Foreign Language Anxiety and Self-Disclosure in Online University French Classes

1. Introduction

Foreign language anxiety (hereafter referred to as FLA) has been a greatly researched subject of enquiry since the mid 1980s. However, until recently, the majority of this work has approached the topic through the lens of the physical classroom – the natural, default context for L2 learning until the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. The emergency pivot from on-campus to online learning that ensued brought with it a radically different context within which to view FLA, and in so doing raised the question of how FLA affects students who are studying online. Given the paucity of research on this topic, the present paper investigates FLA within the context of the online French L2 classroom: specifically, online French classes at an Australian university during the Covid-19 lockdowns of 2020 and 2021. More specifically, we target in-class speaking contributions with a view to establishing how learners with mid to high levels of FLA experience speaking in synchronous online language classes. What strategies, if any, do students use to deal with FLA? A subsidiary question is whether self-disclosure, a particular feature of social interaction hitherto unexplored in the literature on FLA and classroom activities, contributes to FLA. Our interest in this question was sparked by the observation that students in the L2 classroom are frequently required to self-disclose as part of their language learning journey and that, crucially, this level of self-disclosure is atypical in other disciplines. Questions such as 'What did you do on the weekend?', 'Who did you go out with?' and 'What do your parents do?' are routine, even clichéd, prompts for conversation. Despite the ubiquity of these types of conversational prompts, there is a noticeable gap in the extant literature regarding how students with mid to high levels of FLA – or indeed, any students at all – perceive self-disclosure, with no research having explored the types of responses they are comfortable providing in classroom settings. Hence, there are two outstanding questions that need clarification as far as this is concerned. Firstly, how comfortable are students with mid to high levels of FLA with self-disclosure during speaking activities in the online L2 classroom? And secondly, does self-disclosure exacerbate their FLA?

2. Literature review

2.1 Foreign language anxiety

FLA is a distinctive type of anxiety experienced by learners of foreign languages (Horwitz, 1986; Horwitz et al., 1986). In what follows, we will understand this concept as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz et al., p. 128). Furthermore, in line with Horwitz (2001), we will view this construct as a type of state anxiety (i.e. non-permanent and situation-specific) as opposed to trait anxiety (i.e. an enduring feature of one's personality). Research has shown that FLA is generally independent of other types of anxiety, such as Fear of Negative Evaluation (Horwitz 2001), although the symptoms of FLA are common to anxiety more generally: for instance, worry, dread and forgetfulness (Horwitz et al., 1986). The status of FLA as a particular type of anxiety justifies the great deal that has been written on the topic since the mid-1980's, when the frequently cited and widely used Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz et al., 1986) was devised. Briefly, the FLCAS is a self-report questionnaire that measures the level of anxiety experienced by individuals when learning a foreign language. The scale consists of 33 items that assess anxiety related to various aspects of language learning, such as speaking, language comprehension, and taking tests (see section 3.2 for further information.) Over the years, a significant body of research has shown that students find speaking in an L2 anxiety-inducing (e.g. Daly, Chamberlain & Spalding, 2011; von Wörde, 2003; Young, 1991). It therefore follows logically that much of the ensuing research has focused on FLA in relation to L2 speaking (Pichette 2009), although there has been (increasing) attention paid to FLA in relation to the other three macro skills of reading, writing and listening (ibid). The coarse-grained category of 'speaking' suggests a monolithic concept whereas finer-grained distinctions are *de rigueur* in the literature. For example, research has focused on speaking within the context of test-taking (e.g. Al-Khotoba et al., 2020, Chen et al., 2022; Philips 1992), as well as on speaking during class time (e.g. Aguila & Harjanto, 2016; Effiong, 2015). Based on this collective body of existing research, a number of causes of FLA have been proposed. MacIntyre (2017) organises these into three categories: academic, cognitive, and social causes. The first of these includes triggers such as insensitive corrections of errors by teachers in front of other

students, the second comprises shyness and low self-esteem, while the third encompasses fear of being ridiculed. Numerous studies on FLA, both qualitative and quantitative in nature, have also shown how LA affects students of all nationalities, studying different languages and at varying levels in their acquisition journey (Pichette, 2009). Given the prevalence of FLA, it is critical for language educators to understand how it affects learning outcomes in different environments, including the online classroom, and to reflect on their role in improving students' language learning experiences.

2.2 Foreign language anxiety in the online classroom

The conception of the 'online classroom' that is the focus of the current study is that of the online, synchronous environment, where teachers and students work together in real time. A review of the literature reveals that most of the research focused on this particular context has emerged only recently, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting switch to online learning; relevant studies will be presented later in this section. Prior to the pandemic, little was known about the relationship between online education and FLA (Russell, 2020; Sun, 2014). Nevertheless, some limited work had been undertaken on FLA and distance education (e.g. Bosmans & Hurd, 2016; Hurd, 2009; White, 2003), the latter term covering both synchronous and asynchronous approaches to teaching and learning. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly given the established use of the internet and associated tools (e.g. Skype) to support distance learning, there has been little research into the effects of technology on FLA (Aydin 2018). Aydin (2018), in a meta-analytic review of the literature exploring the topic of technology and FLA in education journals between 2009-2016, identified a total of 25 relevant articles. However, these papers focus disproportionately on FLA in the physical learning environment, with only two papers considering the impact of FLA in online language classes. Moreover, we were unable to locate one of these papers (JoohaeKim, 2005) in our internet search; the other, Pichette (2009), discusses language learning in the context of 'distance learning.' However, as noted above, this term is used as an umbrella category for different types of remote learning classes that are comprised of both synchronous and asynchronous approaches to learning. As such, Aydin's (2018) meta-analytic review reveals a distinct lack of research on FLA in the context that interests us in the current study: synchronous, online foreign language classes. One work of note that was not

