CA; McCroskey 1970): A type of anxiety related to individuals' level of fear or anxiety associated with oral communication with another person or persons. While CA is an anxiety phenomenon pertaining to first language (L1) use, Horwitz et al. argued that such communicative apprehensions may also permeate the FL classroom. They observed that their learners felt apprehensive about initiating or participating in communication. Importantly, they theorized that CA in the FL classroom would likely stem from learners' awareness of their limited linguistic competence in the FL. They further argued that learners' apprehensions are intensified by anticipating difficulties in both listening comprehension and language production (1986: 127).
- 2) Test anxiety (Sarason 1978): A fear of failure and/or of making mistakes in evaluative situations—another salient issue in the FL classroom, according to Horwitz et al. They note that continual evaluation is more characteristic of language instruction than many other subjects, given its assessment-driven nature with frequent use of quizzes and tests to monitor progress (1986: 127). Additionally, they noted that the teacher, being often 'the only fluent speaker in the room' (1986: 128), serves as a primary evaluator, further raising the stakes of classroom participation and performance.
- 3) Fear of negative evaluations (FNE; Watson and Friend 1969): A fear of being judged negatively by teachers and peers for inferior performance in the FL classroom. Horwitz et al. emphasized that the nature of FL classroom interaction, where learners' errors and hesitations are observable by everyone and explicit corrections and evaluations are frequent, places learners in vulnerable positions for becoming susceptible to this type of anxiety (1986: 127).

Upon closer inspection of the authors' engagement with these conceptually related anxieties, a number of assumptions about the FL classroom can be identified. Moreover, the characteristics of their learner population (i.e., Spanish beginner-level learners at the tertiary level) seem to have also played a role in their delineation of theoretical scope. To exemplify these observations, three classroom vignettes, grounded in specific FLCAS items (see numbers in parentheses), are presented and discussed next.

Vignette 1:

Taylor often feels nervous and confused (27) in the foreign language classroom. Even on his way to the classroom, he finds that it is difficult to relax (28). He still feels anxious even though he has come prepared (16). For some reason, he never feels quite sure of himself. Sometimes, he even forgets things he knows because he is so nervous (12). The fact that there are so many grammar rules often makes him feel overwhelmed (30). Sometimes it is hard for him to stay focused in the classroom, and he finds himself thinking about many unrelated things (6). He feels frustrated that he is constantly reminded of his shortcomings in the foreign language. He lacks the vocabulary to express what he wants to say, and he panics when he has to speak without preparation (9). It upsets him when the teacher corrects him, and he does not understand what the corrections mean (15). It also frightens him when he does not know what the teacher is saying in the FL (4, 29). He often leaves class feeling frustrated, which makes him want to skip language class altogether (17). He does not usually feel this anxious about going to other classes; it is only in the FL classroom that he feels this way (26). He would be apprehensive about taking another foreign language class (5).

Vignette 1 is constructed around FLCAS items that capture the distinct beliefs, perceptions, emotional responses, and behaviors characteristic of FL learning, as observed by Horwitz et al. in students' support-group narratives, in Horwitz's personal experience, and in conversation with counselors (Horwitz 1986). There was a strong tendency among the

participants to whom the FLCAS was administered (see results in Horwitz et al. 1986) to feel anticipatory anxiety related to the FL classroom and to subsequently exhibit avoidance behavior: feeling apprehensive about going to their language classes, not wanting to take on more language classes, and feeling distracted when in the classroom. Horwitz et al. found that the items which most clearly distinguished FLA from other academic anxieties were items such as (30) 'I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak a foreign language' and (26) 'I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes' (1986: 130).

