




RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Language anxiety and learner silence in the classroom from a cognitive-behavioral perspective

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## Abstract

Language anxiety plays a key role in language learners' silent behaviors in class (King, 2013). Given its public nature and emphasis on interaction within it, the classroom context plays a significant role in the production of language anxiety. Anxious people are more likely to negatively appraise situations, affecting their behavior. That is, it is not just the subject content that causes anxiety, it is also the cognitive processes that occur from being in the classroom environment (Clark & Wells, 1995; Horwitz et al., 2010). King (2014) found that anxious language learners' thoughts often contain *feared predictions* about the social costs of speaking in the classroom and worries about how peers might negatively evaluate performance. These fears about external factors contribute to learners becoming inhibited and using silence to avoid the discomfort of speaking. Also, while anxious learners tend to have content-specific concerns, for example, making mistakes, self-focused thoughts are often intensified by contextual factors, such as interacting with peers (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). This article looks at the relationship between language anxiety and silent behavior from a cognitive-behavioral perspective, emphasizing how the dynamic interplay between an individual learner and the classroom context can result in even the most motivated and proficient learners missing opportunities to develop their language skills through target-language interaction.

**Keywords:** classroom context; cognitive-behavioral theory; learner silence; speaking anxiety

A recurrent route to learners' silent behaviors in the L2 language classroom is undoubtedly language anxiety (LA) (King, 2013). Anxious learners often become inhibited from speaking in the target language and may use their L1 to avoid using the L2, give short responses, or rarely initiate talk (Bao, 2014; Nakane, 2007; Oxford, 2017). Many language teachers that observe such learner behaviors are likely to feel concerned by the discomfort their students experience when speaking the target language (see Smith & King, 2018). Teachers are also likely to be troubled by learners missing opportunities to develop communicative skills during lessons due to LA, especially when there are few chances to do so outside of the classroom. However, the relationship between anxiety and silence should also be considered as bidirectional. The silent behaviors of anxious learners have the potential to trigger or intensify their LA (Effiong, 2016; Maher &

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King, 2022b; Tsui, 1996). If learners attribute negative meanings to their silent behavior, this can lead to fears about speaking in the L2, such as doubting one's ability, which in turn can intensify LA. Furthermore, anxious learners can be affected by their peers' silent displays, feeling uncertain about what their classmates' silences mean and negatively attributing them to their own performance. Interlocutors' silences can also trigger fears due to not knowing how to respond to the absence of talk, heightening anxiety and leading to further silence (King & Aono, 2017). This bidirectional relationship between LA and classroom silence can cause a cycle of negative thoughts, emotions, and behaviors inconducive to developing L2 proficiency.

The impact of peers' in-class behaviors, including silence, on anxious learners, is an example of how the classroom context plays a significant role in the anxiety of some learners. The classroom is a social situation where students interact and perform in front of their peers (King & Morris, 2022). Due to these factors, anxious learners can develop an acute awareness of interpersonal dynamics between themselves and their peers, causing them to monitor their behavior. Learners can experience anxiety about performing in the L2 in this social environment, in addition to concerns about academic achievements and mastering linguistic knowledge. So, although using the L2 with peers in activities is vital for building linguistic knowledge and proficiency (Gass, 1997; King & Morris, 2022; Swain, 2005), being in an environment that necessitates performing in front of peers on a frequent basis can impede in-class participatory behaviors and achievements. Unlike some other subjects where content-specific factors are a dominant cause of anxiety in an academic setting, such as math (Cassady, 2010), LA tends to emerge via content and context-specific factors (Kim, 2009).

