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# Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety: Midwestern Language Learner Exploration

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## ABSTRACT

Numerous studies in the communication discipline have explored the negative impacts of communication apprehension on college students and ways instruction can help reduce such anxiety. Study of a specific form of apprehension, foreign language anxiety, has received far less scholarly attention, but could serve college students well. Therefore, the current study attempts to establish a solid basis for continuing research aimed at English-speaking foreign language learners at one mid-sized Midwestern university. The objective of this study is to establish a baseline for understanding the extent to which foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) impacts language learners at a mid-sized Midwestern university and to determine the predictive power of classroom anxiety (CA) on FLCA. Students ( $n = 58$ ) enrolled in introductory level foreign language classes answered survey questions drawn from several previously validated measures (i.e. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, Unwillingness to Communicate Scale, and Classroom Anxiety Measure). The results of this study found significant correlations between FLCA and CA, unwillingness to communicate, self-rated proficiency, and language learning background. This study contributes to the existing base of knowledge regarding variables that affect FLCA and suggests potential interventions and treatments to help decrease students' FLCA.

## INTRODUCTION

Imagine walking into a classroom, taking a seat, and preparing some writing materials before a lecture. Imagine the professor looking up from behind the podium where she was quietly reviewing her lecture notes before class. Now imagine the first words out of her mouth are in a language that, to the untrained ear, can only be identified as Martian. She continues to speak her Martian language for the next hour. After this time, you look down to your carefully prepared paper where you had intended to write notes on the lecture. Much to your dismay, your paper is as blank as it was at the beginning of the class. You wonder if you should even bother coming back tomorrow.

For some, this scenario is all too real. Individuals can learn foreign languages in many different ways, but the immersive approach, as described in this example, is often touted as one of the most effective ways to learn a language. However, it can still be a very intimidating experience. In fact, every method for learning a language has elements that might intimidate potential students. While this fear doesn't necessarily dissuade people from learning a foreign language, it has the potential to deter them — or at least hinder their progress. Therefore, finding interventions to combat this anxiety must be a priority for educators. In order to find effective methods of anxiety reduction in foreign language learning environments, the academic community must first understand that specific anxiety. Thankfully, research is already underway.

### Literature Review

The study of foreign language anxiety blossomed after the study by Horwitz et al. (1986). In it, the authors describe three building blocks for understanding FLCA. The first block is

communication apprehension, which is characterized as a fear of communicating with others (Horwitz et al., 1986). The authors believe this fear is magnified by the introduction of a foreign language because people typically have less control over the communicative situation and less capability navigating the situation in a non-native language. This dimension of FLCA has been linked to academic failure in foreign language learning (Tuncer and Dogan, 2015). The second block is test anxiety, which broadly refers to the “type of performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure” (Horwitz et al., 1986, p.127). Foreign language learning is a process wrought with small mistakes and errors, and it is very easy for test anxiety to be triggered in a foreign language learning environment (Horwitz et al., 1986). The third and final block is fear of negative evaluation, which is a broader construction of test anxiety that includes negative social evaluations made or perceived to be made by peers, teachers, or oneself (Horwitz et al., 1986). Importantly, Horwitz et al. (1986) believe foreign language anxiety is not simply a combination of these three factors. Rather, foreign language classroom anxiety is “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Horwitz et al., 1986, p.128). Studies have negatively correlated FLCA to learning achievement (Ghorban Dordinejad and Nasab, 2013; Shao, Yu, and Ji, 2013; Tuncer and Dogan, 2015), which makes this a very important issue for educators.

The definitions and building blocks of FLCA are carried on to this day in the study of foreign language anxiety. Many arguments rely on the assumption that foreign languages exacerbate other anxieties in the classroom to create a unique construct — FLCA; however, these assumptions may not be justified. Perhaps, the FLCA construct simply measures (in a new way) the anxieties common to any classroom. Other studies have looked into general

classroom anxiety (e.g. Richmond et al., 2001), but FLCA has never been measured against general classroom anxiety. The assumption made by Horwitz et al. (1986) therefore lends itself to the first research question:

**RQ1:** How does foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) relate to classroom anxiety (CA)?

**RQ1a:** How do FLCA and CA correlate, if at all?

**RQ1b:** Does CA predict FLCA?

An important advancement for this area of study was the development of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS; Horwitz et al., 1986), which is used to measure FLCA for the current study. Pilot testing of this scale led Horwitz et al. (1986) to these conclusions: significant foreign language classroom anxiety is experienced by many students, and educators can combat it either by helping students cope with situations that cause anxiety or by making the learning environment less stressful. Furthermore, Martirosian and Hartoonian (2015) found significant negative correlations between FLCA and self-regulated learning strategies (e.g. motivation, critical thinking, and self-regulation of emotions), suggesting that one might reduce anxiety by teaching these strategies. Liu and Chen (2015) corroborated the correlation between motivation and FLCA. Effiong (2013) revealed that teaching approaches greatly predict anxiety in the classroom as well. Other studies have examined more holistic strategies to reduce FLCA through class structure, learning atmosphere, and teaching behaviors (Mejia, 2014; Tsiplakides and Keramida, 2009). Despite the research, FLCAS is still under scrutiny to determine if it actually measures anxiety (Sparks and Patton, 2013).

While many studies sprung forth from the pioneering work of Horwitz et al. (1986), one snares the attention of both foreign language learning researchers and communication researchers alike. In 2008, *The Modern Language Journal* published a work entitled “An Exploration of Chinese EFL Learners’ Unwillingness to Communicate and Foreign Language Anxiety” by Liu and Jackson. This study synthesized several scales in order to address the complexity of foreign language anxiety. The FLCAS was the primary instrument, with three additional questions added. Also, Burgoon’s (1976) Unwillingness to Communicate Scale (UCS) was included as a measure to gauge reticence and communication apprehension (Liu and Jackson, 2008). The Language Class Risk-Taking Scale (LCR) and Language Class Sociability Scale (LCS) were also included as additional factors that might influence classroom anxiety. Finally, a couple of questions were created to assess foreign language learning background and self-rated proficiency. Together, these instruments allowed the study to comprehensively view and analyze foreign language anxiety for their sample. The authors performed numerous and detailed analyses on their data, with many interesting and intricate results, but the current review hones in on only a few. From the data gathered, Liu and Jackson (2008) found a strong positive correlation between unwillingness to communicate and foreign language classroom anxiety as well as slight negative correlations between foreign language classroom anxiety and language class risk-taking, language class sociability, and self-rated proficiency. The study is limited by the sample selected (Chinese EFL students in Beijing), so the authors urged future studies to include new populations (Liu and Jackson, 2008). Therefore, several hypotheses have been developed for the current study to test a sample from a far different population:

**H1:** Students with high unwillingness to communicate will rate higher in FLCA.

**H2:** Students with higher self-rated foreign language proficiency will rate lower in FLCA.

**H3:** Students with more extensive language learning backgrounds will rate lower in FLCA.

Furthermore, Liu and Jackson (2008) suggest future studies might explore the interactions between foreign language classroom anxiety and other student characteristics. Park and French (2013) have already explored the impact of gender on FLCA, finding females report higher anxiety. The very stark contrast between samples in the Liu and Jackson (2008) study and the current study raises another interesting question:

**RQ2:** Does one demographic (considering gender, race/ethnicity, etc.) consistently rate higher in FLCA than others?

## **METHODS**

### **Participants**

For the present study, a sample was taken from among language learners at a mid-sized Midwestern university. One introductory (100-level) Spanish learning class and two advanced introductory (300-level) Spanish learning classes were selected to participate. These classes were selected over others because the professors were already in contact with the author, making it convenient. Fifty-eight students completed the survey as an extra credit option for their classes. Participation was not mandatory. Participants were asked to write in a description of their race or ethnicity. Eighty-one percent ( $n = 47$ ) were white/Caucasian. Five other races or ethnicities were represented, but none of these existed in high enough numbers to be statistically relevant. Of 58 participants, 57 responded when

asked about biological sex. Sixty-five percent of participants ( $n = 37$ ) were female, 32 percent ( $n = 18$ ) were male, and 4 percent ( $n = 2$ ) chose not to answer. The ages of participants ( $M = 19.96$ ;  $SD = 3.51$ ) ranged from 18-24, with two participants not answering and one outlier at 44.