Indeed, while indicative of the unique demands of the FL classroom and FL learning process, item (30) directly reflects learner challenges that are particularly pronounced at early stages of language acquisition. This is the case for the majority of the FLCAS items, which include challenges such as difficulties understanding what is being said, why one is being corrected by the language instructor, or difficulty engaging in communication without proper preparation. Horwitz et al.'s learners were university students enrolled in introductory Spanish courses. Based on the nature of an introductory language course, one designed to provide foundational knowledge and basic communicative skills, it is reasonable to assume that these students shared broadly similar levels of proficiency and competence (i.e., at or below A1-level according to the CEFR 2001: 2020). Moreover, as these learners were situated in an English-dominant context, and most likely were monolingual speakers of English, it seems reasonable to assume that TL exposure would have been confined to the classroom, coupled with limited needs for TL interaction for purposes of participation in local and global contexts. It is also worth noting that many of these FLCAS items are reflective of the discomfort arising from learners' limited self-expression in the FL compared to their first (L1). The discomfort arising from such a discrepancy is closely reflected in Horwitz et al.'s theoretical scope. For example, Horwitz (2017) reiterates that individual self-perceptions are challenged in the FL classroom, as limited linguistic command can constrain, and sometimes threaten, authentic self-expression.

This assumption of an internal disparity felt by beginner-level learners also served as a guiding interpretative lens in Horwitz et al.'s engagement with CA, reflected in items such as: (4) 'It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language', (9) 'I start

to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class', and (24) 'I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students'. Over half of the participants in the 1986 study agreed to such statements endorsing CA. It is readily observable in the phrasing of these items that communicative apprehension was theorized as stimulated by the disparity learners feel between L1 mature and L2 immature command. In fact, the disconnect between a learner's *true self* and their more limited *foreign-language self* is identified by Horwitz et al. as the principal source of discomfort inducing FLA.

While advanced-level FL learners may also be susceptible to an adjacent type of discomfort and communicative apprehensiveness stemming from a perceived internal discrepancy, it is nevertheless important to highlight that Horwitz et al.'s theorization of such an internal discrepancy rested on the specific disparity between L1 mature and L2 immature command, one which resonated with *their* beginner-level learners.

Vignette 2:

Kim sits quietly at her desk, staring at the textbook in front of her. The teacher has instructed the students to read aloud from a short piece of prose text, an activity they do every week. The teacher asks a student in the front row to start reading a couple of sentences. Kim is quickly counting heads in front of her. She finds the part of the text that she will have to read and starts rehearsing it in her head. Last week, she had counted wrong and rehearsed the wrong set of sentences. She had then read aloud without having prepared in advance (33). Her teacher corrected her pronunciation and took notes afterwards, before calling on the next student to read aloud. Kim started to worry about the consequences of failing her foreign language class (10), because she knew these read-aloud activities counted towards her grade. Now she is afraid that every mistake she makes will be noticed (19). She feels like every instance of using the foreign language is simultaneously an instance of assessment (2). There is simply no room for error in this classroom. She now trembles when she knows she is going to be called on in class (3), and she even feels her heart pounding in anticipation (20).

Vignette 2 is built around a subset of the FLCAS items that are indicative of fear of failure (FOF) and test anxiety. These items are reflective of the discomfort that can arise from learners' experiences of continual assessment in the FL classroom. Horwitz et al. (1986) recognize a negative impact of the frequent use of tests and quizzes in the FL classroom employed for continual assessment purposes, as well as the role of the language teacher as someone who provides real-time corrections (1986: 128). They argue that this constant scrutiny creates strong evaluative pressure, as any regular participation, such as answering questions, reading aloud, or engaging in dialog, may be perceived by FL learners as informal testing situations. The blurring of the lines between instruction (routine classroom activities) and assessment (formal and summative), they argue, may be particularly characteristic of the FL classroom, as using an FL inherently involves taking risks and making mistakes. Indeed, over half of the participants endorsed statements reflective of fearing making mistakes in the FL classroom (1986: 130).

While it is difficult, and perhaps unwarranted, to make claims about the particular pedagogical approach(es) that informed Horwitz et al.'s FL classrooms, it is possible to infer a number of classroom characteristics which seem to have informed the authors' theorization of the FL classroom. For example, the anticipation of and the emotional response to being called on by the teacher, and having to answer questions that students have not had a chance to prepare in advance, seem to predominate across all FLCAS items related to public speaking in the FL classroom. Public speaking in language classrooms can take many forms. It is striking that no FLCAS items involve oral production in different classroom activities (e.g., pair or group work). The sole inclusion of items reflective of student-teacher interactions may bolster the view that these classrooms were characterized by hierarchical teacher-student dynamics as the default mode of interaction. Such a reading appears consistent with Horwitz et al.'s arguments surrounding *their* FL classrooms' assessment-driven nature, where frequent use of quizzes and tests were employed by the teacher to monitor progress, as well as the view of the teacher as an evaluator to satisfy (Horwitz et al. 1986: 127–128).