Figure 1 is a cognitive-behavioral model of a silent L2 learner's anxiety. This model was developed from one of the most well-known contemporary explanations of social phobia by Clark and Wells (1995). The model demonstrates how language anxiety contributes to silent behaviors and how the interplay between an individual learner and the classroom context impacts learners' in-class oral performances (King & Morris, 2022). In a similar approach to social cognitive theory (SCT) (Bandura, 1986), the model takes into account immediate contextual factors and sociocultural influences in the classroom that make up a complex dynamic system involving content and context-specific factors. For anxious learners, these factors activate assumptions that lead to thoughts about the negative consequences of speaking and self-criticism of their ability and communication competence. Furthermore, these factors emphasize how LA is a dynamic situated phenomenon; it should not be assumed that LA is triggered simply by being in the classroom or that anxious learners are entirely reticent.

This paper presents a cognitive-behavioral theory-based (CBT) approach to understanding LA and silence, demonstrating the significance of the classroom context.

### *Cognitive-Behavioral Model of a Silent L2 Learner's Social Anxiety*

This section provides an overview of the cognitive behavioral model (Fig. 1). First, the background of the model is explained by justifying why cognitive approaches for examining anxiety have become dominant among other psychological perspectives, focusing on the importance of cognitive bias. Following this, *feared predictions* and *self-focus image*, two elements of the model, are used to explain how cognitive bias leads to negative thoughts that maintain a negative cycle of emotions and behaviors that can affect anxious learners.

In comparing other psychological perspectives, including behavioral and psychoanalytical, existing research has established the importance of cognitive approaches for

