

Pedagogical  
Innovations in Foreign  
Language Learning  
via Interlocutor  
Familiarity



# Pedagogical Innovations in Foreign Language Learning via Interlocutor Familiarity

By

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Examining diverse contexts and individual learning styles in foreign language classrooms and the multitude of external and internal stimuli affecting foreign language learning stems from my maternal family members' experiences learning languages across three continents and four nations. From the Carpathian Mountains in Ukraine with their eldest daughter (my Aunt Anna), my grandparents fled the only land they ever knew to escape to a refugee camp in Austria, where their second daughter was born (my late Aunt Maria). After living in a refugee camp in Austria, my grandparents and two aunts escaped to Brazil, where my Mom (Vera) was born and raised. On my Mom's thirteenth birthday, my family immigrated to the United States. Though their linguistic and cultural story begins in Ukraine, it is ceaselessly cultivated across our globally diverse communities.

Reflecting on bridging the familiar with the foreign in our language programs and transcending classroom boundaries, we can meaningfully connect experiences among learners, educators, and communities to content and build a tolerant and global experience that fosters lifelong learning across disciplines, institutions, and societies. While our classrooms can never replicate firsthand experiences, reflecting and examining diverse learner perspectives and individual learning factors can allow educators to increase learners' social connectivity to content at the interdisciplinary level to transform the way we approach pedagogical methods and diverse learner needs.

From my academic to my personal experiences, I am grateful to my graduate school faculty at Temple University for their incredible support and inspiration to examine these pertinent research areas. I am also thankful to my student participants for making this study possible. My polyglot Mom has been my linguistic and cultural guru who made me who I am today. I thank my Dad (Ray) for all of his support. Special thanks to my brother (Stephen), without whom, my statistical analyses would never be possible. Thank you also to Rowan University for enabling me to begin my new academic journey. Thank you very much to Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their recognition of foreign language learning research in our globally changing societies.





## PREFACE

From primary school to higher education programs in foreign language studies, educators across the globe continue to challenge learning theories and experiment novel approaches to respond to a growing need to learn languages and become culturally cognizant. Though it is impossible to attribute language learning to a specific theory or an individual learner factor, it is possible to identify and share innovative ways to enhance language learning experiences and improve pedagogical approaches to foreign language learning.

Connecting language learners to content and reducing learner anxiety are merely a few challenges many foreign language educators face, making classroom environments somewhat like petri dishes for testing and studying specific variables that affect each learner that enters a classroom door or logs onto an open or online classroom context. Identifying unique and shared learner interests, peer relations, motivational and attitudinal factors, and preferred learning styles can enable researchers across disciplines to explore the complexities of learner diversities and their impact on making these connections to content and reduce learner anxiety while promoting learning and content retention. Specifically, examining distinct learner contexts can allow educators to explore new avenues of pedagogical design to improve learning contexts.

Thus, drawing upon sociocultural theory (SCT), cognitive theory (CT), and affective factors in foreign language learning (FLL), this study is based on doctoral research that examines the effects of interlocutor familiarity in group settings in two beginner language courses at a large public university in the United States. This study explores learners' perspectives on working with a familiar peer as opposed to an unfamiliar peer and examines learners' lexical retention in two distinct classroom contexts on specific content.

Accordingly, the first chapter reviews the concept of intercultural competence and the growing need to learn languages in our globally changing communities and professions, followed by an overview of the research study. The second chapter explores the contrasting views of sociocultural and cognitive theorists and the role of affective factors in FLL and second language acquisition (SLA) to identify theoretical underpinnings of pedagogical methods. The third chapter reviews previous

investigations on the impact of group work in FLL contexts and the impact of group and peer familiarity on learner performance across disciplines. The fourth chapter outlines the methodological framework of the empirical study, which examines two distinct foreign language (FL) classroom settings, whereby students in one class section worked with the same peer of choice throughout the course and the other class section worked with a different partner assigned by the instructor. An overview of the research questions and the participants' academic, language, and demographic backgrounds are also reviewed in chapter four. The fifth chapter reviews the quantitative results from learners' lexical retention tests and the qualitative data gathered from classroom observational field notes and learners' written examples in the two separate class sections. The sixth chapter concludes the study with a discussion on the quantitative and qualitative findings, caveats, and directions for future research in FL pedagogy.