within the scope of Aydin's review is a dissertation by Báez-Holley (2013), in which the author compares language anxiety in students studying beginners' Spanish online as opposed to in an on-campus setting at an American university. Báez-Holley administered a standardised measure of FLA (Hurd, 2006) designed to assess the overall level of FLA as well as which language tasks are associated with higher levels of it. Although she observed a range of differences in the types of activities that trigger FLA between the groups (e.g., online students ranked 'freezing when called on to speak' and 'not matching up to the expectations of others' as less anxiety provoking than classroom students), crucially, no significant differences in the overall level of FLA experienced by the two groups were observed. This contrasts with a more recent finding by Resnik et al. (2022) who, in a survey of over 400 L2 English students using the FLCA during emergency remote teaching in 2020, found that students' overall anxiety was significantly less in online classes, although participants felt significantly more embarrassed to answer questions in the online context. In other recent work, Moneypenny and Aldrich (2022), again using the FLCA, surveyed over 170 students taking online Spanish classes. They found that the majority of these students experienced language anxiety and that this correlated negatively with results on oral exams. Valizadeh (2021) presents a comparison of language anxiety in Turkish learners of English in physical and online classrooms. This questionnaire-based study found that many learners experienced less stress when participating in the physical classroom, with numerous reasons accounting for this, including lack of familiarity with technology amongst online learners and concern that others would see their homes. Kusuma et al. (2021) report on a study of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students undertaking an online speaking class at an Indonesian university. Focusing their investigation on the use of e-portfolios in which students record themselves speaking, they found that the use of this recorded modality significantly reduced students' FLA. However, while this study uses the synchronous online class as its pedagogical context, it focuses on the use of asynchronous recordings made by students enrolled in the class: as such, it does not address FLA and its relationship to language use *during* these classes.

2.3 Strategies to deal with foreign language anxiety

Most studies on the strategies used by students to deal with FLA have viewed this question from the perspective of the teacher: that is, what can *teachers* do to alleviate their students' feelings of anxiety? In contrast, investigations into how *students* themselves try to mitigate such feelings are fewer in number. Kondo and Ying-Ling (2004), in response to this lack of research, conducted a large-scale study of students studying English in two Japanese universities. They asked participants to complete a questionnaire in which they listed strategies they used to manage their anxiety in English language classrooms. Their analysis revealed a total of 70 such strategies, which were subsequently sorted into five broad categories: preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer seeking, and resignation (i.e. giving up). Participants mentioned 'preparation' strategies far more frequently than any of the other categories: 60.4% of participants cited at least one preparation strategy. The next most frequently cited category was 'resignation' (28.4%), with percentages decreasing to 26.2% for positive thinking, 11.9% for relaxation and 11.4% for peer seeking. This typology of strategies has since become influential in the literature, informing subsequent work on the topic. For example, Yasuda and Nabei (2018) sought to investigate the effectiveness of these five types of strategy on the FLA experienced by undergraduate Japanese students of English, as measured by their willingness to communicate (WTC). They found that preparation and positive thinking both 'showed positive predictive impacts on WTC' (p.911). Taking a phenomenological approach involving in-depth interviews with 15 L2 learners of French, Spanish or German, Von Wörde (2003) highlighted students' desire for 'connectedness' as a way of reducing anxiety. Students stressed the importance of building a sense of community for buffering anxiety, with many expressing a desire to get to know their co-learners on a personal level beyond the confines of the classroom. Equally, the use of inclusive teaching methods and teacher relatability were cited as critical factors for reducing anxiety. Kao and Craigie's (2013) investigation of students studying English in two Taiwanese universities paints a somewhat different picture. Their findings revealed that the type of strategy preferred by students was positive thinking. This was followed (in descending order of preference) by relaxation, resignation, preparation and peer seeking. As such, peer seeking and preparation were far less important to this particular cohort of participants. While a clear reason for this difference in result is not immediately forthcoming, we note the difference in cultural context and suggest that the reason may be attributable to one or more

factors related to this variable. For example, the prevalent collectivist culture in Taiwan might prevent students from seeking assistance from their peers, as they may worry about burdening the group. Baez-Holley's (2013) study is of particular interest for the present paper because the author discusses strategies used by students who are learning online. Her results show that 40% of these learners of Spanish turn to positive self-talk to mitigate the effects of their anxiety, this being the most frequently cited strategy. Actively encouraging oneself to take risks, followed by the use of relaxation techniques, were the next two most frequently used strategies. Interestingly, preparation was not listed, and peer seeking, operationalised here as 'share my worries with other students', was only used by 6% of participants. The literature therefore reveals a somewhat mixed portrait of the strategies preferred by students to mitigate the effects of FLA, and almost all of this work has focused on the context of the physical classroom. It seems reasonable to ask, at this juncture, whether students enrolled in online, synchronous classes may in fact adopt new strategies hitherto omitted from the existing research. Such strategies might include the use of technological tools to support vocabulary choice and sentence construction in the moment (e.g., online dictionaries and translators.) This possibility will be addressed in the results of our own study.