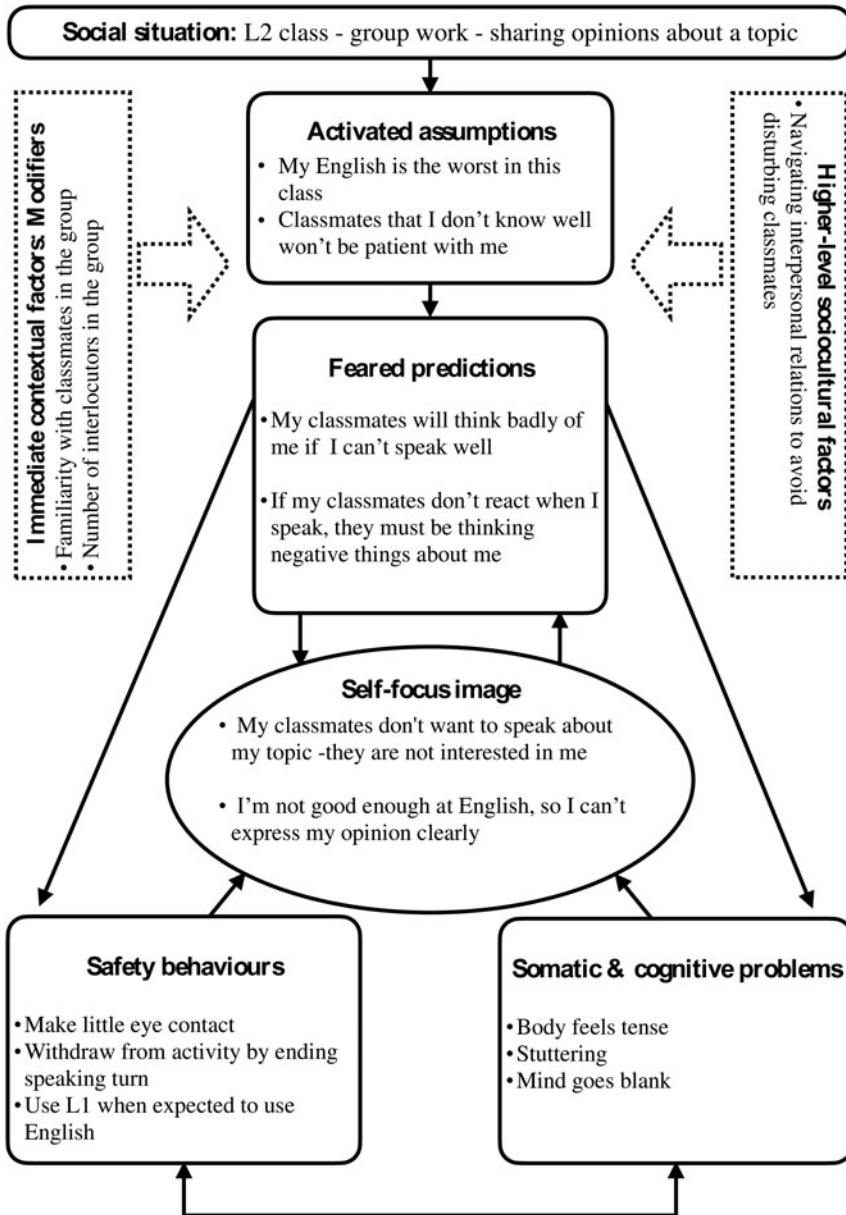


Figure 1. A cognitive-behavioral model of a silent L2 learner's language anxiety (Adapted from King & Smith [2017] and based on Clark & Wells' 1995 original model).

understanding anxiety (Heimberg, 2002; Hofmann, 2007; Strongman, 1995). These studies have demonstrated the interrelated nature of emotions and cognition, specifically, how cognition influences emotions and behaviors. Cognitive approaches have, for example, shown how anxious people are more likely to interpret social situations

negatively due to differences in cognitive appraisal (Clark & Wells, 1995). These types of skewed negative perceptions are a significant feature of LA (Horwitz et al., 2010). Anxious learners are more likely to subjectively appraise speaking tasks negatively in the L2 classroom, resulting in them focusing attention inwards and being critical of their own speaking performance and L2 communicative competence. Furthermore, learners with low self-perceived ability have been found to be likely to experience LA (Alrabai, 2015; Young, 1991). The cognitive approach to examining LA demonstrates that anxious learners will be more likely to perceive these learning tasks as risky situations, whereas more confident learners may perceive these activities as enjoyable and a chance to develop their communicative abilities.

The cognitive-behavioral model of a silent L2 learner's language anxiety (Fig. 1) demonstrates how cognitive bias activates negative thoughts, which sustain a cycle of emotions and behaviors that impact how anxious learners perform in class. When anxious learners face a situation they perceive as threatening, they begin predicting the negative consequences of speaking (*feared predictions*) and then search for information about how others are evaluating them and increasingly concentrate on themselves as the focus of the situation (*self-focus image*). Threatening situations can include speaking in front of peers in the L2, an evaluated speaking task, not feeling prepared to speak, and being in a class that has a quiet atmosphere (Effiong, 2016; King, 2014; Suzuki, 2017).

Anxious learners' worries about how others will evaluate their L2 performance are often underlying causes of *feared predictions* (Hofmann, 2007). The interpersonal nature of the language classroom means that some students are inhibited due to worries about maintaining good relationships with peers and managing their social image (Bao, 2014; Greer, 2000). Anxious language learners tend to strive to avoid making a poor impression on classmates and, therefore, may worry about making mistakes, having poor pronunciation, or getting an answer wrong (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Nabei & Yasuda, 2016). Kitano (2001) also found that *feared predictions* can arise through self-doubt about whether they believe they can successfully convey their ideas in the target language and make a good impression.

*Feared predictions* lead to cognitive processes that focus on learners perceiving themselves as social objects and being critical of their L2 performance and ability. *Self-focus image* thoughts often involve self-doubt about linguistic ability and interpersonal skills. Anxious learners can become highly aware of themselves, feeling under a spotlight where peers notice their weak points and judge them. The nature of the L2 classroom can exasperate self-focused thoughts because teachers and peers are usually quiet when a student speaks, for example, when answering the teacher's question in front of the class or giving a presentation. Indeed, it is a social norm of the classroom context to be observed (Effiong, 2016). Clark and Wells (1995) suggest that anxious people use interoceptive information to cue their behavior and feelings. This means they are less objectively aware of what is happening around them, making it harder for them to be impartial about what is activating their negative thoughts. This level of self-attention also spikes anxious feelings, fueling fears and further impeding performance. Inhibition and silence arise as a consequence. With attention resources directed inwards, cognitive symptoms of anxiety, such as inability to recall vocabulary or concentrate on what an interlocutor is saying, may also result. Further silent episodes resulting from these thoughts act to confirm self-doubts and sustain the negative cycle.