Moreover, item (10) 'I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class' could also be suggestive of the role summative assessment played in these learners' FL classrooms. As is typical on the tertiary level, courses commence at the end of the academic semester, and

grades are awarded accordingly. For learners in upper-secondary settings, particularly in the Scandinavian context, grades for core subjects like English are awarded at the end of learners' final year (i.e., senior year of upper-secondary). That is, learners progress through the system from English 1 to at least English 2, while in some programs English 3 (i.e., university prep) is also mandatory. Learners in these contexts may be less susceptible to fear of failing, as it is generally the case that learners who risk not meeting required knowledge criteria are provided with targeted support and extended opportunities for improvement since English courses span multiple academic years.

It is important to consider how *these* tertiary-level classroom characteristics, as well as the nature of language instruction in *these* types of language learning contexts, seem to have informed Horwitz et al.'s theorization of the FL classroom.

Vignette 3:

René has a sneaking fear that their peers will laugh at them when they speak the foreign language (31). They wonder if they are the only one who thinks that their language classes are too fast-paced. When they think about this, they worry that they are going to be left behind (25) in comparison to the other students in the classroom. Volunteering answers in class is embarrassing for René (13), because they always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than they do (7).

Vignette 3 is built on a subset of FLCAS items that are reflective of fear of negative evaluation (FNE). Over a third of Horwitz et al.'s participants responded that their perceptions of their own FL competence were influenced by comparisons (7) to other students in their classes (1986: 130). Two thirds also agreed that (25) 'language class moves so quickly [they] worry about getting left behind'. While on the surface, this item can be interpreted as speaking to students' social orientation and motivations (being rooted in peer comparison), there are other possible aspects of these students' experiences that this item could speak to. For example, item (25) could also be interpreted as indicative of an FL classroom environment that is high-tempo and syllabus-driven. As is typical of tertiary-level one-semester courses, expectations for language development, and the pace at

which this is expected to take place, may be clearly defined and rigorous, leaving little room for individualized pacing. Curricular expectations of progression through a rather fixed curriculum over a short period of time may add additional explanatory value for learners' fear of falling behind. Arguably, for learners situated in language courses that stretch over longer periods of time (sometimes years), the fear of falling behind may be less pronounced as a more moderate tempo applies. Yet another explanation for these learners' fear of falling behind could be that US students are often tuition-paying individuals (i.e., students who will have to pay fees a second time if they do not pass). It is hard to rule out the possibility that the cost-bearing structure for these students has not heightened the perceived stakes (anxiety) of participation in FL courses, implicating academic, financial, and thus, social success. While perhaps speculative in terms of affect, it is nonetheless a characteristic of Horwitz et al.'s learner population worth considering.

Only a small number of the participants expressed having anticipatory fears of external judgement and discomfort associated with initiating participation, as targeted by the items: (31) 'I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language' and (13) 'It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class'. This could be taken to indicate that, in contrast to teacher evaluations, the participants were not overly concerned with being judged by their peers. On the one hand, it may relate to the degree of maturity, self-regulation, and socially adept behavior that can be expected from students at the university level. In fact, Horwitz has, in a number of publications, repeatedly grounded her discussion of the role of authenticity in the FL classroom on 'adult learners' (e.g., Horwitz 1996: 2000, 2013, 2017). It is important to consider how Horwitz et al.'s theorization of what generates discomfort in the FL learning process seems dependent on adult self-conception.

On the other hand, the low concern with peer evaluation among the participants could also be attributed to shared skill levels in these *particular* introductory FL classrooms. At early stages of language acquisition, learners will likely perceive themselves as facing similar challenges as their peers. Such perceived homogeneity may reduce the social pressure to compete, potentially rendering classrooms more collaborative than competitive and mitigating fears of negative evaluations from peers. This is not necessarily true for all FL classrooms, not least in contemporary heterogeneous EFL classrooms in English-rich

environments, where classroom learners often display varied linguistic abilities (Henry 2013).