2.4 Foreign language anxiety and social disclosure

To our knowledge, there are only two previous studies on the topic of FLA and social disclosure; these are detailed in two short papers by the same authors. Fondo and Erdocia (2018) present a small-scale study in which 12 participants, 6 Spanish-speaking learners of English and 6 English-speaking learners of Spanish, participated in a 5-week e-tandem exchange. Their results focus on 9 of these participants and reveal, perhaps somewhat counter-intuitively, that three of the four participants who scored highly for FLA were also "high self-disclosers": that is, they 'openly shared their opinions and daily life activities' (p.58). They note that participants overall were happy to talk about familiar topics but that they were not as comfortable when it came to talking about feelings and relationships. The authors therefore suggest that low-level self-disclosure is not a trigger for FLA; in fact, it may be a way of *reducing* it. Another study by the same authors (Fondo et al., 2018) used the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz et al., 1986) to measure anxiety and the General

Disclosiveness Scale (GDS) (Wheeless, 1978) to measure self-disclosure as a personality trait. The participants, English-speaking learners of Spanish and Spanish-speaking learners of English, completed these scales prior to participating in an online conversation exchange. The authors categorised respondents into different profile types depending on their responses. They report that participants in the 'anxious partakers' category did not have difficulty talking about themselves and did so with reasonable depth, but caution that 'this first stage of personality trait analysis does not clarify yet if self-disclosing is a strategy used by students for FLA reduction' (p.63). Although there is a widespread paucity of research looking at the role of self-disclosure in the foreign language classroom, Liddicoat (2009) does consider, as an example of the barriers to self-disclosure encountered by some students, the role of the default heteronormative context in the L2 classroom. For example, he reports the case of a male student who describes in Spanish some physical attributes of his boyfriend. The teacher corrects the adjectives so that they are in the feminine form and changes the noun 'boyfriend' (*el novio*) to the feminine, 'girlfriend' (*la novia*). As such, the student did authentically self-disclose but this was rejected by the teacher. Naturally, in an ideal world such obstruction would not exist in the classroom, but given that it did (and potentially still does), could it actually be stressful for students to self-disclose? That is,
if students are 'corrected' in order to align with an expected social norm, are they likely to be their authentic selves in the language classroom or even *want* to be? As Horwitz (2000) points out, 'language learning is a complex interpersonal and social endeavor' (p.258). In other work, MacIntyre (2017) summarises the different causes of FLA that have been identified by researchers. However, while 'losing one's sense of identity' and 'fear of being laughed at, being embarrassed and making a fool of oneself' are listed, there is no mention of social aspects such as the fear of losing social status or an aversion to self-disclose because of potential negative judgement in relation to a set of social norms. While the 'fear of being laughed at, being embarrassed and making a fool of oneself' may possibly connect to these ideas, we imagine that the embarrassment mentioned here may actually relate to a poor level of linguistic competence as opposed to the substantive content of speech. Yet given that anxiety has 'social dimensions' (MacIntyre, 2017), it is important to also consider such embarrassment in the light of the content of speech, which often contains personal information that

can affect the social interaction between members of a language class as well as the social status, both real and perceived, of these members.

Taken collectively, the literature review therefore reveals the following key information. Firstly, there is an important link between speaking and FLA. Secondly, there is little research on the strategies students deploy to manage their own FLA, and even less in the context of online, synchronous classes. Thirdly, there is an absence of research on self-disclosure in the L2 classroom and its relationship to FLA. We therefore decided to focus our study on the topic of speaking during synchronous, online language classes. Our aim was to respond to the following three questions that attempt to address some of the gaps in the literature.

1. How do students with mid to high levels of FLA experience online, synchronous language classes?
2. What strategies, if any, do students use to manage their FLA?
3. Is the variable of self-disclosure, and particularly what students are asked to reveal about themselves, a contributing factor to their FLA?

Given the open nature of these questions, we decided to adopt a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews to probe individual students' experiences.

3. Method

3.1 Recruitment and participants

As one of the authors is the coordinator of the French language and culture program at a university in Australia, we decided to focus our study on university learners of French at this institution. Following submission and subsequent approval of an ethics application for the study, students enrolled in all levels of French at the university (high A1 to C1, following the Common European Frame of Reference) were contacted after one of two major Australian lockdowns: at the end of 2020 and in the latter half of 2021, respectively. Given that LA has been shown to affect learners at all levels of their language learning journey, we decided to invite students to participate in the research across the entirety of the French language programme at this time (N=122). Interested candidates were asked to

follow a link to complete the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and a consent form on the Qualtrics platform. In total, we received 31 responses to this call for participation. Given that this number was lower than what we had hoped for, we also recruited after the second lockdown period in the latter half of 2021. This led to a further 16 responses, resulting in a total of 47 responses.

3.2 The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale

The FLCAS (Horwitz et al., 1986) is a survey-like tool designed to measure a student's level of language anxiety. It is made up of 33 questions, 24 of which are positively worded. Examples of two items are 'I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class' and 'I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class.' Participants must respond to each question using a five-point Likert scale, with options ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. The range of possible scores is 33 (low anxiety) to 165 (high anxiety).