## Measures

Pivotal to this study was the FLCAS developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). It is a 36-item measure used to assess the three building blocks of foreign language anxiety — communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1986; Liu and Jackson, 2008). This measure was retrieved from Liu and Jackson's study and modified by switching any usage of the word "English" to "foreign language" instead. The added items from the Liu and Jackson (2008) study were maintained. The reliability of the FLCAS for this study was  $\alpha = 0.95$ . According to the 2008 study by Liu and Jackson, a score of 107 or lower indicates low FLCA, a score of 108 to 144 indicates moderate FLCA, and a score higher than 144 signifies high FLCA.

The Unwilling to Communicate Scale (UCS) developed by Burgoon (1976) was also duplicated from Liu and Jackson (2008). The short form of it is a 20-item measure used to assess primarily reticence but also communication apprehension (Burgoon, 1976; Liu and Jackson, 2008). The reliability of the UCS for this study was  $\alpha = 0.84$ . According to Liu and Jackson (2008), a score less than 60 represents a low unwillingness to communicate, a score from 60-80 signifies moderate unwillingness to communicate, and a score greater than 80 indicates a high unwillingness to communicate.

The Classroom Anxiety Measure (CAM) developed by McCroskey and based upon a study by Richmond et al. (2001) is also applied to this study. It is a 20-item measure used to

assess anxiety in a standard classroom. The reliability of the CAM for this study was  $\alpha = 0.95$ . A result of 25 or lower signifies low anxiety, whereas a result in the range 26-79 represent moderate anxiety and a result of 80 or greater indicates high anxiety.

In addition to these measures, 17 questions were included to gather data on language learning background, self-rated proficiency, and demographic characteristics. While most of these questions were 5-item Likert-type questions (ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree), several allowed for open-ended responses or explanations. The reliability of the self-rated proficiency report for this study was  $\alpha = 0.82$ .

Liu and Jackson (2008) included two additional scales into their study. Because the current study so closely mimics Liu and Jackson's study, these scales are worth mentioning. The LCS and LCR by Ely (1986) were omitted from the current study. The author made this decision because he was unable to contact the original author of the scales for permission.

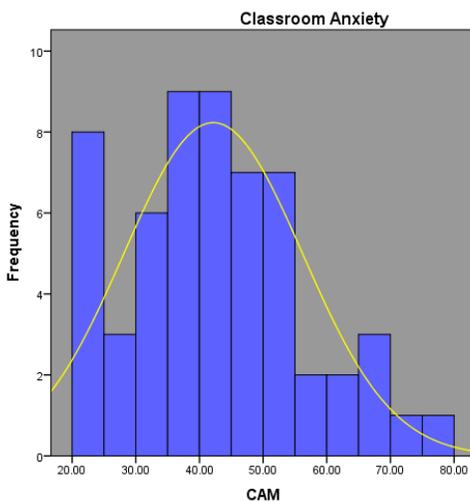
## **Design**

This study utilized QuestionPro© online survey software to gather and store data from the chosen sample. A link to the survey was sent to the professors of the selected classes, and it was then disseminated to students via the university's online learning system (D2L). The survey was administered over two weeks at the end of the fall term in 2015. Data were only collected during this single timeframe, at each participant's convenience. Participation was not mandatory, and extra credit was given for completing the survey. After data were collected to the online software, they were exported into Word© and Excel© documents in order to run it through statistical analyses (correlational analysis, regression analyses or t-tests, depending on the question or hypothesis). The analysis directly follows the relationships set forth in this study's research questions and hypotheses.

## RESULTS

Results were collected from 58 participants for McCroskey's (n.d.) classroom anxiety measure (CAM) and Horwitz et al.'s (1986) foreign language classroom anxiety scale (FLCAS). For the CAM, two cases were missing one response each. For the FLCAS, five cases were missing a response each. In all of these instances, a neutral score of 3 was substituted for the missing response in order to complete the data set. This substitution is meant to clean up data without the need to throw out incomplete cases. With only 58 cases to begin with the removal of seven would have been a significant loss for the study. At the same time, the choice to replace missing data with 3-scores could skew data unnaturally toward the center. However, the degree to which data may be skewed is very minimal given each participant answered 56 questions over the course of these two measures and only seven of the total number of responses were altered.