Taking into consideration varied approaches to language pedagogies, distinct learning styles and contexts, and the growing need to develop intercultural competence in communities and professions across the globe, this book helps educators transform classrooms into socially engaging environments that facilitate collaborative learning and explore innovative ways to continue improving pedagogical performance and learning experiences. Creating classroom spaces that allow for increased learner participation and lowered anxiety levels can allow for an inclusive learning that extends beyond four walls and into our global communities. Continuing collaborative efforts to challenge theories and further test methodologies and variables by drawing upon interdisciplinary research studies can serve to not only allow researchers and educators to become more informed about individual learner preferences and classroom contextual factors, but can also foster meaningful learning environments across disciplines.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CT	Cognitive Theory
ESL	English as a Second Language
ELLs	English Language Learners
FTF	Face-to-Face
L1	First Language
FL	Foreign Language
FLLs	Foreign Language Learners
FLL	Foreign Language Learning
IIO	Input-Interaction-Output (IIO) Model
L2	Second Language
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
SCT	Sociocultural Theory
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development





# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION: ROLE OF LANGUAGES AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT IN A GLOBALLY CHANGING ECONOMY

In our globally changing economy, learning languages and becoming culturally cognizant are critical for effective communication in diverse contexts—from our daily interactions in our communities to our diverse professional encounters. Across the globe, we are experiencing an increasingly diverse society extending from urban communities to rural neighborhoods. Moreover, in higher education programs throughout the United States, we are seeing a growing percentage of international students in undergraduate and graduate studies (Lee 2013). Furthermore, it is predicted that by the year 2050 half of the population in the United States will be comprised of racial and ethnic minorities (Martin Anderson, McLaughlin, and Dancy Smith 2007). Effectively interacting in our diverse communities and workplaces entails more than a global understanding of cultural nuances and awareness, but necessitates critical thinking skill development and practical applications of language and culture in context.

Hence, *intercultural competence* development is vital in our diverse encounters. Depending on the field or discipline, *intercultural competence* has been defined in several ways (Fleckman et al. 2015; Office of Minority Services 2000, 80865), but principally entails three critical components: affect, behavior, and cognition. Specifically, an individual's attitudes (referred to as affect) can influence understanding and skill development (or cognition) and, consequently, impact interactions (or behaviors).

That is, intercultural competence broadly entails effective cultural and linguistic navigation in diverse interactions (Spitzberg and Changnon 2009). Research investigations in multiple fields including (but not limited to) medical (Anand and Lahiri 2009; Sentell, Braun, Davis, and Davis 2013; Vanderpool, Kornfeld, Finney Rutten, Squiers 2009; Wen et al.

2014) and legal contexts (Eades 2008; Hafner 2012) consistently support the notion that a lack of intercultural competence results in serious consequences including increased mortality and morbidity rates and significant financial costs. As a lifelong learning competency that is not limited to the language classroom, intercultural competence development is undeniably essential in every field.

Nevertheless, language classrooms should certainly serve as key environments that open learners' doors to new perspectives on diverse uses of language (e.g., slang or stigmatized language forms, formal speech, etc.) in collaborative contexts. Initializing these new perspectives can begin to take shape in introductory language courses with an aim to spark learners' interests in cultural and linguistic diversities and transform them into active and global lifelong learners.

Therefore, second language acquisition (SLA) and foreign language learning (FLL) are increasingly gaining importance from urban to suburban communities across the globe. Though not a primary focus of the present study, clarification of the underlying significances of acquisition and learning is necessary. In his Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis, Krashen (1981) asserts that acquisition refers to subconscious or implicit learning, and learning reflects a conscious process.

