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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Foreign language speaking anxiety online: Mitigating strategies and speaking practices

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Abstract

This article explores how online language learners encounter foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA), what mitigating strategies they apply to manage synchronous online tutorials, and what their asynchronous speaking practices are. In a large-scale mixed methods study, we gathered survey data from 307 language learners at a UK online and distance learning university and conducted in-depth group interviews with 10 students focusing on their FLSA experience and perceptions regarding synchronous and asynchronous speaking activities. The results reveal that the triggers of FLSA and the mitigating strategies learners apply partly overlap with those in the face-to-face context but are partly specific to the online environment (e.g. breakout rooms, vicarious learning). The use of technology can be anxiety-inducing (e.g. cameras) as well as supportive (e.g. online translation tools and dictionaries). Novel findings of the study are that avoidance strategies are more nuanced in this context, ranging from complete avoidance of tutorials to full engagement via the chat, and that the use of breakout rooms magnifies learners' emotions and is one of the main triggers of FLSA. This might be helpful for practitioners – also beyond language courses – in scaffolding and optimising their small group activities online.

Keywords: foreign language speaking anxiety; breakout rooms; computer-assisted language learning; online and distance learning; use of camera; vicarious learning

1. Introduction

The role of affective variables such as anxiety, motivation, or enjoyment on foreign language learning has been long acknowledged (e.g. Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). Most studies, however, examine these in the face-to-face (f2f) classroom. Those few that focus on online courses generally explore emergency online teaching where f2f classes were forced into the virtual classroom because of the COVID-19 pandemic. In these, the changed teacher roles and expectations were often not clear, and social presence was perceived as insufficient, which resulted in low satisfaction rates and reduced meaningful interactions (Harsch, Müller-Karabil & Buchminskaia, 2021). Although researchers and practitioners have ample knowledge about the triggers and complexities of foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) in the f2f classroom, much less is known about it in carefully planned online language courses. This is surprising because due to technological advances and the lessons learnt from emergency remote teaching, there are more and more fully online language courses and courses with a significant online component on offer. The present

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study aims to fill this gap by exploring FLSA, speaking practices, and mitigating strategies in the various contexts of online language courses, namely synchronous online tutorials and asynchronous speaking practices.

1.1 Foreign language anxiety online

Research on foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) has investigated its role in the development of different skills, and it is generally accepted that speaking is the most anxiety-provoking activity (Young, 1992). The causes behind anxiety fall into three big groups: (a) general communication apprehension (including understanding apprehension and the fear of speaking spontaneously); (b) fear of inadequate performance (including test anxiety or the fear of making mistakes); and (c) fear of negative evaluation (e.g. Park, 2014). It is widely accepted that FLCA mostly has a negative impact on foreign language acquisition and can be a stable situation-specific anxiety that is detrimental to willingness to communicate. More recent research indicates that FLCA should be viewed as a dynamic system that fluctuates within a single learner, often on a moment-by-moment basis (Gregersen, 2020).

It is widely attested by now that online language learning and teaching has different affordances and different challenges to the f2f context (e.g. Gacs, Goertler & Spasova, 2020). According to Pichette (2009), some students with high levels of FLCA may choose to enrol in an online course to seek security in anonymity. Successful language learning, however, requires learner participation and interaction, which means that online language learners not only need to engage in speaking activities and interact with their peers but also need to be resilient and self-disciplined to stay on track with their studies. Sun (2014), in a qualitative study with 46 Chinese learners, identified that the major difficulties online language learners face are time management, staying engaged and working collaboratively, socialising, and keeping motivated and self-directed.

Although the impact of computer-mediated speaking on anxiety levels has been of interest (e.g. Poza, 2011; Sze, 2006), few studies focus on online and distance learning courses. In a study with 500 students of lower-intermediate French at a distance learning university, Hurd (2007) found that, contrary to her expectations, many students showed high levels of anxiety in this learning context. Bárkányi (2021), examining the interplay of motivation, self-efficacy beliefs, and FLSA on massive open online Spanish courses, found that although spoken interactions were asynchronous in this non-formal environment, anxiety often prevented learners from fully participating in speaking activities. In this study, participants with high anxiety levels showed slightly more appreciation of being shielded by technology. Russell (2020) also claims that online language students exhibit significant levels of anxiety, but she found that levels of foreign language anxiety (FLA) are more likely to diminish in the online context. Resnik, Dewaele and Knechtelsdorfer (2023), in a study with 437 EFL emergency online learners, showed that although the overall anxiety levels seemed to be lower in the online context, learners were less willing to volunteer answers in the online classroom, which shows that the nature of their worries might be different.