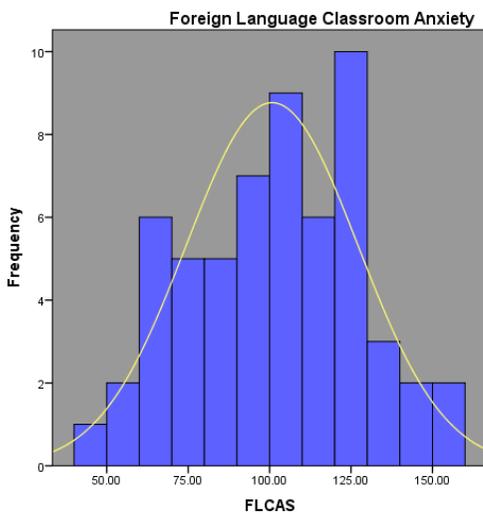
For the CAM, possible scores ranged from 20-100. The mean score was 42.16 ( $SD =$



14.05). Data was normally distributed, with the exception of a secondary mode representing the lowest scores as represented by Figure 1.

Figure 1. The results from the CAM results were normally distributed.

Given the scoring of this measure (20-25, low; 26-79, medium; 80-100, high), this secondary mode may represent the inability of this measure to separate low anxiety scores over a range or into further categories (e.g. low-low, mid-low, high-low). It may also reflect an actual split between low-anxiety and medium-anxiety students in the classroom. Eight students scored as low anxiety, and 50 ranked in the medium anxiety range. None of the 58 surveyed students expressed high anxiety.



Possible scores for the FLCAS ranged from 36 -180. The mean score was 100.71 ( $SD = 26.38$ ). Data followed a normal distribution skewed slightly by a mode around 125 (Figure 2). Thirty-eight students scored low or no anxiety; 17 students ranked in the medium anxiety range, and three students experienced high FLCA.

Figure 2. The data for the FLCAS followed a normal distribution skewed slightly by a mode around 125.

Possible scores ranged from 20-100 on the UCS. The mean score was 46.81 ( $SD = 11.12$ ).

Data followed a normal distribution. Fifty students scored low for unwillingness to communicate (UTC), while eight participants had moderate UTC.

Self-rated proficiency (SRP) was measured using five questions addressing writing, reading, speaking, listening, and overall proficiency. Possible scores ranged from 5-25.

The mean score for the sample was 12.39 ( $SD = 3.21$ ). Data followed a normal distribution. A ranking system for these questions has not been established. However, participants ranged from 5-20 for this study.

To understand how FLCA and CA relate (Research Question 1), correlational analysis and regression analysis were performed to compare and contrast classroom anxiety (CA) and FLCA experienced by the sample. For Research Question 1a, correlational analysis revealed a statistically significant and high correlation between CA and FLCA ( $r = 0.67$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ). Linear regression analysis was used to investigate Research Question 1b. A significant regression equation was found ( $F(1,56) = 47.0$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) with an  $r^2$  of 0.46. Participants' predicted FLCA is equal to  $47.6 + 1.248 * CA$  when CA is measured using CAM. This reveals the unique effect of CA on FLCA to be 1.2 ( $p = 0.000$ ). In other words, for every one-point increase in CA, a participant's FLCA is predicted to increase by 1.2. Hypothesis 1 predicted a positive correlation between FLCA and UTC. Correlational analysis supports this hypothesis with a statistically significant, strong positive correlation between the two variables ( $r = 0.47$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). Linear regression was performed to further investigate the relationship between FLCA and UTC. A significant regression equation was found ( $F(1,56) = 15.6$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) with an  $r^2$  of .22. Respondents' predicted FLCA is equal to  $48.869 + 1.107 * UTC$  when UTC is measured using UCS. For every one point increase in UTC, predicted FLCA increases by 1.1 units.

Hypothesis 2 predicted a negative correlation between FLCA and SRP. Correlational analysis supports this hypothesis with a statistically significant, strong negative correlation between FLCA and SRP ( $r = -0.48$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). Simple linear regression was run to investigate further. A significant regression equation was found ( $F(1,56) = 16.630$ ,  $p =$

0.000) with an  $r^2$  of 0.229. Participants' predicted FLCA is equal to  $149.462 - 3.938 * SRP$ .