For example, a monolingual Brazilian Portuguese speaker living in London can subconsciously acquire English as a second language (ESL) as a result of daily encounters utilizing the second language (L2). A monolingual Brazilian Portuguese student enrolled in a foreign language (FL) course in Brazil, on the other hand, is consciously developing FL skills through extensive study and lessons. Nonetheless, it is important to note that FL classroom contexts do not preclude foreign language learners (FLLs) from subconsciously acquiring linguistic and cultural skills in classroom contexts.

Therefore, it is essential that classrooms reflect innovative learning environments that feed into the acquisition of cultural and linguistic tools through social activities. It is important to note that this study will use the concepts interchangeably, since examining whether learners acquired or learned specific lexical items were not at the forefront of this research.

Thus, innovations in FL instruction seek to facilitate intercultural competence development and FLL in multiple settings—from traditional and hybrid environments to online or open learning contexts. No matter the innovation, providing learners with substantial opportunities to communicate in diverse interactions is undeniably a necessary ingredient in constructing meaningful learning environments.

Group work has, therefore, played a significant role in creating these types of socially active environments in the FL classroom context. Broadly, group work in the FL classroom is characterized as a cooperative (Olsen and Kagan 1992), collaborative (Nunan 1992), and communicative (Richards 2006; VanPatten 1998). While cooperative learning environments are those that promote cognitive and social development through structured tasks that increase learner interdependence, collaborative learning refers to building knowledge in social learning communities within a social constructivist framework (Oxford 1997). In its communicative sense, group work seeks to foster learners' development of communicative competence. Simply defined, communicative competence serves to enable speakers to socially and culturally navigate written and oral discourse in diverse contexts.

Together, these concepts are representative forms of active learner engagement in reciprocal learner-centered interactive exchanges that aim to promote increased meaningful learner input-output and facilitate FLL. Therefore, these concepts will be used interchangeably. Hence, group work as communicative tasks lie at the heart of FL pedagogies with a primary objective of transforming learners into active participants in the social community of their FL classroom. For this individual transformation to occur, innovations in FLL and SLA must also consider unique learner variables and contexts.

Some of these variables and contexts that have been previously examined include teacher and learner roles (de Jong 2012; Gergersen and MacIntyre 2015; Long 1990; Pica and Doughty 1985), learners' ages (Andrew 2012; van der Hoeven and de Bot 2012), personalities (Boroujeni, Roohani, and Hasanimanesh 2015; Dewaele 2012; Porter 1991; Robinson, Gabriel, and Katchan 1993). Though recent research studies in SLA and FLL have focused on the aforementioned conditions and other pertinent factors (i.e., learner motivation, aptitude, task type, gender differences, etc.), the effects of interlocutor familiarity in group work contexts have been sparsely investigated.

Thus, the present study seeks to address this variable to explore the effectiveness of peer familiarity on learning. Accordingly, this empirical research study begins with a theoretical overview of the four following critical perspectives in FLL and SLA: 1) cognitive theory (CT), 2) sociocultural theory (SCT), 3) affective factors, and 4) group work tasks and neurobiological factors of peer relations. Innovative practical applications of these perspectives in distinct FLL contexts are empirically examined as pedagogical strategies that seek to guide learners in individual transformations to become active participants.

This empirical research investigation is based on a pilot study (Poteau and Jacobs 2007) conducted with a colleague on two class sections of introductory Spanish at a public university. In the pilot study, each class section met three times per week for fifty minutes in back-to-back time slots. The purpose of back-to-back time slots was to avoid potential effects of conflicting times and subject performance. Students in Class #1 worked with the same small groups (2-3 students) throughout the semester and Class #2 worked with a different small group (2-3 students) during each class session.