As mentioned above, we received 47 responses to the FLCAS. However, six of these were excluded from the analysis for one of the two reasons outlined below. Specifically, we encountered instances where the same student completed the study on two separate occasions (five cases); in these instances, we retained only their initial submission for analysis. In addition, one participant's data were omitted because they provided an incorrect and therefore unidentifiable code, which precluded the possibility of a follow-up interview. Of the 41 participants included in the final data set, the mean FLCAS score was 93.46 (SD = 22.54) with individual scores ranging from a minimum of 44 to a maximum of 145. For comparison, in an early paper validating the reliability and validity of the FLCAS, Horwitz (1986) reports that in a sample of 108 native English-speaking students learning a foreign language at the University of Texas, the mean FLCAS was 94.5 (SD = 21.4,) with scores ranging from 45 to 147, which is very close to our own findings. She also reports a Cronbach's alpha of 0.93 (N = 108) and a test-retest correlation of .83 (N = 78). Critically, there are no pre-defined cut-off points for foreign language anxiety based on FLCAS scores as this varies as a function of culture and specific group (see Toyama & Yamazaki, 2022). In a meta-analytic review of the literature, Toyama and Yamazaki (2002) explored FLCAS scores across a range of countries. For Australia, they examined four studies

and recorded an overall mean FLCAS score of 93.16, (they do not report a standard deviation), which again is very close to the results from our own data set.

Since the FLCAS does not have established thresholds for anxiety, we designated the categories of low, medium and high anxiety respectively, by delineating scores at the 33rd (i.e., first tertile) and 66th (i.e., second tertile) percentiles and dividing the data accordingly. Scores falling at or below the 33rd percentile were classified as 'low language anxiety,' those between the 33rd and 66th percentiles as 'medium language anxiety,' and those at or above the 66th percentile as 'high language anxiety'. This resulted in the following categories:

- Low language anxiety: scores of 80 or below (14 participants)
- Medium language anxiety: scores from 81 to 105 (13 participants)
- High language anxiety: scores from 106 or above (14 participants)

The second author, not being a staff member of the university where recruitment took place, contacted students to arrange interview times. The students contacted first were those with the highest levels of FLA. As some students did not reply to email correspondence or declined to be interviewed, we gradually worked our way down the list, ending at the mid-point. Hence, all students who participated had medium to high levels of FLA (as explained above), with the lowest interviewee score on the FLCAS being 92. More specifically, the participants we interviewed had a mean score of 108.92 (SD = 13.37) with a range of 92 to 133. We interviewed six individuals from the high anxiety group (M =115.67, SD = 12.71) and four from the medium anxiety group M = 98.25, SD = 4.92). The histogram below (Figure 1) shows the overall distribution of FLCAS scores across participants.

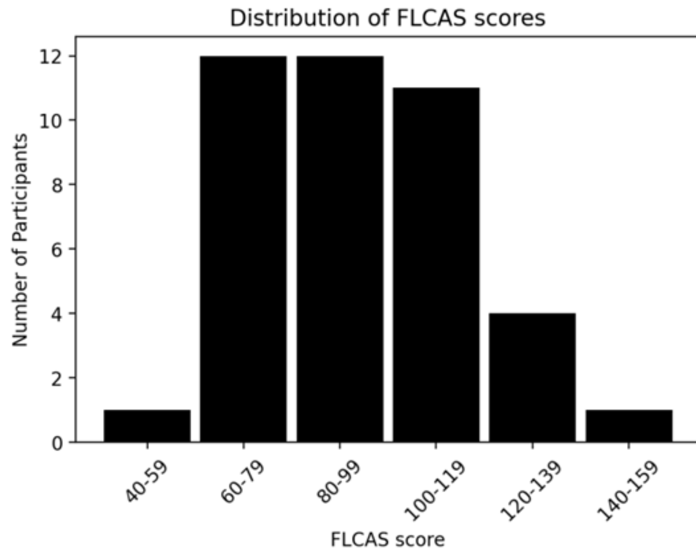

Figure 1. Distribution of all participants as a function of FLCAS score.

In the second histogram (see Figure 2), we indicate the proportion of participants who were interviewed (grey shading) in relation to the overall distribution.

