



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Feedback matters: Thwarting the negative impact of language anxiety

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## Abstract

Elaine Horwitz et al. (1986), in their seminal article that helped jumpstart our current interest in language anxiety, characterized this affective malady as composed of three elements: fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and test anxiety. Notably, all three of these components are linked in different ways to learners' perceptions about others' assessment of their linguistic competence. Over the years since Horwitz et al.'s influential publication, research has only reinforced the idea that feedback provided to language learners has a powerful impact on their emotional well-being and levels of linguistic confidence. This article explores research on the various ways that learners can be supported via assessment practices and feedback techniques that not only counter the debilitating effects of language anxiety but also may even work preventatively to increase learner well-being. Among these is *Appreciative Inquiry*, a feedback technique that focuses on what learners are doing effectively, as well as other nondeficit, strengths-based approaches that concentrate on assets rather than fixing what is broken.

**Keywords:** language anxiety; second language anxiety; positive psychology; appreciative inquiry; signature strengths

Elaine Horwitz et al. (1986), in their seminal article that helped jumpstart our current interest in language anxiety, characterized this affective malady as composed of three elements: fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension and test anxiety. Notably, all three of these components are linked in different ways to learners' perceptions about others' assessment of their linguistic competence that is often provided via oral or written feedback. Over the years since Horwitz et al.'s influential publication, research has only reinforced the idea that feedback provided to language learners has a powerful impact on their emotional well-being and levels of linguistic confidence (Asif, 2017; Gregersen, 2020; Gregersen et al., 2014; Rassaei, 2015). This article explores research on the various ways that learners and preservice teachers can be supported via assessment practices and feedback techniques that not only counter the debilitating effects of anxiety but also may even work preventatively to increase well-being. Among these is *Appreciative Inquiry*, a feedback technique that focuses on what learners are doing effectively, as well as strengths-based approaches that concentrate on assets rather than fixing what people unfamiliar with second language (L2) inter-language may refer to as “broken” (Gregersen & Mercer, 2022; Gregersen et al., 2022).

Communicating in an additional language exposes us to judgment by our interlocutors, whether it be conscious appraisal or valuation lying just under the surface. The degree to which we care about this appraisal varies from person to person, so while some learners speak freely, throw caution to the wind, and focus on making themselves understood, others are more reticent, worry about correctness, and concern themselves with their public image. Members of the latter group are often more prone to language anxiety, dreading adverse evaluation, feeling apprehension about communicating, and experiencing elevated anxiety during testing situations (Alrabai, 2015; Horwitz et al., 1986; Liu & Jackson, 2008). The question this article seeks to answer is whether focusing on the positives rather than having a myopic focus on deficiencies could have an affirming impact on learners via Appreciative Inquiry, be it learning an additional language or learning the art of language teaching. A related query is whether learners who are encouraged to focus on using their natural assets (signature strengths) rather than concentrating on improving their limitations enhances learning.

Both approaches, *Appreciative Inquiry* and *Using Signature Strengths*, are explored in this article falling under the umbrella of *Positive Psychology* (PP), which aspires to understand how people flourish and experience well-being. PP identifies and promulgates the strengths, values, and potential in individuals and their social milieu—not merely the deficits (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). PP pursues a holistic, balanced perspective of flourishing by taking into account the positives and adversities of both psychological and social dimensions (Seligman, 2011). Both studies in continuation implemented antideficit, strengths-based approaches that avoided positioning individuals as problems that needed fixing and had the explicit intent of exploring and understanding lived experiences without labeling them in negative terms.

Anxiety is experienced when the evaluation of a threat or stressor surpasses the appraisal of one's particular resources to address that threat or stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987) such as a learner attempting to write in a language that is not their own or an inexperienced preservice teacher who must prepare and deliver a lesson. The role of emotion in performance is articulated well in the *Broaden-and-Build Theory* (Fredrickson, 2004), which proposes that if negative emotions are left unchecked, they narrow one's scope of cognition and attention, thus limiting potential thought-action repertoires, such as those needed for language production. In contrast, positive emotions broaden thought repertoires—even under stress—and can at the very least neutralize the hold that a negative emotion has gained within a person.