For every one point increase in SRP, predicted FLCA decreased by 3.9 units.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that students with extensive language-learning backgrounds would experience less FLCA than students without a language learning background. To address

this hypothesis, participants' results were separated into two groups based on one question:

one group for those who had previous experience learning a foreign language other than from the class they were currently in and another group for those without such experience.

Given the small size of the group with a background in language learning ( $n = 12$ ), a simple

arithmetic mean was calculated for this group ( $M = 93.9$ ). A single-sample  $t$ -test was then

performed using the other group (i.e. no language-learning background) as a sample and the

calculated mean as a "population" value. FLCA of students who hadn't studied other

foreign languages was significantly greater than the FLCA of students with a language

learning background ( $t(45) = 2.2, p = 0.04$ ). The mean score for the group with no

language-learning background was 102.5. The statistical power of these results depends on

the assumption that the calculated mean is actually representative of its population. Further

study is necessary.

Research Question 2 was created to explore some of the potential intersections of FLCA

and various demographics. Because of relatively homogeneous composition of the sample

with respect to race and ethnicity, no tests were run to analyze the impact of race on FLCA.

However, gender was investigated. FLCA results were broken into two groups based on

gender. The mean score for males was 98.5, and the mean score for females was 101.378.

A two-sample  $t$ -test was run to compare the two groups. No significant differences were

found between male and female participants ( $t(42) = 0.4, p = 0.692$ ). Furthermore, a single-

sample  $t$ -test was run to test FLCA results collected from the current study of Midwestern

American students learning Spanish to Liu and Jackson's (2008) study of Chinese EFL students at a university in Beijing. The sample mean, 100.7, was not significantly different ( $t(57) = -0.070, p = 0.945$ ) than the "population" value (the mean score from Liu and Jackson's study), 101. No other demographic information was tested.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS)**

Apart from his pure academic motivations, the author also conducted this study to provide an evaluative measure for introductory foreign language classes. Before discussing the research questions, the evaluative element of this study deserves some attention. The mean score for the current study was 100.7, which indicates low levels of FLCA on average. This result bodes well for students of foreign languages at the university where the study was conducted. Certainly, some of this result is related to instructional methods employed at the university; however, the mode range for this data is 120-130 (Figure 2). This result means that many students are still experiencing moderate amounts of FLCA. To reduce this anxiety, further study is required to test possible interventions.

Research Question 1 explored the connection of CA and FLCA. An  $r$ -value of 0.675 and an  $r$ -squared of 0.456 reveal a connection between these anxieties. This connection suggests a possible treatment for FLCA is to treat CA. In other words, by treating anxieties common to any classroom (e.g. test-taking, speaking in front of peers, etc.), FLCA may also be treated. This is unsurprising considering FLCA was constructed using communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation as building blocks (Horwitz et al., 1986). The original concept assumed that the introduction of a foreign language exacerbated those anxieties in such a way as to create a unique anxiety: FLCA. The close connection revealed by this study between CA and FLCA seems to

support that assumption. A large portion of FLCA can be predicted by CA, but importantly, a large portion is not explained by CA. This study is not sufficient to illuminate whether that unexplained portion of FLCA is due to the assumption from the original conceptualization or if it simply reflects a shortcoming of the CAM to measure all of the building blocks of the FLCAS.

Hypothesis 1 predicted a positive correlation between FLCA and UTC. This hypothesis was supported by the results of this study ( $r = 0.47$ ). An  $r$ -squared of 0.22 also showed the moderate level of predictive power UTC has for FLCA. Again, this result is not surprising because the UCS closely addresses one of the building blocks of FLCA, communication apprehension. This result suggests that by increasing willingness to communicate, we can improve FLCA in the classroom. This might be accomplished by creating a more casual, open, and non-hostile speaking environment in the classroom or by fostering friendship (and group identity) between students in the classroom. Further study is necessary to test these ideas.