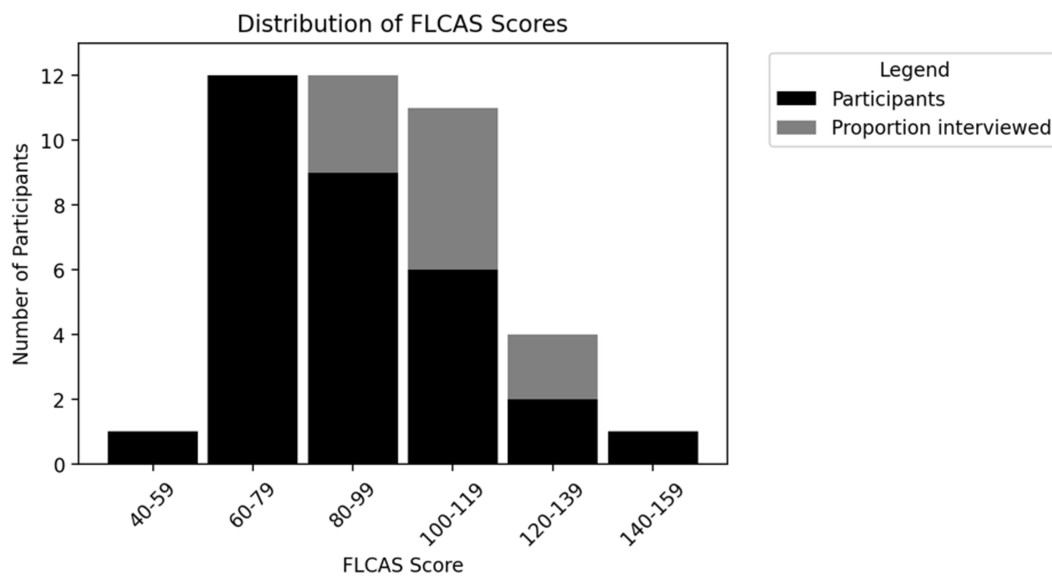

Figure 2. Proportion of participants interviewed within the overall distribution.

3.3 Interviews

In order to comprehensively examine the experience of students in an online synchronous language learning context, we employed in-depth one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Although this approach is labour-intensive, it provides rich and detailed data on the students' experiences and allows for sufficient exploration of individual perspectives and insights. We created a topic guide of open-ended questions, along with possible follow-up prompts, that focused on motivations for learning French and possible sources, manifestations, and strategies for reducing FLA in the online context (see appendix for questions). The use of videoconferencing for the interviews was necessary as the interviewer (the second author) resides in a different country. Interviews began in a casual manner, with the interviewer introducing themselves and describing the process to follow. This short, casual exchange aimed to put the interviewee at ease. Interviews lasted 30-45 minutes and were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber. Interviewee names were replaced by pseudonyms.

3.4 Analysis

Following transcription, the data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). We adopted a realist theoretical perspective, considering the participants' use of language as truthful accounts of their opinions and experiences. Transcripts were initially read twice to enable familiarisation with the data before the process of coding began. An inductive approach to coding was used: hence, the themes identified were not shaped by any particular theoretical perspective and the analysis was closely guided by the information provided by participants (ibid). Repeated readings of the transcripts meant that the process was iterative in nature, which allowed for constant refinement of coding until the themes and sub-themes were deemed to represent the dataset and were conceptually distinct and independent of each other (ibid). The first author undertook the thematic analysis, before sharing the themes and codes with the second author. A discussion between the authors led to the final iteration of themes and sub-themes.

4. Results

The use of thematic analysis led to the identification of two themes: (i) the social nature of language learning and (ii) stepping outside of one's comfort zone. Within each of these themes there was a small number of sub-themes.

4.1 Theme 1: The social nature of language learning

4.1.1 Sub-theme 1a: The importance of physical co-presence

Participants noted that the lack of direct physical interaction with their co-learners resulted in lower levels of perceived social cohesion and that this hindered learning outcomes.

> I think one of the things that you definitely lose from online learning is just the small conversations you have with people in the class that I feel like do contribute a lot to your language learning skills. (Sally, FLCAS score 133)

The sentiment expressed by Sally was not an isolated feeling: eight of the ten participants mentioned the importance of physical co-presence with co-learners and/or their teacher in the classroom. In line with previous literature, (e.g. von Wörde, 2003) participants also mentioned the significance of in-person social support as a protective factor against anxiety. Participants missed the ability to turn to peers for immediate responses when confusion arose or to discretely ask the teacher for clarification, something that is more easily afforded by the physical classroom.

> For French in particular I think just having other people at the table that you can just talk to, just ask a quick question to if you're a little bit confused or if you really want you can call the teacher over to your table instead of saying it in front of the whole class. I think they all contribute to reducing anxiety (Leah, FLCAS score 131)

In contrast, online classes were also associated with less time spent practising spoken French, less one-on-one time with the teacher and lower engagement. Such negative effects of online classes on language acquisition were mentioned by five of the ten interviewees.

> If you spent too much time on someone – and this is true in the standard classroom – other people are going to start to wander but because it was on Zoom it's far quicker like it takes 10 seconds of not being spoken to and then I'm on my phone. So I think that was probably the case for a lot of other students so I think that there wasn't the time afforded for us. (Lachlan, FLCAS score 92)

4.1.2 Sub-theme 1b: Social aspects of breakout rooms (including the use of English in breakout rooms)

Breakout rooms also provided an opportunity for students to build rapport with each other at a time when they were separated physically. Half of the interviewees mentioned the positive social effects of breakout rooms.

> It's nice when you go into breakout rooms 'cause then you know that other students have the same issues, you're not on your own. (Leah, FLCAS score 131)

Breakout rooms were also used as a means of encouraging students to consolidate new content, support skill development and increase interaction. However, students report routinely using English in breakout rooms: this was a means of 'breaking the ice' with other students, a way of responding to breakdowns in communication in French and the comfortable, default medium for interacting with their peers. All ten students confirmed the use of English within the context of breakout rooms.