A re-examination of the theoretical underpinnings of the FLA construct, and its operationalization in the FLCAS, supports the view that conceptualization is contingent upon a specific context and learners. Horwitz et al. (1986) compellingly theorized the nature of a FL classroom and its learners, upon which they conceptualized FLA as a situation-specific anxiety. While it is certainly true that language learning involves performance evaluation in both academic and social contexts, which implicates self-concept and self-expression more deeply than is typically observed in other academic subjects (Horwitz et al. 1986: 128), we must bear in mind that their theoretical scope seems to have been highly influenced by observations of adult learners' experiences in a particular FL educational setting. Horwitz and colleagues did find significant but moderate correlations between the FLCAS scores and other criterion instruments (State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, Spielberger 1983; Personal Report of Communication Apprehension, McCroskey 1970; Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale, Watson and Friend 1969; and Test Anxiety Scale, Sarason 1978), which provided evidence for the existence of language anxiety (FLA) as independent from, instead of a composite of, these different types of analogous anxieties, as well as evidence for FLA construct validity. However, we must interpret this conceptualization through a critical lens that brings to the fore that the beliefs, perceptions, and emotional responses to the FL learning process were found in *this* particular group of learners in *this* particular educational environment and instructional context. Thus, the appropriateness of continual reliance on Horwitz et al.'s conceptualization of FLA for empirical investigations in contexts far removed from the one which guided its theorization requires reflection.

With these reservations in mind, the discussion now turns to a reappraisal of the conceptualization in FLA. To do this, I suggest changing the mode of engagement with Horwitz et al.'s key theoretical premises and explore the ways in which these can be extended or modified to better account for the discomforts inducing FLA in English classrooms in English-rich environments.

FLA in English classrooms in English-rich environments

When we explore the contrasts between the characteristics of the Swedish upper-secondary English classroom and its learners, such as Alex (described in the initial vignette), and the characteristics of Horwitz et al.'s FL classroom and FL learners, these contrasts make apparent the contextual misalignments at play.

Exposure to and use of the TL (i.e., English) are rarely confined to the classroom in English-rich environments such as Sweden. In contrast, exposure to and use of the TL (i.e., Spanish) may have been mostly confined to the FL classroom in what can be described as an English-dominant environment (i.e., USA). The kind of informal English language learning that increasingly takes place in these types of English-rich environments has been found to positively affect language learning motivation, enjoyment, and confidence (e.g., Arndt 2019; Lai et al. 2015; Lee and Hsieh 2019). Contemporary English language learners in English-rich environments are thus afforded opportunities to gain a sense of comfort in English, which can have a positive effect on confidence in the use of English beyond the classroom. Accordingly, these learners may be more accurately understood as both English language *learners* and English language *users*, an important distinction from Horwitz et al.'s university students, who seem to have been positioned primarily as learners. This shift carries important implications. The FL classroom (i.e., the English classroom) is no longer solely a space for language learning but also a site for social positioning, where display of English language competence can become a meaningful component of identity construction and social performance. This broader role of the classroom frames the discussion that follows.

Self-discrepancy and the authenticity gap

Horwitz et al. theorized communicative apprehensions in the FL classroom as stemming from the discomfort arising from learners' self-perceived discrepancy between L1 mature and L2 immature command. This, Horwitz has argued repeatedly, hinders self-expression and renders L2 communication inauthentic. The level of 'immatureness' reflected the experiences of beginner-level learners of Spanish, who found it challenging to speak without preparation, as well as comprehend what the teacher was saying. When considering advanced-level learners of English in English-rich environments, it is hard to imagine that the principal

discomfort inducing FLA stems from this kind of disparity between L1 mature (e.g., Swedish) and L2 immature (e.g., English) command. In fact, a discrepancy between L1 and L2 command may not exist to the same degree for these learners. However, we can consider another type of discrepancy internal to the L2 (i.e., English), which may be more useful when discussing questions of principal discomforts inducing FLA in these contexts.