In the pilot study, no significant differences between the learners in each class section were found in terms of age, FL proficiency level, and FL exposure. Moreover, class activities and lessons remained the same for each class section. To examine whether familiar and unfamiliar peer constructs can affect learning, two slang lessons with group activities were administered in each class section. Two unannounced slang retention tests were distributed to each learner to examine the effects of familiarity in group constructs on lexical retention. Each test consisted of separate slang terms that derived from one slang lesson.

Pilot study outcomes indicated that Class #1 exhibited higher scores on slang retention tests, but this difference did not yield statistically significant results. In a group work attitudes questionnaire, learners in Class #1 evidenced higher levels of comfortability working in groups than those in Class #2.

As an influential marker, the present study was conducted during doctoral research and draws upon data from two separate class sections (in each class section,  $n = 23$ ) of introductory Spanish at an urban public university with a goal of further exploring peer familiarity, group constructs, and learner perspectives on the language classrooms that we build as a team.

Specifically, the present qualitative and quantitative empirical study examines the following two fundamental areas: 1) the effects of interlocutor familiarity on lexical retention and written production and 2) group work and interlocutor familiarity attitudes and the role of affective factors (anxiety and motivation) in FLL.

To examine these two fundamental areas, the group selection and construct within each of the two class sections consisted of distinct contexts. Specifically, learners in Class #1 selected their own partner to work with throughout the semester, while learners in Class #2 were assigned a different partner by the instructor and did not repeat partners throughout the semester.

Though group structure set the class sections apart, all pedagogical materials (e.g., exams, quizzes, lessons, activities, etc.) were duplicated in each of the two classes. To examine lexical retention and written production in Class #1 and Class #2, treatment in each class included two lessons on specific slang terms from Spain. Each of the two slang term lessons consisted of written group assignments, which were collected for analyses. Three slang term tests were distributed to each learner in Class #1 and Class #2 as individual lexical retention tests to quantitatively compare learners' lexical retention in Class #1 and Class #2.

The Slang Lesson #1: Test #1 (the first slang test) included only the slang terms presented in Slang Lesson #1 and was administered during the second class session following this lesson. The Slang Lesson #2: Test #1 (the second slang test) included the slang terms from Slang Lesson #2 and was conducted during the second class session following this second lesson.

The Final Retention Test (the third slang test) was a comprehensive lexical retention test administered at the end of the semester. A Group Work Attitudes Questionnaire was administered during the final class session to examine learners' perspectives on interlocutor familiarity and group work in each class section.

As a window into our classrooms and a glimpse into the minds of FLLs, this study provides unique insights into diversifying pedagogies to optimize learning and enhance experiences among FL educators and FLLs. Learning from FLLs and pedagogical experiences allows us to more closely examine ways to continue to revise theories and innovate academic programs across disciplines.

Our common goal is to prepare learners—from the formative years to adulthood—to not simply step foot into our globally changing communities, but to actively participate and engage in meaningful discourse across cultures and languages as global lifelong learners. Taking into consideration the unique preferences, needs, and backgrounds of our FLLs and our ultimate goals, we can begin to shape our classrooms into experiential learning environments that awake in the community.



## CHAPTER TWO

# SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING: THEORIES AND PERSPECTIVES

Theories and perspectives in SLA and FLL are continuously put to the test in a variety of contexts. Today, an influx of distance education courses and open or online institutions and programs have brought both innovative digital models and pedagogical challenges to the field. In the FL open or online classroom context, for instance, a research study on the role of teacher social presence in L2 interactions using webcams did not evidence a strong impact on learners' interactions, disproving investigators' predictions (Guichon and Cohen 2014). Other research investigations on the effects of adding chat-based interactions in courses that meet in face-to-face (FTF) classroom contexts indicate that learners can improve oral proficiency and either outperform or maintain similar performance levels as learners without the addition of chat-based activities (Abrams 2003; Hirotnani 2009).