> Everyone did it, it wasn't just me 'cause I feel nervous about speaking French like everyone was speaking in English to break the ice and feel a bit more comfortable and then as time went on in the breakout room we would then progress to French. (Danica, FLCAS score 107)

> Overwhelmingly English, overwhelmingly English like I'm trying to think of how to describe it like obviously the work that we're doing is in French but even then sometimes you would

> get halfway through a sentence, not know how to say the rest and then you would just go oh well blah, blah, blah and say it in English and it's like that's what I mean, that's what I want to say. (Liam, FLCAS score 104)

4.1.3 Sub-theme 1c: Willingness to self-disclose

Students were comfortable talking about themselves in French class, noting that questions tended to revolve around what they did on the weekend, their interests and other prompts for reasonably low-level information. Tellingly, eight out of the ten interviewees stated that they were comfortable with disclosing low-level personal information, while the other two interviewees, while not as forthright in their endorsement, did not appear to be against the idea, either. Students pointed out that their status as learners meant that their vocabulary was not necessarily extensive and that many students tended to provide similar answers to these sorts of questions. Furthermore, all interviewees felt that the call to disclose low-level information about oneself (e.g. what they did on the weekend) was a reasonable request, given that such disclosure would be a logical aspect of interaction, especially if they were to go overseas and live and study in the target language. In any case, students were able to invent answers if they did not want to respond truthfully.

> I feel like with learning a language it makes sense to speak about yourself because that's the thing that realistically you'd have to apply if you went overseas and the things that would come up in conversation. I also feel like you could – like no-one's holding you to your answers like you could easily just answer anything. (Sally, FLCAS score 133)

> Yeah, if I don't have an answer for it or I don't know what I think I will say that, I'll go I've got no idea, I don't know and I think that's fine, that's not anxiety-inducing for me personally. […] Personally I've never been asked a question where I've thought oh that's weird like that's a weird question to ask. (Gillian, FLCAS score 98)

4.2 Theme 2: Stepping outside of one's comfort zone

4.2.1 Sub-theme 2a: Being put on the spot in front of the class

The majority of students (seven out of ten interviewees) reported negative responses to being asked a question directly by the teacher, explaining that this process was daunting and made them feel stressed or anxious. One student even stated that they sometimes wanted to avoid attending class in case they were put on the spot. However, there was also an understanding by three students that this type of questioning was beneficial for their progress in French.

> At first I really hated it but as we did more classes I got a lot more used to it and I did get a lot more comfortable and confident in speaking French so that was a good thing. (Danica, FLCAS score 107)

One student pointed out the distinction between being put on the spot to respond to an individual question as opposed to an activity in which the teacher systematically goes around the whole class, asking each student to contribute in turn. The latter was seen more positively than the former, which was associated with increased anxiety.

> If it's oh we're going to go around and everyone's going to say a bit then I think that definitely relieves anxiety 'cause we're all in it together, I guess. But if it's just like picking on people individually I think that creates more anxiety for people in general. (Mary, FLCAS score 108)

Three students also highlighted the importance of teachers explaining the process of direct questioning to their students and explaining that the classroom was a safe space. In doing so, teachers can attenuate the anxiety associated with this type of interaction. Providing learners with the choice of not responding when they feel particularly anxious can be an effective way to alleviate stress and can therefore be a useful practice.

> Another thing is with calling out I think it's good to set that in the beginning like as students you have your first lesson, it'd be like okay well this is how I'm going to run our classes. If I call you and you're comfortable you can share, if you're not then just say sorry, I'm not sure so it doesn't put that pressure on the student like if you're called you have to answer. (Alana, FLCAS score 106)

4.2.2 Sub-theme 2b: Strategies to reduce anxiety

All students had strategies that they used to reduce their anxiety in online classes. A key word associated with this sub-theme is 'preparation', whether this be pre-class preparation (i.e. preparing for the material to be covered ahead of time and anticipating the types of questions that the teacher could ask), or pre-preparing responses *in class* when the student knows that they will be asked to provide an answer.

> preparation, thinking okay, she's asked this question, what could come next or looking at my notes and just getting some general ideas into my head, looking at the PowerPoint slide and really reading what's on the screen, stuff like that just so that if she does ask I can say oh I'm not sure about that one but what about this like try to make it work for myself (Gillian, FLCAS score 98)

The use of technology – specifically, online resources like Google Translate and Word Reference – also featured heavily in students' tactics to reduce anxiety. Seven of the ten interviewees made references to the use of online tools in the synchronous, online classroom.

> You could always go on something relevant to this course and be like oh yeah, okay, cool. It's just good to have that backup and I'm not completely put into the deep end. (Lachlan, FLCAS score 92)

We now summarise the relevant themes and sub-themes in Table 1 below for ease of reference and clarity.

Table 1. Table of themes and sub-themes.

Theme	Sub-themes	Explanation of sub-theme
1. The social nature of language learning	The importance of physical co-presence	The physical classroom facilitates contact with other students. This creates a positive social dynamic and also facilitates the learning process through interactional practices related to physical co-presence, such as incidental conversations with other students.
	Social aspects of breakout rooms	Break-out rooms allow students to build rapport, thus mitigating (to some extent) the negatives of physical separation. English was used to 'break the ice' between participants and was frequently the de facto language in breakout rooms.
	Willingness to self-disclose	Students are willing to disclose low-level personal information about their lives. This is seen as a reasonable request in the context of foreign language learning. There is also the possibility of inventing information for responses.
2. Stepping outside of one's comfort zone	Being put on the spot in front of the class	Students are anxious when they are asked questions directly by the teacher. However, this anxiety can be mitigated somewhat by the teacher explaining this pedagogic strategy at the start of class. The strategy of direct questioning, although stressful, is also recognised by some students as being beneficial for their learning.
	Strategies to reduce anxiety	All students have techniques in place to reduce anxiety during online, synchronous French classes. Many of these strategies revolve around the use of technology: for example, looking up words in

	an online dictionary like 'Word Reference', using Google Translate, etc.

