



NEIL CURRY AND KATE MAHER (EDS)
**PSYCHOLOGY-BASED ACTIVITIES FOR SUPPORTING ANXIOUS
LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

CREATING CALM AND CONFIDENT FOREIGN LANGUAGE SPEAKERS

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The book edited by Neil Curry and Kate Maher, entitled *Psychology-Based Activities for Supporting Anxious Language Learners: Creating Calm and Confident Foreign Language Speakers*, is a two-in-one resource for language teachers. On the one hand, it is a collection of practical activities ready to be used in the language classroom; on the other, it serves as an approachable and reader-friendly introduction to the psychology of language learning, with a focus on the affective domain in general and anxiety in particular.

With its practical orientation and aim of increasing language teachers' psychological literacy, this book fills a long-felt gap in the literature on anxiety related to second/foreign language (L2) learning. Over the past four decades anxiety has been one of the most thoroughly researched psychological variables (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015), as evidenced by a plethora of research articles and even special volumes dedicated to the subject (e.g. Horwitz & Young, 1991; Gkonou et al., 2017). However, this book stands out as the first to be written for language teachers.

While the large body of research on anxiety in the context of language learning has contributed to a nuanced understanding of the causes of L2-related anxiety and its undesirable effects on learners (Horwitz & Young, 1991; Gkonou et al., 2017; MacIntyre, 1999), the question of how the negative impact of anxiety could be alleviated remained peripheral in the literature. For decades language teachers had to make do with rather vague, general recommendations relegated to *Pedagogical Implications* sections, which amounted to creating ‘healthy’, ‘positive’ (Dewaele et al., 2018), ‘non-threatening’ (Dewaele, 2019), ‘low-stress’ (Horwitz et al., 1986; Horwitz, 2017), ‘low-anxiety’ (Young, 1991, 1999) classroom environments. However, what this meant in practical terms—how teachers could create such environments and what specific actions they could take to support anxious learners—remained to be further explored.

Curry and Maher’s volume is a timely contribution that fills this crucial gap. Inspired by a few pioneering attempts in the literature to offer more tangible and actionable recommendations for language teachers (e.g. Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014; Young, 1999), the editors aim to offer a rich collection of psychology-based activities specifically designed to reduce anxiety in the language classroom. They brought together language educators and researchers on L2 anxiety from a wide range of instructional contexts to share their approaches and ideas. *Psychology-Based Activities* is the result of this collaborative effort, presenting 18 ready-to-use, research-based activities designed by contributors from various parts of the world, including Hong Kong, Hungary, Japan, Poland, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Turkey, and the United Kingdom.

Each activity is introduced in a separate chapter, following the same structure and format, ensuring uniformity across the volume. After a brief introduction, the authors provide a short theoretical overview of their activity, explaining their approach to reducing anxiety, the rationale for developing the activity, and the research underpinning it. This is followed by a step-by-step description of the activity and its implementation, along with materials, potential variations, follow-up activities, and the authors’ reflections. Each chapter ends with the contributors’ recommendations for further reading. The easy-to-follow instructional format and personal tone—creating a sense of teachers talking to fellow teachers—make readers feel personally addressed and engaged.

The book starts with an *Introduction* by the editors. Curry and Maher provide a succinct overview of what teachers need to know about the nature of language anxiety and offer a compelling rationale for the volume. They highlight how the activities focus on speaking-related anxiety, as it is primarily in speaking situations that learners tend to feel vulnerable to the negative, inhibitive effects of anxiety. As a result, anxious learners may find themselves unable to seize communicative opportunities and even develop negative feelings about their abilities and L2 learning. The editors state that their primary motivation for providing language teachers with the volume is to help such learners manage their negative emotions and boost their speaking confidence. The book effectively conveys the message that language teaching is not just about imparting linguistic knowledge and skills but also about helping learners overcome their fears and reluctance to speak. The activities provide a practical guide for achieving this, though not in a ‘recipe book’ fashion. Rather, readers are encouraged to adapt them to their own teaching

contexts and their learners' needs.