Another well-researched notion within the discipline of PP is the power of using one's signature strengths, or the positive parts of our personalities that generate feelings of authenticity and engagement. Both studies outlined in this article began with participants identifying their signature strengths by taking the online Virtues in Action (VIA) survey (<https://www.viacharacter.org>) developed by Park et al. (2004) who felt compelled to create it as a reaction to the "disorder focus" of mainstream psychology. The VIA is a psychometrically valid self-report personality test that also has face validity. The survey has ninety-eight questions measuring an individual's character strengths. The survey consists of five-point Likert-style items to assess the degree to which respondents endorse statements that exhibit the twenty-four strengths of character that comprise the VIA classification. Once completed, respondents receive a free rank order listing of their twenty-four character strengths known as their "Character Strengths Profile." To create it, the originators brainstormed a catalog of positive individual traits by referring to poetry, literature, pop-culture, philosophy, and religious writing, across history and cultures, to ascertain virtuous

traits—everything from *Exodus* to *Pokémon* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In essence, its purpose was to detect what is “right” with people by crafting a single classification of core character strengths (Niemic, 2013). In the end, they found twenty-four strengths that fell into the six overarching categories: Wisdom and Knowledge (creativity, curiosity, love of learning), Courage (bravery, perseverance, honesty), Humanity (love, kindness, social intelligence), Justice (teamwork, fairness, leadership), Temperance (forgiveness, humility, self-regulation), and Transcendence (appreciation of beauty, humor, spirituality). Each of us possesses all twenty-four “virtues in action” (i.e., signature strengths) in varying degrees, reflecting an exclusive character strengths profile. Research suggests that when we use our strengths, we feel a host of positive outcomes (Seligman et al., 2005), among which are: proprietorship and genuineness, intrinsic motivation to exercise our strengths, a swift learning curve, feeling invigoration rather than exhaustion, a “try-and-stop-me” feeling of inevitability, excitement (especially at first) while displaying our strengths, yearning to act in accordance with them, the creation and pursuit of fundamental projects that revolve around our strengths, continuous learning of new ways to use them, and the discovery of our strengths as owned in an epiphany (Schutte & Malouff, 2019). However, most important for the purposes of this current article is that when a person employs their strengths, psychological resources are provided for individuals to draw upon when faced with negative emotions like anxiety. According to PP researchers, such strengths provide a sense of efficacy and control as one takes on a task, and thereby, they reduce stress. They act as buffers, helping protect people from anxiety and depression and nurture psychological well-being (Merritt et al., 2019).

In continuation, I briefly describe two studies the results of which both support the implementation of PP in combatting anxiety; in particular, a focus on the positive through the feedback process of appreciative inquiry in preservice language teachers (Gregersen & Mercer, 2022; Gregersen et al., 2022) and the recognition and utilization of one’s signature strengths in learners of English as an additional language (EALs) (Gregersen et al., 2021).

### **Appreciative Inquiry and Preservice Language Teachers**

Vulnerabilities abound when considering the negative emotions experienced by novice preservice language teachers as they are susceptible to stressors during their transition from the student to the teacher role, feel the challenges to their identity, face a host of insecurities, encounter dissonance in the expectations held by various stakeholders, and experience feelings of restricted agency (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Farrell, 2012; Freeman, 2016; Whalen et al., 2019). To combat these vulnerabilities, we explored the use of *Appreciative Inquiry* (AI) as a pathway to preservice language teacher well-being (Gregersen & Mercer, 2022; Gregersen et al., 2022). AI capitalizes on teachers’ existent strengths to create positive growth and development rather than engaging in a process of identifying weakness or deficit and seeking to repair (Hammond, 2013; He, 2013). “Using AI as a reflective lens with preservice teachers encourages them to explore positive aspects contributing to their classroom efficacy instead of condemning them to only ruminate on what went awry or what they could do better” (Gregersen & Mercer, 2022, p. 116).

Our goal in this exploration was to answer questions concerning how preservice language teachers respond to an AI approach to feedback on their teaching simulations as

well as how an AI approach affects teachers' well-being. Our participants were fifteen master's candidates enrolled in a TESOL language teaching methods course at a small international university in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). We implemented a four-stage approach. In Stage One, participants managed the feedback process by completing the VIA survey and being matched with a peer based on the top five signature strengths they shared from their Signature Strengths Profile. During this phase, they also identified aspects of their own teaching that they wanted to focus on during their teaching simulation. In Stage Two, preservice teachers were observed by their teacher-mentor and the peer with whom they had been matched. Important to note is that we collected data during the pandemic, so participants were teaching online. The teacher-mentor and peer took notes during the teaching simulation, concentrating only on positive aspects of the teaching in areas identified by the preservice teacher in Stage One. During Stage Three, the mentor-teacher, peer, and preservice teacher jointly reflected on the successful elements of the teaching simulation and the reasons for its effectiveness. Stage Four consisted of the preservice teacher and peer contemplating how the strengths identified in the teaching simulation could be transferred to different contexts. This stage safeguarded the basic tenet of AI: to pinpoint strengths and apply them as positive resources for attaining future goals. At the end of the four stages, participants composed a reflective essay on their experience using AI. These narratives produced a qualitative data set with a total corpus size of 11,601 words. The written feedback was subsequently analyzed through the data management software *Atlas.ti*. A thematic analysis approach was used to identify and interpret patterns in the qualitative data, and, in our case, three main themes emerged: self-confidence, authenticity, and community involvement (Gegersen et al., 2022).