For learners like Alex, the principal discomfort inducing FLA may result from a discrepancy that pertains to in- vs. out-of-school use. Ushioda (2013) observes that such in-school/out-of-school dissonance permeates contemporary EFL classrooms in European contexts, while research on motivation by Henry (2014) finds that the leisure time Swedish learners spend in English-mediated environments outside of school provides learners with meaningful, positive, and identity-congruent experiences as users of English. These experiences contrast with the more structured and decontextualized activities taking place in the English classroom, which some learners perceive as inauthentic and disconnected from their lived linguistic realities (creating an *authenticity gap*; Henry 2013). Horwitz's (2017) argument regarding authenticity is particularly relevant at this juncture. For learners like Alex, authenticity is perhaps not challenged because of the underlying personal knowledge of a limited ability to express herself in the L2, but rather from feeling that her capacity for self-expression is hindered by the formal expectations surrounding English language use inside the classroom.

Swedish learners' out-of-school lives in English often involve not only content consumption, but also some interaction with international audiences on English-mediated digital, social media platforms. Among contemporary European adolescents, English has become an important linguistic and social resource tied to identity development and performance (e.g., Henry and Goddard 2015). This is especially so in digital spaces, where participation to a large extent involved identity exploration, construction, and expression through social interaction (e.g., Pérez-Torres 2024). This kind of participatory engagement with English provides many opportunities for spontaneous language and development of conversational fluency (Kusyk 2017). However, the linguistic skills that emerge from such contexts are often genre-specific, shaped by the conventions and communicative norms of a particular digital medium or online community. Learners become adept at using recurring phrases,

expressions, vocabulary, and interactional routines—imported ways of speaking (Eckert 2003)—that are characteristics of these platforms. While this genre-specific proficiency enables many learners to communicate in English with ease and confidence in familiar digital contexts and offline social contexts with peers who share the same social conventions of English language use, it may not always transfer to more formal or academic settings, where different linguistic demands and norms are placed on the learner (i.e., structured argumentation, academic vocabulary, and formal registers). Therefore, contemporary Swedish EFL learners' anxious experiences may result from a disparity between the *kinds* of English they are comfortable with and accustomed to using in informal settings and the more formal English that is expected inside the classroom. Expanding the mode of engagement with learners' perceived self-discrepancy may offer a starting point to reappraise the original conceptualization of FLA. This may also allow for more nuanced conversations around what generates discomfort in these language classrooms, conversations that can inform the construction of context-specific FLCAS items for investigations of FLA in these types of settings.

Performance, evaluation, and mode of interaction

Horwitz et al.'s theorization of the unique performance pressures inherent to the FL classroom rests on an understanding of the FL classroom as prone to performance evaluations. As has been discussed, the authors considered the frequent use of quizzes and tests in outlining the assessment-driven nature of FL classrooms. Moreover, the authors also discussed the role of the teacher in these classrooms, often understood by the students as an evaluator to satisfy, rendering any type of oral participation prone to scrutiny. There is a considerable contextual misalignment between these types of FL classrooms and the Swedish upper-secondary English classroom.

Learners like Alex find themselves in a language classroom which only minimally involves these types of form-focused tests and assessment practices. Classroom activities rarely include tests and quizzes for monitoring progress or for purposes of summative assessment. The types of assessment described in the Swedish national curriculum for English (SNCE) suggest a holistic approach to evaluating performance and achievement (Swedish National Agency for Education 2022, 2025), including a variety of group-based and interactional activities that go