5. Discussion

This study is a first attempt to systematically understand how students with mid to high levels of FLA feel about speaking French in online, synchronous classes. Critically, we explore the role of self-disclosure in relation to FLA, which has only been examined in two previous (short) papers; however, even then the study of self-disclosure was not in the context of in-person classroom activities. As such, the results presented in the current work provide new insights about a neglected aspect of the literature.

A key finding of the current work is the importance of social interaction to language learning amongst students with mid to high levels of FLA. This aligns with the results of Von Wörde's (2003) study, which identified students' desire for 'connectedness' as a way of reducing anxiety. In our study, students expressed an overwhelming preference for learning in the physical (as opposed to virtual) classroom, as the latter offers greater possibilities for spontaneous and discrete interaction with peers and teachers and facilitates incidental conversational exchanges. Within the synchronous, online context, students indicated the importance of English in exchanges with other students, both as a means of building rapport with other students and responding to breakdowns in communication in the L2. It is important to consider the context of breakout rooms here. Unlike in the physical classroom where the teacher has more direct influence over student behaviour, in breakout rooms the teacher has limited control over what is happening and is typically not co-present. The lack of supervision inherent in breakout rooms decreases student accountability, which may well result in reduced pressure to conform to the expectations of the teacher, increased social loafing and the likelihood that students will switch to their L1. In any event, the use of L1 in the L2 classroom is a contentious issue, with many teachers espousing immersive or near-immersive classroom environments as a beneficial way of acquiring a foreign language (see Hassane, 2023 and Kelleher, 2012 for a discussion of this debate.) However, this argument presupposes that linguistic development can be readily divorced from the social context in which acquisition is embedded. If students wish to

be their authentic selves, as suggested by Horwitz (2017), is a monolingual, target-language-only context really ideal? This is an important question because students are used to interacting with each other exclusively in English in all other contexts. Seen within this light, the recourse to English as the default language of interaction amongst students is logical and arguably more natural – and hence authentic – for them. In fact, we suggest that the first language should be used in a judicious manner to allow students to form meaningful interpersonal connections and create ease of communication: for example, when asking for help with lexical retrieval. This increased network of social support will buffer students from anxiety and only once these relationships are well-established would we encourage students to use French as much as possible to practise the language.

The drive for social connection was also reflected by students' willingness to disclose low-level personal information, such as their weekend activities or hobbies. This aligns with a vast body of existing literature which shows that relationship formation involves mutual self-disclosure that operates via a 'norm of reciprocity' in both face-to-face and online contexts (e.g., Dietz-Uhler et al, 2005; Trepte et al., 2018). Evidence shows that individuals tend to prefer those who readily engage in self-disclosure with them and that they are more inclined to reciprocate this behaviour with those who self-disclose to them. Additionally, people tend to develop a stronger liking for others after engaging in self-disclosure with them (Cunningham et al., 1986). As such, the willingness to self-disclose is a foundational psycho-social step in the process of fostering positive interaction in the language classroom. Indeed, decades of social psychological research have shown that social connections help to buffer stress and reduce anxiety (e.g., Fleming & Baum, 1986; Panayiotou & Karekla, 2013). As such, the development of these social connections in the language classroom may well be a strategy to keep negative effects of language anxiety at bay. This finding dovetails with the results reported by Fondo et al. (2018), who also detail how participants in their 'anxious partakers' category were not only happy to talk about themselves, but did so in reasonable depth. The authors of this study note the possibility that this may be a strategy adopted by learners to lessen FLA, but that such a conclusion is premature for the moment. Nevertheless, we would like to suggest that one implication of our combined findings is that embedding self-disclosure more directly into foreign language curricula might represent an effective strategy for building positive relationships and reducing anxiety in

educational settings. One suggestion might be that students create digital profiles about themselves – in the target language – at the start of each semester. These profiles, which would outline their hobbies, interests and future aspirations, could be uploaded to a virtual learning environment. They would then be readily available to all students who can learn about their classmates. Students would be able to post follow-up questions to each other online and use the information they have learned about each other in in-class speaking activities. Furthermore, we would suggest that the teacher lead by example: that is, the teacher should disclose some relevant information about themselves so that students feel less intimated and perceive the process as being fair.

Our study also uncovered several strategies used by students to mitigate the effects of their language anxiety. In line with previous research (Donley 1997; Kondo and Ying-Ling 2004), our participants highlighted the role of preparation in this process. This preparation involved completing class activities in advance of the session, pre-empting questions that the teacher might ask, and scanning ahead to work out the line of French that a student will be asked to read out. Several students developed elaborate strategies to minimize their risk of being asked a random question during online classes. One student, for example, appeared to engage in complex mental calculations about the optimal time to answer the teacher's question while minimizing the probability of being called on later. Their general strategy was to answer early in the session without being too early, which would reset the ‘teacher timer’ that monitors how long it has been since the student last participated. Factors such as the student's perceived placement in the teacher’s Zoom window, the number of students on the call, and the session's overall length all contributed to considerations around the optimal time to respond. A novel strategy for reducing FLA that emerged from our data and which has not been explored in the extant literature is the use of on-screen resources to prepare responses. This involves the use of online tools such as Google Translate or any other number of ‘prompts’ that can be displayed on a screen in real-time. One participant pointed out that the accessibility of such information was a confidence booster and hence that “being online might actually aid in learning French even more.” In terms of the five types of strategies identified by Kondo and Ying-Ling (2004), our participants mentioned only two: preparation and peer support. The strategies of relaxation and

resignation were not addressed, and positive thinking was mentioned only indirectly by one participant.