Hypothesis 2 predicted a negative correlation between FLCA and SRP. This hypothesis was supported by an  $r$ -value of  $-0.479$ . It seems that students who believe they are proficient in a language are also the students that experience little FLCA. An  $r$ -squared value of 0.23 demonstrates the moderate predictive power of SRP for FLCA. It should be noted that SRP was measured for this study using only 5 items. More extensive surveys for SRP may be more effective for future studies. This relationship may again relate to the building blocks of FLCA. It might also indicate that students who believe they are proficient do not experience as much test anxiety or fear of negative evaluation. Further analysis is necessary to verify this claim. At any rate, these results suggest that educators

might combat FLCA by increasing the confidence and competence of their students. This suggestion has been made by scholars before (Liu and Jackson, 2008), and indeed, it still seems relevant. Future research may test ways to increase confidence and competence in the foreign language classroom through positive reinforcement and personalized, constructive feedback.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that students with language learning backgrounds would experience less FLCA than students without such backgrounds. The results of a single-sample t-test supported this hypothesis: students without language learning backgrounds experienced significantly more FLCA than students with experience learning other foreign languages. Unlike many of the other variables tested in this study, this result does not seem to clearly or intuitively connect to the building blocks of FLCA. The significance of this result lends great support to the assumption that foreign languages impact other anxieties to create a unique form of anxiety. However, the method by which these results were calculated should be scrutinized. This study did not collect enough data to run a proper t-test, instead comparing the mean score of students with language-learning backgrounds against the individual scores of students without language learning backgrounds. For this result to be truly meaningful, the mean score would need to be representative of the population of students with learning language backgrounds. This study simply assumes it is representative, which merits further research. Furthermore, a more extensive questionnaire on language learning background could prove useful for future studies.

Finally, Research Question 2 sought to investigate how different demographic markers affect FLCA. The results of this study suggest that men and women do not experience FLCA differently. Gender does not appear to influence FLCA, which makes treating FLCA

in the classroom much easier because educators will not necessarily need to devise different treatments based on gender identity. This study allowed open-ended responses when asking students to identify their gender identities. Nevertheless, students generally fell into the categories male or female.

A single-sample t-test was run using the data collected from this study and the mean score of Chinese EFL students at a Beijing university as reported by Liu and Jackson (2008). This test revealed no significant difference between the two. This is perhaps the most interesting result of this entire study. It states that this sample of a Midwestern American university students learning Spanish is not significantly different than the previously sampled Chinese students learning English. Finding no significant difference between such drastically different samples shows the strength of FLCA as an evaluative measure for learning language anywhere. It also highlights common experience among all learners of languages. Further study should compare these results to other diverse samples to identify if this result was merely happenstance.

## LIMITATIONS

Limitations were present in this study. Many of the limitations specific to various measures or analysis were included in the preceding paragraphs. Nonetheless, it's important to remember that the results of this study represent only college-aged Midwestern American-language learners studying Spanish at one mid-sized Midwestern university. Expansion of this study to other Midwestern universities, as well as to universities in other regions of the United States or globally, would greatly improve the quality of its results.

The methodology of this study also proved limiting. Results were collected in only one round and only at the end of the academic semester. This means that students were exposed

to their foreign language for months prior to being surveyed, which may have greatly reduced their anxiety. Data was also collected during one of the most stressful times of the semester which may have inadvertently impacted the results. Participation was not mandatory, and extra credit was given for participation. The lack of mandatory participation may have allowed students with high FLCA to simply avoid the survey. The extra credit may have influenced some individuals to complete the survey quickly without respect for the integrity of the results. Furthermore, only introductory Spanish classrooms were surveyed. These results may not apply to other languages (French, German, etc.). Because it surveyed Spanish classrooms, this study also missed another important group of individuals—those who chose not to participate in foreign language learning at all. Perhaps high FLCA kept this group from even signing up for a foreign language class. At any rate, other language classrooms and non-language learning classrooms would be very interesting to study in the future. Furthermore, a pre-test, post-test design would be much more useful for evaluative and treatment purposes.

## CONCLUSION

From a purely academic point of view, this study suffered from a lack of focused and comprehensive research into one specific issue of FLCA, instead opting to cover a solid range of topics. This decision was made consciously by the author in order to establish a solid basis for continuing research into FLCA for both academic and evaluative reasons. Hopefully, the suggestions made herein will provide more structure as research illuminates the finer details of FLCA. Indeed, this research will be necessary to improve foreign language teaching pedagogy as the knowledge of foreign languages becomes more vital for business, politics, education, and life around the world.

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