However, for the purposes of this article, I wanted to explicitly examine and quantify the presence of certain words, subjects, and concepts in the narratives, so I conducted a content analysis in an attempt to draw reliable conclusions about how AI addressed adverse emotions such as anxiety that may have surfaced. Hence, I went back through the entire corpus of 11,601 words and coded it for the number of participants whose commentaries mentioned any words with the root word of "anxiety" ( $n = 3$ ), "concern" ( $n = 2$ ), "worry" ( $n = 3$ ), "nervous" ( $n = 4$ ), and "fear" ( $n = 3$ ). Important to note is that the instructions for the final reflection did not prompt participants to explicitly address these emotions, so any mention of them was initiated completely by the preservice teacher. None of the participants who used any form of the key terms suggested that AI induced anxiety or its related adverse emotions but rather the preservice teachers described feeling negativity at the outset and expressed how AI functioned to combat it. Although due to space constraints I cannot address all of the excerpts, I am including below seven that best characterized the positive results of using AI:

"The feedback on the lesson aspects was clear and really helped put the anxiety and doubts that I had leading up to and after finishing the lesson to rest."

"To sum up, I'm glad that my initial reaction to this experience was very different from its outcome. I went in feeling a bit anxious and worried about how it would unfold, but I realized how much of a positive reflective process it turned out to be. The things I gained benefitted me not only in the short run, but also in the long run."

“To be honest, the idea of the appreciative inquiry process seemed daunting at first. I was excited about the idea of holding a class simulation using a specific teaching method, but I had concerns about how it would play out with an online platform.”

“Despite being extremely fearful for it, I am looking forward to teaching in a face-to-face setting, just so I can prove to myself that what (teacher-mentor) and (peer) said about me really is true and I really do have the ability to become everything I aspire to be, if not more.”

“I felt totally defeated and incredibly stressed and I seriously considered giving up entirely. But then I asked myself, ‘What did my classmates do that was successful? How did they use technology to their advantage?’”

“This method of feedback while unconventional (for me at least), feels very helpful in that it really helps build confidence and deal with the ever-mounting stress that society puts on individuals, especially teachers. Giving aspiring teachers that initial boost in confidence needed to start teaching.”

“The AI process is an empowering way to transform the typically nerve-wracking observation into a growth experience that the teacher can look forward to experiencing.”

As can be observed in these excerpts from preservice language teachers who experienced AI feedback, the approach was received positively. It was able to transform the negative challenges associated with novice teachers who are on the road to gaining more classroom experience to feeling the positive effects of implementing their own strengths and perceiving the support of encouraging feedback that focuses on the things they do well in order to build on that for the future. Instead of seeing emergent educators as persons in need of reparation or shaping them into an ambiguous definition of a “good” teacher, the feedback given via AI focuses on what is valuable, endowing individuals with the confidence to employ their strengths as a catalyst to prospects of future development (Gregersen & Mercer, 2022; Gregersen et al., 2022).

Although implementing AI as a form of feedback for all novice teachers irrespective of their discipline will likely result in positive outcomes, language teachers in particular will likely benefit. According to MacIntyre et al. (2020),

Being a *language* teacher triggers its own unique challenges resulting from the specificity and the emotional character of foreign-language teaching: self-doubts about one’s own language ability; coping with the emotional anxieties of learners; heterogeneous proficiency in learner groups; threats to sense of self and identity; energy-intense teaching methodologies; intercultural components to teaching; and precarious working conditions. (p. 2, emphasis in the original)

Because AI is particularly concerned with the “emotional character” of teaching, it may have the potential to combat the above-mentioned stressors that are particular to teachers of additional languages.