Further, Mendelson's (2012) case study of a student enrolled in a FL course that integrated chat-based activities evidenced an increase in academic discourse use (412). Interestingly, the student in Mendelson's case study participated in language play during the initial stages of the chat-based activity, which he notes could be because "joking was a familiar activity from chatting in her first language" (412). The possibility of the learner seeking a sense of familiarity to accommodate to a new learning environment and task is critical in evaluating several factors including (but not limited to) task design and type, classroom contexts, learner perceptions and attitudes, and peer relations. Though Mendelson's case study demonstrates an overall positive outcome integrating chat-based activities in FTF classrooms, there are, nevertheless, conflicting research studies (Crystal 2006; Kern 1995), suggesting that lengthy academic discourse in chat-based activities is not a common thread in these types of environments.

Clearly, the diversity of our research landscape brings about critical findings in various contexts, leading us into new directions to examine our

pedagogies in light of mixed approaches and theories in FLL and SLA. With multiple perspectives on FLL and diverse learner variables, it is implausible to isolate one specific pedagogical approach that fosters supportive learning environments for each and every learner in distinct contexts.

Thus, this chapter examines three fundamental perspectives on FLL to identify critical elements of the complex learning system: 1) CT, 2) SCT, and 3) affective factors. In reference to the latter area, learner anxiety and motivation are examined as a means to determine certain individual learner traits that impact learning. In order to explore the effects of communicative exchanges and the role of affective factors in FLL, these particular perspectives provide rich insights as to the internal and external stimuli that can affect learning experiences.

Beginning with CT, language learning is said to occur as a result of an individual and internal process (Markee and Kasper 2004; Mitchell, Myles, and Marsden 2013). More specifically, the Input-Interaction-Output (IIO) Model proposes that humans initially control information processing internally in their short-term memory and progress to automatic processing of information within their long-term memory (Gass 1997; McLaughlin and Heredia 1996). Specifically, the IIO model suggests that the initial stages of FLL consist of learner output that is a controlled process, which is characterized by uneasy, slowed, delayed, and/or inaccurate speech production. It is during these initial stages that learners continue to practice the FL in communicative contexts, facilitating the gradual progression to improved performance and automatic processing.

Undoubtedly, acquiring any skill requires learners' attention and continued practice. Following a controlled process of continued practice, learners are able to use the particular skill without realizing and, consequently, that skill is acquired. From this IIO Model, Gass and Mackey (2006) assert that the impact of interaction on learning has paved the way to reexamining this construct as what they consider an interaction approach. Their latest perspective sheds light on the influential role of meaningful interaction in cognitive development.

Thus, cognitive theorists assert that language learning occurs when the learner directs attention to establishing connections between form and meaning through meaningful interactions and experiences in one's environment (Cadierno and Lund 2004). It is through these social interactions and experiences whereby learners process and transmit information, and interpret language structures through problem-solving practices (Wenger 1998). Hence, learners' experiences working in group



settings can influence processing and transmitting information in classroom contexts.

Evidently, learners must have ample opportunities to practice the FL in order for learning to occur. Numerous external factors (i.e., context and type and quality of input received) can affect internal factors (i.e., noticing, directing attention, practicing the FL). A stimulating learning environment is one that enables learners to direct attention to notice specific FL features of study. Therefore, any setting that triggers tension or high levels of anxiety can negatively impact learners' output and input processing, which can result in learners' avoidance behavior. As a consequence, this type of setting distracts learners and causes them to direct attention to their environment instead of focusing on the FL. In other words, as Ellis and Robinson (2008) assert, "What is intended is learned, and so attention controls the acquisition of language itself" (3).

As a consequence, lack of attention results in lack of retention. A learner's negative experience can negatively impact emotional states and inhibit FLL. Collaborating with a familiar peer can enhance learning experiences and, thereby, help learners notice gaps, scaffold, and negotiate meaning in interactive exchanges. A familiar peer can foster a supportive learning environment that enables learners to notice and direct attention to specific FL features, and understand the types of feedback they will receive. Daily interactions promote continued practice with a peer and gradual progression to automatic use of the FL feature.