Overall, our findings both align with, and differ from, those reported in relation to the physical classroom. Firstly, our mean score for the FLCAS was 93.46: this is very close to the mean of 93.16 reported for the four Australian studies in Toyama and Yamazaki's (2022) meta-analysis of existing data. We therefore suggest that students at Australian universities have comparable levels of foreign language anxiety, irrespective of whether they are studying online or in the physical classroom. As far as strategies for dealing with foreign language anxiety are concerned, participants' strong use of preparation is not in itself a novel finding. However, interviewees in our study reported using online tools such as Google Translate and Word Reference to prepare responses. This contrasts to preparation methods reported in studies based on learning in the physical classroom. For example, Kondo and Ying-Ling (2004, p.262) give examples of preparation as "studying hard, trying to obtain good summaries of lecture notes." In more recent work, Yasuda and Nobei (2018) again cite "studying hard" as an example of preparation, in addition to looking up words in the dictionary, although they do not mention the use of the Internet or online tools as part of this process. As far as social interaction is concerned, our results align with those reported in the extant literature: students actively seek contact with their fellow students, a result that has previously been made clear by Von Wörde (2003). Our interviewees, however, highlight the role of the L1 in this process, pointing out its importance in 'breaking the ice' in online student interactions. Finally, our findings concerning self-disclosure cannot easily be analysed in relation to the existing studies on foreign anxiety in the physical classroom. This is because the concept has not been previously investigated in this context, which is precisely why we were eager to make it a focus of our own study.

6. Conclusion

The present study has taken the first tentative steps to investigate how students with mid to high levels of FLA experience speaking activities in online French language classes, and how they feel about self-disclosing in these classes. As such, we aimed to provide new insights to the very limited literature on FLA in synchronous, online classes; we also sought to deliver the first study of self-

disclosure in this same context. Our results clearly indicate that students feel comfortable disclosing low-level personal information and that they seek to interact with their peers in the L2 language classroom. The use of their L1 (English) plays an important role in these interactions. In addition, all interviewees had clear strategies in place to mitigate the negative effects of their LA, with the use of preparation techniques and technology being particularly important in this domain. While some of our findings align with existing observations relating to foreign language anxiety in the physical classroom (for example, the use of preparation to manage FLA and students' desire for interaction with their classmates), we also brought to light new findings, such as the use of online resources as a preparation strategy and students' willingness to participate in low-level self-disclosure. Certain caveats about this study, however, need to be borne in mind. Firstly, since this is a small-scale study based on interviews of 10 students, we would encourage more research in this area, using a variety of methods to triangulate results and targeting a range of foreign languages. Secondly, the data were collected within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic: it is therefore possible that some of the feelings that students reported here are attributable, in part at least, to the negative social effects of the lockdowns (social isolation, etc.) That said, our findings cohere with previous studies undertaken before the pandemic, such as Fondo and Erdocia's (2018) and Fondo et al.'s (2018) research on self-disclosure as well as von Worde's (2003) observation of a connection between FLA and the desire for social interaction. Nevertheless, future research should seek to target online learners outside of this lockdown context. Finally, the use of technology as a strategy to deal with FLA should be investigated in more depth: this is particularly important as all students in online classes use an internet-connected device to participate, and students in on-campus settings also tend to use their own devices during lessons. Part of this research on strategies should also focus on the question raised by Fondo et al. (2018): that is, do students use self-disclosure as a strategy to lessen their LA? We suggest that the answer to this question, apart from being interesting from a psychological point of view, has the potential to drive real meaningful change in the way that L2 teachers relate to their students, and in how students relate to each other in the classroom.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this manuscript for their very helpful comments, which brought valuable new ideas to our work. We are grateful for their time and dedication.

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Appendix

Interview questions

Ice-breaker questions

- How long have you been studying French for?
- Why did you choose to study French at university?

I'm going to ask you a few questions about how you've found your online French classes this year. When you answer these please bear in mind that the context is your online French class, as opposed to on-campus French classes.

- Recently your French classes have been conducted online because of the COVID-19 situation. How have you found this experience?
- Do you feel comfortable speaking French in class?
- [If interviewee doesn't feel comfortable speaking French in class:] Do you have any strategies in place to deal with this? By strategies, I mean things you do that make speaking French in class more comfortable.
- Do you feel comfortable having your camera on for the online class?

- When we learn a new language we are often asked to talk about ourselves: for example, what we did on the weekend, our likes and dislikes, our relationships with our family and friends, our views on social and political issues, etc. How do you feel about being asked these questions and about answering them in French class?
- Do you take into account the presence of other class members when you formulate your answers to these sorts of questions?
- Are there any topics that you wouldn't want to discuss in French class?
- French has some sounds that are different to English: for example, nasal vowels. How do you feel when you have to pronounce these sorts of sounds in French?
- Do you think you put on your best French accent when you speak French in class? Why/why not?
- Do you feel more comfortable or less comfortable speaking in the online class than in on-campus French classes? Why do you think this is?