## Using Signature Strengths and EAL writers

EAL writers are also vulnerable as they experience the disruptive and unwelcome negative effects of anxiety arousal. Similar to the above research using the AI approach, Gregersen et al. (2021) conducted a mixed-methods case study to explore whether an individual EAL writer using their signature strengths in novel ways could set anxiety aside to work on interventions that psychologically build up their strengths. Several reasons supported our use of an N-of-1 study. According to Woodworth et al. (2016), studying individuals, rather than drawing conclusions from group averages, is advantageous for three reasons: (1) relevant changes in psychological states can be identified that might be missed when averaged over a group; (2) PP interventions, such as employing signature strengths, often are tailored to an individual's context; and (3) case studies with repeated interventions over time provide a rigorous test of the intervention's impact.

In this study, we wanted to consider in detail one specific EAL writer who effectively used her signature strengths in new ways to assess the potential of the intervention to mitigate the effects of negative emotion. To identify our case study participant, we started with a population of forty-five first and second year EAL students in a research writing class at a small university in the UAE. All participants took Cheng's (2004) Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) as a pretest. This twenty-two-item questionnaire measures the anxiety student writers experience when writing in English. Upon completion of the SLWAI, participants then identified their signature strengths using the VIA online survey (Park et al., 2004) and throughout the next three weeks, they self-generated means of employing their own strengths in novel ways as they approached writing tasks in their English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course. Using three narrative frames (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008) before, during, and after the intervention each week, participants conveyed their thoughts about their past, present, and future use of signature strengths. Narrative frames are partially written portions of texts that prompt writers to complete the slots to share their ideas and experiences. At the end of the three weeks, EAP writers were posttested using Cheng's (2004) SLWAI to discover whether any changes occurred in their writing anxiety.

We chose to focus on Noor (pseudonym), the participant who showed the most change between pre- and post-SLWAI renderings. She had a posttest anxiety score 21 points lower than at pretest. This was the greatest difference of anyone in the study suggesting that she found a fit between her specific context and the way in which she used the signature strengths intervention. She is a Design major, speaks Arabic as her L1, and began acquiring English at age three as an L2. She self-assessed her English proficiency a bit above average with a 7.5 on a scale of one (*low proficiency*) to ten (*high proficiency*); and her top five signature strengths in descending order are spirituality, creativity, humility, honesty, and zest.

In continuation, I outline the ways Noor used her signature strengths for the three days of class in Weeks Two and Three of the intervention. In the first class of Week Two, Noor decided to focus on her creativity by, in her words, "finding smart arguments" for her research paper. After doing so, she noted on her narrative frame that she felt like "a critical thinker." The second class that week showed Noor writing about using her honesty by "stating 100% accurate facts" in the body of her paper, which resulted in her feeling "knowledgeable." In the last class of Week One, Noor focused on her "zest" by writing an "anecdotal introduction," stimulating her to feel "optimism." During class one of Week Two, Noor used her spirituality to, in her

words, “find an accurate tone to address her audience.” This made her feel that she had sent an “accurate message.” She used her creativity again during the second class of the week by “making an anecdote,” leaving her feeling like she “killed the idea since it’s already created” with “no room for improvement.” Finally, on the third day of Week Three, Noor employed her “honesty” again to find “accurate data,” which made her feel “unbiased.”

Although not all of the participants were able to show the gains in anxiety relief that Noor experienced, for her, employing her signature strengths in new ways decreased her adverse emotion and increased her wellbeing in a positive, dramatic way. This study demonstrated that interventions are as individual as the people who use them. For example, several students even had difficulty in the basic assignment of matching their strengths to a writing task. In essence, one intervention may work for one person one way under one condition, but even for the same person, if the circumstances change, results may vary. For another person, the outcomes of the same intervention will also be very different. It is for this reason that interventions must be personalized to suit the emotional and mental situations of the individual.

In terms of future directions, because of the necessity of such individualized approaches, researchers might consider investigating which kinds of nondeficit, strengths-based approaches lead to more positive outcomes across different populations in the mitigation of foreign language anxiety. One approach to take is a preventative perspective; that is to say, researching positive interventions that create supportive spaces to avert or at least limit the generation of anxiety in the first place. Another direction is to investigate positive interventions that can be implemented when one has already detected the presence of negative emotion; that is to say, rather than investigating preventative interventions, the purpose of the research would be to discover remedies to address already present language anxiety.

The aim of this article was to explore the results of ignoring traditional, deficit-based approaches to teaching and feedback provision in the pursuit of increasing positive emotion and mitigating negative mental states. Rather than focusing on the issues that language learners and preservice teachers need to fix, an AI approach and a focus on using signature strengths nurtured more positive attitudes and less language anxiety. Maya Angelou once said, “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” As language teachers and language teacher educators, we need never forget this.

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