The 18 activities are organized into five parts based on the theories they derive from. These represent key psychology-based approaches that have influenced current thinking about language pedagogy over the past decade, including positive psychology, flow theory, cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), visualization, well-being techniques, and mindfulness.

Part One, *Assessing Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA)*, focuses on identifying and understanding the causes of FLA in specific contexts. With two activities, it provides teachers with easy-to-use, adaptable tools to assess anxiety levels in their classrooms and explore the unique triggers that may affect their learners. The first activity, *How Are You Coping*, introduces a questionnaire to explore the emotions students experience in different scenarios when using their L2 and whether they utilize any coping strategies. The second activity, *You Are Not Alone*, describes how teachers can use a brief self-report measure called the 'Nervousness Metric' to quickly collect data on learners' anxiety levels during different activities. Both questionnaires are ideal for prompting discussions with students, which, functioning as awareness-raising activities, make learners aware of language anxiety and help them realise they are not alone in feeling nervous.

Part Two, *The Classroom Environment*, draws readers' attention to the classroom context as an important factor in L2 anxiety. With four activities, this part emphasizes the creation of a positive and engaging learning space. The first activity, *I'm Worthy and Special*, is an ideal choice when meeting a new group, as it helps bring the class closer together as a community and encourages learners to build up a positive self-image. Group members first share their strengths and positive qualities, then their weaknesses and the accompanying emotions of fear. Peer reactions and proposed solutions to each other's feelings promote learners' self-esteem and create a sense of bonding within the class. The second activity, *Creating Enjoyable Learning Environments*, is also a great option to try with new groups. Class members individually conceptualise what they think ideal classmates are like, then discuss their expectations and together create class rules for how to support one another. This student-centred activity helps build rapport and trust among classmates. The remaining two activities encourage teachers to incorporate principles of flow theory into their lessons to reduce L2 anxiety. *Flowing Classrooms* provides practical steps for creating tasks based on flow theory to facilitate flow experiences. *Making Speaking Tasks Emotionally Engaging* asks students to share a personally meaningful problem they would like to solve and to give advice to each other. What brings about flow and reduces anxiety is the learners' strong emotional involvement in the activity.

Part Three, *Cognitive Techniques*, familiarises readers with cognitive-based approaches that emphasise the importance of how students think about using a foreign language and show them how their thoughts can be managed to reduce their anxiety. Comprising six chapters, this part introduces strategies that encourage learners to "think through" their anxiety—that is, to challenge negative thought patterns and replace them with constructive ones, promoting a healthier

mindset toward language learning. The first activity, *Stoic Sayings for Alleviating Anxiety*, proposes that sayings from Stoic philosophy, along with discussions of their implications, can help learners realise that it is not things themselves that make us anxious, but what we think about them—and that it is useless to worry about things beyond our control. Internalising this philosophy can become a coping strategy, helping learners develop more realistic expectations of themselves as L2 speakers. *The Confidence-Building Diary*, a positive-psychology-based activity, encourages learners to keep a diary to record positive experiences and feelings related to using their L2 and reflect on them. The reason this exercise helps reduce anxiety is that focusing on positive experiences can boost self-confidence. The next activity, *Facing Worries Head-On*, uses group discussions to raise awareness and address communicative anxiety. The underlying idea is that tackling anxiety does not need to be a solitary endeavour. Rather than being hidden and avoided, negative thoughts and experiences are transformed into objects for discussion. Once worries and struggles are normalized as part of the learning process, students can focus on developing strategies to overcome them. The activity titled *Positive Attributions* invites students to reflect on presentations they did and were dissatisfied with, then explain why they think they did not do as well as they wished. Guided by the teacher, they differentiate between adaptive (having positive consequences) and maladaptive (having negative consequences) ways of viewing past performance, retraining their negative attributions to lessen their anxiety. The last two activities in Part Three introduce readers to techniques derived from CBT, a psychological approach that has proven helpful for treating various types of anxiety. *Looking for Evidence* is based on the premise that the fears students express in the language classroom are often not the result of lived experiences but rather what they think might happen. The activity encourages learners to search for evidence (or a lack of it) to find out whether their worries about speaking are justified, helping them realise there is little evidence to support some of their anxiety-inducing beliefs, so they can start to re-evaluate them. Finally, *What Makes You Nervous* improves speaking confidence by increasing learners' awareness of their anxiety triggers. Students are invited to focus on speaking situations where they experienced anxiety and identify what aspects of the situation triggered negative thoughts and feelings. They then do the same with speaking situations where they felt comfortable. This procedure helps learners become aware of their anxiety triggers and develop coping strategies tailored to their individual needs.