Yu, Song and Chiu (2020), using *Second Life* virtual world, did not find any significant differences between online learners and in-person learner groups, neither did Báez-Holley (2013) with beginner Spanish students studying online and on-campus. Other studies that explicitly compare online and f2f language learning tend to show that students in f2f classes are actually less anxious (e.g. Bollinger, 2017, in a study with 147 community college language learners in Georgia, USA; Simsek & Capar, 2024, with 234 Turkish ESL university students). Lisnychenko, Dovhaliuk, Khamska and Glazunova (2020) also found that students online showed significantly higher levels of communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation, whereas they felt slightly more comfortable about making mistakes. The informants of the latter study, 38 Ukrainian students of English, were forced to transition from classroom to online learning (similar to Resnik *et al.*, 2023), which might have added to their anxiety and negative attitude towards language classes.

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1.2 Validated mitigating strategies

Most practitioners are aware of the need to create a relaxed, nonthreatening atmosphere in the language classroom, and they employ different, often ad hoc, strategies to achieve it. In their systematic review of 40 publications on evaluated language anxiety reduction interventions, Toyama and Yamazaki (2021) identified that not all the examined interventions turned out to be effective. For instance, teaching with music, relaxation techniques, peer feedback, and group work by itself do not seem to have a significant impact on FLA. The effectiveness of computer-mediated communication gave contradictory results. The authors conclude that positive self-talk therapy and cooperative learning with a task outside of the course materials seem to reduce FLA, as well as the enhancement of teacher–student interaction.

There are far fewer studies exploring how students themselves cope with FLA rather than focusing on teacher-led interventions. Kondo and Ying-Ling (2004) found that mitigating strategies employed by Japanese students of English form five broad categories: preparation, resignation, positive thinking, relaxation, and peer seeking (in this order of frequency). Yasuda and Nabei (2018), also with Japanese students of English, noted that preparation and positive thinking positively correlated with willingness to communicate. In most previous studies, mitigating strategies have been explored or developed in the f2f classroom context. A notable exception is Tutton and Cohen (2024) who, in a small-scale study with 41 Australian university students of French, observed that the most common mitigating strategies involved preparation and the use of technology in synchronous online classes. The authors also note that their students preferred the f2f classroom over the online context.

As shown, there is not enough research on the strategies students employ to mitigate their FLSA, and even less in the context of online and distance learning. Thus, to address this gap in research, the present study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do students encounter FLSA in the online classroom?
2. What strategies do fully online language learners apply to manage their FLSA in synchronous tutorials?
3. What are students' speaking practices in asynchronous online language learning?

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The present study was carried out at The Open University (OU), a large open and distance learning provider, where language courses are designed with the latest theoretical approaches and research-based pedagogies for online language teaching in mind, thus potential challenges are addressed proactively. The language modules are taught by combining asynchronous activities with optional synchronous activities. The asynchronous component involves students working through online activities according to a study planner, and these activities include both independent work and opportunities to engage with peers through the use of forums, wikis, glossaries, and personal blogs. Each student is allocated a personal tutor who supports their study of the materials and marks and gives feedback on assignments. Students are encouraged to meet in online rooms as well as to attend tutor-led online group tutorials. Establishing enduring connections is challenging, as students can attend any tutorials they choose, so they may not see the same fellow students or tutor each time. Furthermore, participation in tutorials is advisory, not mandatory, so students might choose not to attend any synchronous sessions at all.

Participants were 307 OU undergraduate students in the School of Languages and Applied Linguistics (LAL), aged 18 and over. Most students study part-time and are in employment. To comply with research ethics and data protection, students were provided with an outline of the study prior to data collection with the approval of the OU Research Ethics Committee (HREC/

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4164). They were assured that their identity and all data obtained would be kept strictly confidential and solely used for the purpose of this study.

2.2 Instruments of data collection

For the study, a mixed methodology was used in sequential stages. First, a questionnaire with closed and open questions was sent to 999 OU language students in December 2021 to understand students' views on FLSA, identify the main causes of it in online speaking situations, and to discern students' speaking practices. Qualitative data were obtained from open-ended questions on the questionnaire and quantitative data from closed questions, with a mix of single and multiple-choice answers. In the questionnaire design, we drew upon data from two earlier events in LAL, attended by 88 students, to discuss how they encounter FLSA. As the questionnaire took approximately 20 to 30 minutes to complete, three £10 Amazon vouchers per language (Spanish, French, German) were raffled among students to incentivise participation. Of the 999 students who were invited to complete the questionnaire, 307 replied. The notable response rate of 30% underscores the significance of the topic for language learners. As part of the questionnaire, students could opt into further research via four group interviews (GIs) of approximately 60 minutes each with a view to gaining deeper insights into students' fears and coping strategies.