beyond evaluating isolated skills (i.e., accuracy in grammar and pronunciation). As in other Scandinavian contexts (Lønsmann et al. 2024: 67), the SNCE supports the view of English as a means of communication more than linguistic accuracy being a goal in itself. Developing learners' communicative competence in a variety of settings, both informal and formal, takes precedence over more form-focused measures of achievement. Activities in these classrooms typically also provide learners with greater autonomy. Learners are encouraged to argue in favor of their own perspectives in a dialogical space, where there are rarely right or wrong answers. Instead of an evaluator to satisfy, the role of the teacher in these classrooms is better described as a facilitator of meaning-making and discussion. Consequently, learners should, in theory, be able to take linguistic risks without fear of judgement from the teacher or concern that their performance will be scrutinized for assessment purposes at every moment of every class. Additionally, being called on by the teacher without preparation (i.e., cold calls) are only rarely employed by these teachers, as they generally practice in classrooms that are exemplary of post-method pedagogical approaches (e.g., Kumaravadivelu 2001). Thus, the English classroom is rarely indicative of the rather default interactionist mode between learners/students and teachers as reflected in the FLCAS items and Horwitz et al.'s theorization of the FL classroom as highly assessment-driven in nature. Moreover, teachers in the upper-secondary English classrooms would also need to be redefined. Horwitz et al. describes the role of the teacher in their beginner-level courses as 'the only fluent speaker in the room' (1986: 127), which they argue raises the perceived stakes of classroom participation. In the upper-secondary English classroom in Sweden, both teachers *and learners*, though to varying degrees, may be more appropriately described as fluent speakers of English.

Prior to employment of the FLCAS and its underlying conceptualization in empirical investigations, then, we must make sure to evaluate the level of contextual alignment between Horwitz et al.'s FL classroom and the FL classroom context of interest. Importantly, Horwitz (1986: 561) notes that the impact of 'different instructional methods or teacher styles' on the learner should be considered in future research on the effects of anxiety on language learning.

Peer-dynamics and the role of others

Horwitz et al.'s learners were beginner-level adult learners of Spanish at the tertiary level. As previously discussed, these students were likely relatively uniform in linguistic competence and ability, progressing along broadly similar developmental trajectories in their first weeks of FL (i.e., Spanish) courses. By contrast, in the Swedish upper-secondary English classroom, learners have engaged with English outside of the classroom to varying degrees from very young ages (Sylvén 2022), resulting in the presence of diverse linguistic profiles and skill levels in the same classes (Henry 2019). For example, some students demonstrate advanced oral speaking skills that may, in some cases, even surpass curricular expectations; others perform within the margins of curricular benchmarks, while less proficient learners struggle to achieve the expected competencies. In such a heterogeneous classroom environment, we can expect disparate linguistic abilities to become more visible and sometimes even a contested aspect of peer interaction and social positioning. For such reasons, we may have to divest ourselves of pre-conceived notions of the FL classroom being (only) a space for learning and consider interactions in the language classroom as a potentially threatening or validating social activity. This puts us in a better position to evaluate the degree of contextual alignment between Horwitz et al.'s theorization of their FL classroom and the characteristics of English classrooms in English-rich environments.

As illustrated in Alex's learner experience, peer evaluations may act as a powerful driving force in her English classroom, where performance opens up the possibility of social comparison, both upward and downward (Festinger 1954). As learners are exposed to differences in language ability, it seems natural that they would gauge their own achievement in relation to how they perceive their peers' competences and how their peers perceive them in return. This may be particularly relevant to consider for investigations of FLA in adolescent learners. Learners of this age may be particularly invested in ensuring that their linguistic competence is acknowledged within the classroom domain (i.e., their social arena) and may even seek to affirm their social status in and through the display of English language proficiency in interaction with peers or refrain from participation in English all together to safeguard their social status.

Accentedness may, for some of these learners, be incongruent with the self-image they want to affirm. As Horwitz (1996) herself observes in a

later paper, advanced learners are often prone to pursue idealized levels of proficiency. High-performing students may inadvertently establish peer-driven performance norms, which become far more influential than curricular-driven goals or teacher expectations in classroom interaction. Despite plentiful affordances for English language use in informal settings, English language use often remains largely confined to the domain of the classroom for many lower-performing students, who have likely not internalized advanced oral proficiency in English as an achieved personal attribute. Nevertheless, these learners presumably understand the prestige afforded by *sounding right* and are indeed often aware of the value English holds as a marker of social capital (for similar arguments for French in Flanders, see Dewaele 2002). In comparison to their peers, this may result in learners not seeing themselves as legitimate users of English, which may contribute to a sense of social marginalization in the classroom, raising the perceived stakes of classroom participation. Such an awareness may become especially salient in interaction with classmates who appear to possess the social attribute of competent English language users, as evidenced in their oral production.