A CBT-based approach to understanding how anxious learners perceive speaking in the classroom highlights that it is not just content-specific factors of learning a language that causes LA and silent behaviors. The cognitive processes that occur from being

in the classroom environment and how the learner perceives their ability to perform in this social situation also play a role (King, 2014). Moreover, when anxious learners are concerned about linguistic factors, the underlying issue often involves, or is intensified by, context-specific factors. For example, incorrectly using a vocabulary item could trigger negative thoughts about how peers will evaluate this mistake. A CBT-based approach also suggests that if learners only focus on content-specific factors to reduce their LA, such as increasing vocabulary knowledge, fixing grammatical errors or practicing pronunciation, their efforts are unlikely to be effective without developing coping strategies that deal with the affective impact of being in the classroom.

### Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

This paper aims to raise awareness of how the classroom context can impact the affective experiences of language learners and how contextual factors play a role in the bidirectional relationship between LA and silence. Anxious learners tend to think in a negatively biased manner that leads to them anticipating the worst about speaking in class and concentrating on the possible threats that exist in the classroom. Anticipating these threats may result in learners with LA misreading cues, which further impedes performance and confirms their negatively skewed perceptions about speaking in the L2. While the public forum of the classroom has the potential to create social interactions that facilitate language learning, this context can also be why learners struggle to take advantage of using this learning environment to develop their spoken proficiency. Language teachers are better placed to support their students when aware that how they manage and organize their classrooms plays a significant role in activating anxious learners' negative assumptions and thoughts.

Understandably, anxious learners may turn to silent displays to avoid what causes their LA, but they may also be frustrated by being stuck in a negative cycle of LA and silence and want to increase their oral participation in class. However, language teachers cannot eliminate all possible triggers of LA for all students. And despite the numerous studies into the causes of LA and the best of intentions by teachers, striving to make a classroom less anxiety-inducing may feel like a nebulous and unachievable goal. Therefore, multi-pronged strategies that deal with individuals' unhelpful thought patterns and encourage good student-student and staff-student interpersonal dynamics are key.

Interventions that provide coping strategies to help recognize and reframe negative perceptions of contextual factors in the classroom can be a way to support anxious learners. The first possible step is reflective activities where learners discuss or write down their negative assumptions about speaking in the L2 in the classroom and break down their negative thoughts to identify underlying factors. For example, *Making mistakes with a classmate understandably causes many language learners to feel nervous, but why are you worried about this happening? What would be so bad about making a mistake with a classmate?* Also, activities where learners reflect on which in-class situations activate their negative assumptions can make them aware of which areas they need to focus on in terms of building confidence. Moreover, hopefully, they will see that they are not as anxious and silent as frequently as they may believe. CBT materials are one such approach to this and can easily be adapted for language learners (see Maher & King, 2022a).

Effective teachers are also aware that they need to manage their classrooms to encourage positive social interactions that students engage in. They do not assume that activities in which students can talk with their classmates will be "fun" and, therefore, productive. Communicative activities in groups and pairs can be just as anxiety-inducing as

presentations in front of the whole class. This is perhaps especially relevant with the increase in English as a medium of instruction (EMI) pedagogy, as learners navigate most of their in-class interactions with peers in the target language (Maher & King, 2022b). Class groups may need time initially to develop interpersonal relationships that facilitate fruitful speaking practice opportunities (see King et al., 2020).

In summary, the language classroom needs to fulfill multiple roles for learners: a place to acquire linguistic knowledge and proficiency in the L2 and a space to learn and develop coping strategies to deal with the affective elements of language learning. While the social nature of the classroom can contribute to learners' LA, through focused interventions and shrewd classroom management, language classrooms can also be places where otherwise anxious learners grow in confidence and flourish in their use of the target language.

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