This sequential mixed-method design was used for both explanatory and exploratory purposes: The qualitative data obtained from the GI sessions provided more explanation for some of the questionnaire data and analysis and allowed participants to explore and test mitigating strategies. Participation in GI sessions was incentivised via the offer of £10 Amazon vouchers. The GIs were conducted between February and June 2022 in English only and were conceptualised as interventions in the sense that they were thematic where coping strategies were elicited and discussed, and students could then apply these to their upcoming tutorials and discuss their impact in subsequent GI sessions. The topics discussed in the four GIs were (1) understanding foreign language speaking anxiety and how it affects the participants, (2) positive ways forward and what strategies participants have tried, (3) learning environments, and (4) future study plans. Tutors facilitated but did not influence the discussions, encouraging students to share experiences and strategies and give advice to each other. Of the 108 students who applied to take part in GI sessions, 10 were selected. Selection criteria included an even spread across the three languages (Spanish, French, German), levels of languages (beginners' level/level 1, level 2, and level 3), and even distribution of students who declared additional requirements, those who declared FLSA, and those who did not. The four GI sessions were moderated by three tutors who were briefed so that they could facilitate discussions and approaches to mitigating FLSA.

2.3 Data analysis

Quantitative data focused on participants' synchronous and asynchronous online speaking practices, their feelings towards these, and potential FLSA mitigating strategies. All quantitative data were transferred to Excel to carry out calculations.

Qualitative data focused on exploration and testing of mitigating strategies of FLSA. The four GI sessions were transcribed to undergo template analysis, together with the qualitative questionnaire data. Template analysis is a form of "thematic analysis which emphasises the use of hierarchical coding but balances a relatively high degree of structure in the process of analysing textual data with the flexibility to adapt it to the needs of a particular study" (Brooks, McCluskey, Turley & King, 2015: 203). This method of data analysis was chosen for its ability to accommodate multiple interpretations (Madill, Jordan & Shirley, 2000) and predefine themes relevant to the study, which ensures consistency and rigour in data interpretation. We followed the six procedural steps recommended by King (2012): familiarisation with the data sets to be analysed, preliminary

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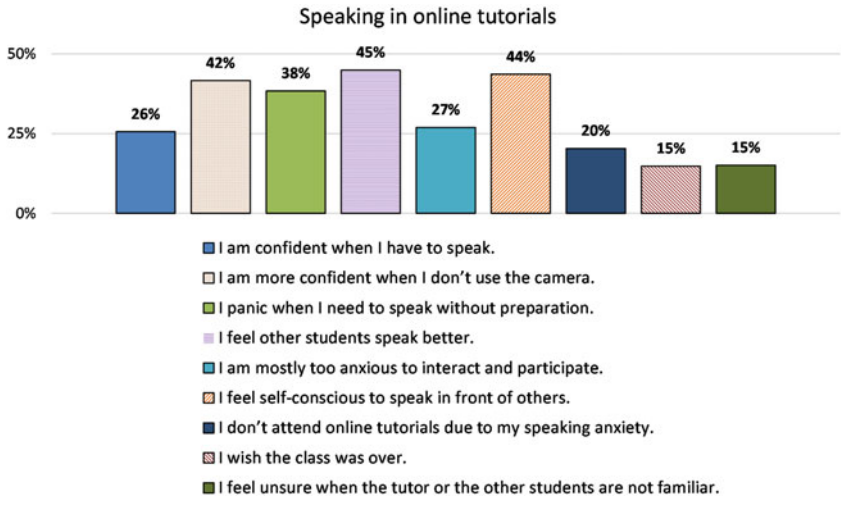

Figure 1. "Choose as many statements with regard to your speaking in online tutorials as apply" (multiple answers allowed; 305 students answered).

coding, organisation of emerging themes, development of an initial coding template, its application, and finalisation. All coding was carried out in NVivo 12.

3. Results

3.1 How do students encounter FLSA in the online classroom?

The first research question (RQ1) asked how students encounter FLSA in the synchronous online classroom. As shown in Figure 1, many of the perceived worries in the online classroom are very similar to those attested in the literature on FLSA in f2f classrooms, like general apprehension and lack of confidence when having to speak in the target language (TL), fear of having to speak spontaneously, fear of being judged, or perceiving that other students are more competent in the TL. While only a quarter of our students feel confident when having to speak, the same proportion of students are too anxious to interact and participate in the sessions, and one fifth choose not to attend at all because of their FLSA. Almost half of our participants are self-conscious about speaking in front of their peers and the tutor, and 38% panic when put on the spot.