In English-rich contexts like these, fluency and target-like pronunciation may generate highly internalized, peer-driven performance benchmarks, against which these learners evaluate their own abilities. It is worth considering the potential significant role that comparative thinking and processes of social comparison (for a similar argument, see Henry and Liu 2026a) may play in these particular kinds of heterogeneous English classrooms in English-rich environments. A perceived gap between learners' own performance and that of their peers, especially in comparison to those who exceed curricular benchmarks, likely contributes to a heightening of these learners' already-existing sense of their shortcomings, leading to communicative apprehension and feelings of anxiety. It is possible, of course, that learners may also experience discomfort from the internal discrepancy between their ability in their L1 and L2, similar to Horwitz et al.'s beginner-level learners. However, it seems more pertinent to consider how these learners' discomfort can stem from a discrepancy between current L2 command of English and the L2 command of English *someone like them* should possess. Thus, the role that internalized institutional, societal, and peer-driven expectations may play in these learners' experiences of language-use related classroom anxiety

could usefully be considered in the design of scale items for this particular learner population or similar learner populations.

Implications

Through critical engagement with FLA at the construct level, and its operationalization in the FLCAS, this paper suggests that it is timely for SLA research to engage with not only instrument validity, but more importantly, the validity of the underlying FLA construct. As highlighted in similar contemporary discussions of the validation crisis in L2 motivation research (e.g., Liu and Henry 2025; Teimouri et al. 2025), theoretical constructs and research instruments need to be understood and validated in their *particular* contexts. This means that learners' age, educational level, type of classroom environment, and cultural expectations for FL use must be core considerations in the application of all conceptual models and instrumentation. This is no less true for foreign language anxiety. Differences in instruction context are often considered in FLA research employing the FLCAS across diverse contexts (e.g., Kim 2009). However, I would argue that, before further implementing the scale in contexts dissimilar to that in which it was originally developed, researchers need to go beyond simply acknowledging contextual differences and consider the role of these in conceptual development.

Four decades after its initial conceptualization, FLA remains a salient and complex emotional response to the process of foreign/second language learning. As such, it is imperative that researchers continue to critically engage with, refine, and perhaps even reappraise the conceptual models that underpin our investigations of this phenomenon, ensuring that theorization of the FL classroom evolves in step with the contemporary realities of foreign language classroom learners, particularly those in EFL settings in English-rich environments.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have suggested that the original conceptualization of FLA may be poorly aligned with the realities of English classroom learners in English-rich environments. Using vignettes built around the original FLCAS items, I have shown how the theoretical contours of Horwitz et al.'s FLA construct were influenced by a number of contextual factors that are markedly different from those that apply to many English classrooms

today. I have highlighted the population of learners and classroom conditions that informed Horwitz et al.'s seminal work and contrasted these learner realities with the learner realities of contemporary Swedish upper-secondary English learners. While in Horwitz et al.'s work, participants were beginner-level learners of Spanish whose language learning took place in assessment-driven classrooms and with hierarchical teacher–student dynamics, those in Sweden are advanced-level learners and users of English whose learning takes place in classrooms that are minimally assessment-driven and informed by post-method pedagogies. I have argued that the self-discrepancy between L1 mature and L2 immature command, which Horwitz et al. identified as one of the main driving forces behind FLA, can be more meaningfully reappraised as an internal L2 English discrepancy for language learners in English-rich environments. Learners' self-perceived disparity could better be understood as stemming from an in- vs. out-of-school dissonance in relation to English language use, as well as a dissonance between current L2 English command and the L2 English command *learners like them* should possess. I have also argued for the need to consider how English classrooms in English-rich environments may function as spaces for social positioning in and through language use, particularly for learners in adolescence, which implicates participation (a potentially validating or threatening social activity) in ways not sufficiently captured in Horwitz et al.'s theorization of the FL classroom.

Finally, I have argued for the need to reflect and consider whether the emotions that arise in response to classroom participation in contemporary EFL classroom settings may reflect social challenges more strongly than challenges that are purely linguistic. Horwitz et al. undoubtedly captured a prevalent anxiety phenomenon among *their* particular FL learners. However, I argue that it is timely to discuss construct validity of FLA, not least before further employment of the FLCAS in English classrooms in English-rich environments.

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