The present study examines the effects of meaningful interactions in distinct group settings or constructs (i.e., familiar versus unfamiliar) as facilitative forms of learners' internalization of specific slang terms through gradual progression that starts with hesitance by means of a controlled process to improved performance via automatic processing. Collaborating with a familiar peer offers a cooperative setting, enabling learners to relate to one another and progress from being consciously aware of the FL features to an automatic use by internalizing content, repetition, restructuring of peer input, and continued practice with their peer.

As is evident, internal processing and social interactions play pivotal roles in FLL. Equally important to cognitivists' approach to language processing is socioculturalists' views on the central role of social interactions. Rooted in the principles set forth by Vygotsky (1978) and colleagues, SCT states that humans primarily learn through social interaction (Hellerman 2008; Lantolf 2000). Learning, therefore, occurs through social interactions as a continuous and cyclical process (Negueruela 2008, 195). Negueruela (2008) asserts that learning and development are distinct

processes in that learning is an internal process that allows for the construction of tools (195). Development, on the other hand, broadly refers to an internal processing of tools in social interactions (Negueruela 2008, 195). Thus, both learning and development occur as a result of complex internalization within socially mediated interactions.

In SCT, interaction is considered a key element (van Lier 2000, 247) because, as a result of the appropriation of social dialogue and mediation, new forms of the FL are learned. As unique exchanges, learners' interactions are not a series of imitations, but are examples of internal reconstructions initiated by individual actions. Thus, learners' internal processing and their social environment are two critical elements within one interaction. Therefore, in SCT, FLL is not solely an internal process, since one's environment also plays a crucial role.

To provide learners with a sense of connection within a social environment in FLL contexts, settings that promote interlocutor familiarity in group work can contribute to a less stressful learning experience. A familiar peer can help learners feel less inhibited and more willing to help each other approach new linguistic features of a FL. Moreover, peer assistance in group work contexts, enables FLLs to work within their zone of proximal development or ZPD (Vygotsky 1978, 86). Broadly defined, the ZPD refers to an individual's current zone of what can be achieved without assistance as opposed to what the individual can do with assistance (Vygotsky 1978, 86). Collaborating with a peer promotes active participation and allows each learner to share FL knowledge in a supportive learning environment. This gives peers opportunities to help one another and build upon each other's understanding of the FL to further develop linguistic skills, which can be employed at a later stage without any peer assistance. Hence, a learner's environment is a crucial external factor that can affect participation, active use of the FL, and, ultimately, FLL.

Though contributory to the FLL paradigm, there are, nevertheless, critics of SCT (Ellis 1997; Mitchell and Myles 1998) that affirm that this perspective lacks a complete understanding of language as a formal system and does not thoroughly evaluate how the learner internalizes the FL. More specifically, Ellis (1997) explains that SCT does not account for the learner as independently processing information (244). However, sociocultural proponents assert that this explanation is nonessential, since a social environment and an individual are necessarily connected (Lantolf 2000).

Evidently, there are clear distinctions between cognitivists' and socioculturalists' perspectives on FLL. While cognitivists view the human

mind as computational, whereby language is internalized through procedural steps, the sociocultural approach, in contrast, views the mind as mediated by social, historical, and cultural contexts. Hence, the sociocultural approach principally focuses on language as a social construction (Thorne 2000, 225). In reference to the present empirical study, the learners in each class section are contextually situated in two types of environments (i.e., familiar versus unfamiliar) to investigate the effects on vocabulary retention, written production, and attitudes.

Drawing upon SCT, Class #1 represents a learning environment consisting of familiar peers working collaboratively to accomplish a common goal. This language learning community is conducive to language development, since it reflects a collaborative context that fosters communication and co-construction of the FL. Learners form personal connections with a familiar peer that can help them feel more at ease practicing the language. Learners in Class #2, on the other hand, are more disassociated with their peer. These distinct social conditions in each class section influence learners' overall experiences with the FL and associated tasks. Meaningful communicative practices with a familiar peer are a result of cognitive processes that gradually facilitate learning of a specific FL feature.