Part 4, *Visualization Techniques*, introduces readers to the idea of using mental imagery to reduce anxiety. With three chapters, this part leverages the power of imagination to help learners visualize themselves as confident speakers. The first two activities are ideal for helping learners manage their fear of public speaking. *Imagine How I Will Face Up to Speaking Anxiety* asks learners to visualise pre-presentation moments, guided by a script read out by the teacher. Rather than suppressing their anxiety, they are invited to observe their physical reactions in a non-judgmental way, accept the discomfort, and then observe their positive bodily reactions in the same way. This method helps learners realise that negative and positive emotions can co-exist, promoting their acceptance: letting go of negative emotions and nurturing positive

ones. *Rewrite Your Inner Script* features the technique of positive visualisation. Learners listen to a detailed script of an ideal presentation day, envisioning themselves as confident and successful speakers. This exercise allows them to realise that giving an L2 speech does not necessarily need to be an anxiety-filled, negative experience. Rewriting their inner script of the feared situation can break the involuntary association between oral presentations and anxiety. The last activity, *Focusing Attention Outwardly*, presents readers with a practical strategy to use in the moment to cope with anxiety. It teaches learners to consciously control their attention and direct it away from anxious thoughts and feelings (i.e. negative self-focus) and towards non-anxiety-related aspects of the task or environment. This technique is particularly helpful for students who are overly concerned and distracted by what impression they make when speaking.

Finally, Part Five, *Well-being Techniques*, focuses on mindfulness and well-being. Its three activities are designed to help learners achieve a calm and centred state of mind, enabling them to approach language learning with mindfulness and reduced stress. *I See You, I Hear You, I Cheer for You*, suggests that learners can overcome speaking-related anxiety through dialogue skits with positive communication in mind. This activity addresses anxiety by shifting students' focus to the enjoyment of the creative process and practising mindful dialogues. Grounded in positive psychology, *Three Good Things About Their English* helps anxious speakers build strengths to overcome their fear of negative evaluation and encourages them to speak. During pair and group work, students are asked to write down three positive things about their partner's performance. Listening to classmates' positive comments helps learners gain self-confidence. The last chapter, *Being Positive in the Present Moment*, introduces a series of activities based on mindfulness meditation techniques used in positive psychology. Rather than encouraging students to suppress or ignore their negative emotions during speaking activities, mindfulness practices help them recognise their concerns, judgements, or fears, and teach them to regulate their emotional states by relying on their own inner resources, using techniques like controlled breathing, body scanning, and relaxation exercises.

As suggested by this summary of its chapters, *Psychology-Based Activities* is a rich resource for language teachers seeking to address the affective challenges faced by their students. It familiarises readers with a diverse range of perspectives and approaches, encouraging them to explore how these can be applied in their own teaching situations. With its balanced blend of theoretical insights and practical activities, this volume is an indispensable companion for both novice and experienced teachers. By equipping teachers with tools to reduce anxiety and build confidence, Curry and Maher have made an important contribution to the field of language education. More than just a practical guide, *Psychology-Based Activities* is a call to action for language teachers to prioritise the emotional well-being of their learners, ensuring that language learning is a calm, confident, and enjoyable experience for all.

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