Thus, socioculturalists' and cognitivists' perspectives and theories are equally applicable to the present research, since each encompasses critical factors that impact FLL. From external conditions (i.e., social context) to internal processing (i.e., cognitive dimensions), FLL occurs as a result of several conditions that cannot simply be attributed to one specific theory or perspective. Hence, several theories in FL pedagogies should be considered in order to enhance methodologies and learning experiences.

In order to enhance learning experiences, FL educators must also take into account affective factors. In addition to the cognitivists' and socioculturalists' perspectives on FLL, affective factors are equally important conditions that must be considered. These factors have the power to positively or negatively affect performance and, ultimately, learning. Two affective factors are examined in the present study: anxiety and motivation. Further, individual differences on personality dimensions such as introversion/extroversion play a role in FLL, which will also be explored.

Anxiety and neurobiological factors are unique qualities to each learner and can clearly impact FLL. FLL can be a daunting task for many students especially when learners are faced with uncertainties. In intercultural exchanges, Gudykunst (2005), for instance, notes that anxiety equates to uncertainty, which we can encounter in our communications, since we are

unable to predict the path of an exchange with an unfamiliar speaker. Gudykunst (2005) identifies cognitive anxiety and affective anxiety as two primary aspects of uncertainty.

Cognitive anxiety entails uncomfortable feelings working with an unfamiliar peer due to a general lack of awareness of the unfamiliar peer's work habits. Affective anxiety refers to an individual's uncomfortable emotions regarding unshared feelings within a context. Though we can look to CT and SCT to help develop innovative classroom activities, no specific theory can provide explicit instruction as to how to break or minimize anxiety barriers in FL courses.

To minimize these negative psychological conditions in FLL contexts, group work is said to limit teachers' dominant roles by allowing students to become autonomous and active learners while, at the same time, it reduces language learners' *anxiety* levels (Horwitz and Young 1991; Lee 2004; Sullivan 2000). Broadly defined, *anxiety* is an emotional state that causes arousal of the limbic system, which affects humans' emotional (i.e., feelings, reactions) and physiological responses (i.e., heart rate, blood pressure) (Horwitz and Young 1991). Consequently, these types of emotional and physiological responses caused by high levels of anxiety can affect participation, communication, and learning.

Though anxiety has been examined as a personality trait, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) note that anxiety in the FLL context is a distinct form of anxiety that is experienced among learners only in FL contexts and is not necessarily a personality trait. That is, language learners' experiences in the FL classroom are factors that can contribute to anxiety, which can positively or negatively affect FLL. For example, a student in a FL course may exhibit high levels of anxiety exclusively in the FL classroom, but will not exhibit this same type of anxiety in another discipline. Scovel's (1978) early research consisting of a review of previous studies on the effects of anxiety on language learning concludes that anxiety is a difficult variable to fully understand, since previous studies have resulted in facilitative and/or debilitating effects on learning.

For instance, early empirical studies (Chastain 1975; Kleinmann 1977) have shown that low levels of anxiety may be facilitative, but high levels of anxiety may be debilitating. Similarly, Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) claim that lower anxiety levels among learners positively contribute to the acquisition of a second language.

In another empirical study conducted by Spielmann and Radnofksy (2001), the researchers sought to qualitatively examine the effects of *tension* in language learning in a 7-week intensive beginner French class. In their report, these researchers note that tension does not necessarily

occur in a specific context nor may it be experienced by every individual in the same way in a given context (259). They concluded that tension caused beneficial (or “euphoric”) or detrimental (or “dysphoric”) effects among the language learners, depending on learners’ personal expectations and perceptions of their learning experience. Furthermore, the participants in their study benefitted from tension since it directly connected to the instructional method (273). These findings reaffirm that the relationship between learning and anxiety is difficult to measure and, therefore, research cannot be limited to its facilitative or debilitating effects.

With respect to how high levels of anxiety can influence communication and learning, Scovel (1991) notes that anxiety can affect learners’ communication, since speech production is a neuromuscular activity (20). In terms of language learning, Scovel (1991) also explains that anxiety can make a learner avoid learning situations as a result of this emotional condition (22). Hence, due to high levels of anxiety, learners can develop avoidance behavior that inhibits active participation and learning.

Other research studies (Kleinmann 1977; Steinberg and Horwitz 1986) examining the effects of anxiety on learning indicated that anxiety negatively affected learners’ communicative practices, since learners that experienced anxiety avoided using certain features of the target language. Moreover, additional research on the effects of anxiety on writing in a native language indicated that learners with writing anxiety wrote shorter compositions than those without anxiety (Daly and Miller 1975; Daly 1977). Whether in oral communication or in written practice of the target language, high levels of anxiety can negatively impact learners’ experiences and learning (MacIntyre and Gardner 1989; Bhatia and Ritchie 2009).

In many instances of language learner anxiety, learners experience anxiety during their initial stages of FLL, since they are less proficient and less comfortable using the target language (Robinson, Gabriel, and Katchan 1993). Hence, some beginner level Spanish-language learners in the present study can experience anxiety because of their unfamiliarity with the FL. Other language learners may not exhibit anxiety and are uninhibited (or less inhibited) by this ‘foreignness.’

Research also suggests that anxiety levels are mediated by group size in the classroom setting (Long and Porter 1985; Rulon and McCreary 1986; Tsui 1996). Since small groups can give learners a more comfortable setting that enables them to feel more at ease using the target language, they are less likely to experience anxiety (Long and Porter 1985). Small group work is said to reduce anxiety and also increase

learners' communication and input with their peer (Koch and Terrell 1991). Rulon and McCreary (1986) note that a small group is an intimate setting that allows students to "negotiate the language they hear, free from stress and rapid pace of the teacher-fronted classroom" (182). These studies appear to support the contention that smaller-based group work structures can lower learner anxiety and, therefore, facilitate FLL.

Additionally, the participatory form (i.e., within small group settings vs. whole class settings) also affects levels of anxiety experienced by FLLs. Speaking in front of a class and an authoritative figure triggers anxiety experienced by many students (Rulon and McCreary 1986). Jacobs (1998) explains that not only do learners feel more comfortable speaking in groups than in whole class exercises, but they also have more opportunities to practice the target language than in teacher-fronted classrooms. He notes that "in teacher-fronted classrooms, the teacher typically speaks 80% of the time; in group work more students talk for more of the time" (22) in a much more supportive environment.

Speaking a FL in a whole class setting may contribute to high anxiety levels, which can negatively affect language learners' development of the target language (Horwitz and Young 1991). MacIntyre (1995) explains that, in addition to the negative effects of anxiety on language learning, there is a relationship between anxiety and performance in that learners' anxiety levels increase when they experience increased failure (97). It should also be noted that affective factors like anxiety and motivation are not independent of each other in terms of their effects on FLL. That is, learners with anxiety may exhibit low levels of motivation that causes them to avoid practicing the language and, therefore, are less willing to communicate in the target language. Hence, the debilitating effects of anxiety can influence learners' motivation and, consequently, inhibit processing of the target language (Foss and Reitzel 1991; Hashimoto 2002).

High levels of anxiety can also negatively affect neural/cognitive development. Dewaele (2009) notes that the brain continues to change and so do our skills and behaviors (623). Additionally, individual differences in the brain can unquestionably impact the rate of FLL (Dewaele 2009). Furthermore, de Bot (2006) argues that stress anxiety can negatively affect brain plasticity. Greater brain plasticity involves more brain cells that account for stronger language use and learning. There is no sufficient evidence, however, suggesting there are specific pedagogical or learning techniques that can enhance plasticity. Neural or cognitive deficits such as a decreased plasticity can, in turn, affect a learner's memory and internal processing, which clearly hinders FLL (Venault and Chapouthier 2007).