3.1.1 Perception of self and others

Just as in the f2f classroom, students are afraid of being judged ("everyone else is judging me for my lack of Spanish"). Many students also report impostor syndrome, a phenomenon first described by Clance and Imes (1978) in high-achieving women. People struggling with impostor syndrome often have difficulty recognising their true competence. They tend to credit their success to external factors like luck or assistance from others, while interpreting setbacks as proof of their professional inadequacy. Thus, they continuously suffer from self-doubt and fear of being exposed as a fraud (for an overview, see Bravata *et al.*, 2020):

"I feel an absolute fraud"

"I feel like I shouldn't be here"

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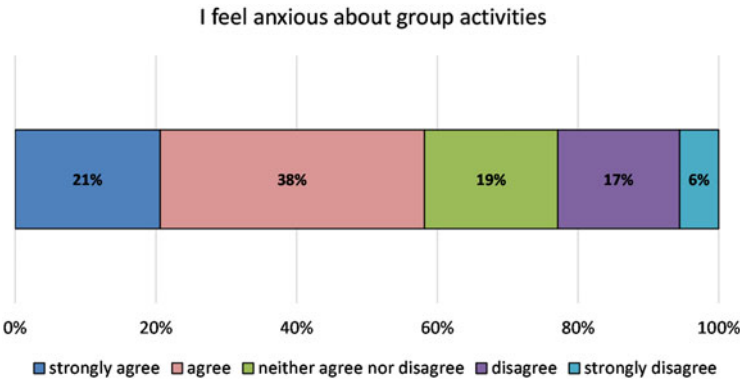

Figure 2. "Rank the following statement about your speaking practice: I feel anxious about group activities" (single choice, 307 answers)`.

> "it feels like it's cheating a little bit"

And a recurring worry is the perception that others have a much better linguistic competence:

> "I see that other students are speaking so well"

> "... I couldn't understand very much about what was being said and that made me feel pretty rubbish"

An interesting finding of this study is that some learners take the perception of others being better to the extreme and conclude that there are many native speaker students among them:

> "many, many people on my course are fluent, native Spanish speakers"

> "in my group I had native speakers, it did intimidate me slightly"

> "I think the majority of my group, well, at least half of it were mostly natives in my group."

> "... you're with [other students], oh, Spanish is my mother tongue, I've lived in Spain for a couple of years and I'm just brushing up."

Although the intensity of FLSA has not been measured in this study, this seems to corroborate earlier research that online learners also experience mid and high levels of anxiety.

3.1.2 Breakout rooms

Tutors frequently employ breakout rooms to encourage collaborative work online in small groups, provide peer-to-peer contact, and a safe space to maximise speaking opportunities for each student. Our data suggest that in the synchronous online context, one of the main triggers of FLSA are precisely breakout rooms. Close to 60% of our participants feel anxious about group activities in online tutorials (Figure 2).

Some say they do not attend tutorials because they don't want to work "in small groups with strangers". The feeling of others being more competent in the TL is also magnified in this context, as attested by these accounts:

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> "I feel as if [. . .] at least half the group have lived [in] the target language country. It is [. . .] very demoralizing for those who haven't."

> "If I'm in a breakout room with somebody who can speak exceptionally well [. . .] and it's their mother language [. . .] I just get left behind and lost and I don't particularly want to get involved as much either, I feel quite isolated quite quickly . . . "

When collaborating in small groups, some students fear not being able to understand what others say – that is, that their language level is inferior to that of their peers: " . . . there was an awful lot of new vocabulary so I couldn't understand very much about what was being said and that made me feel pretty rubbish". Another recurring issue is turn-taking in breakout rooms. On the one hand, students might perceive that someone dominates the conversation, or, on the other hand, that no one wants to speak or that the discussion simply does not flow:

> "It's stressful when you go into a breakout room and someone takes over the conversation and doesn't allow time to reply."

> "I feel that if I volunteer to speak too often, I will seem to be 'hogging' airtime."

> " . . . there's always like a little virtual dance almost of who's going to be the first one to speak and bite the bullet and practise first."

Although breakout rooms are not always perceived as negative, they seem to magnify emotions: "Breakout rooms can be either fantastic or awful, depending on who's in the breakout room with me." Some might feel relieved in the breakout room as they think they can ask for extra clarification, which they were too shy to do in the main room:

> "[. . .] we go into a breakout room and I relax a bit because I confess to my collaborators that actually, I didn't understand what are we doing and can I speak in English please."

> "I found that I, it was really good for me because I realised I wasn't alone in this awful place."

3.1.3 Use of cameras

For some students, navigating the technological affordances of online tutorials can be anxiety-inducing, as they need to be able to switch cameras and microphones on and off and understand how to write in the chat or on whiteboards. However, students seem divided on whether the use of cameras increases or decreases FLSA in online tutorials (Figure 1). This clearly reflects the tension between the lack of non-verbal cues, which might boost the feeling of isolation and being shielded by anonymity:

> "I'd prefer cameras to be on – I find speaking into the void very difficult even in my native language."

> "I think a smile, even online, might help people to feel more confident."

> "I would really dislike if there were cameras."

> "The fact that we don't have a camera, helps me so much as I don't feel as anxious when I have to put myself on the spot."

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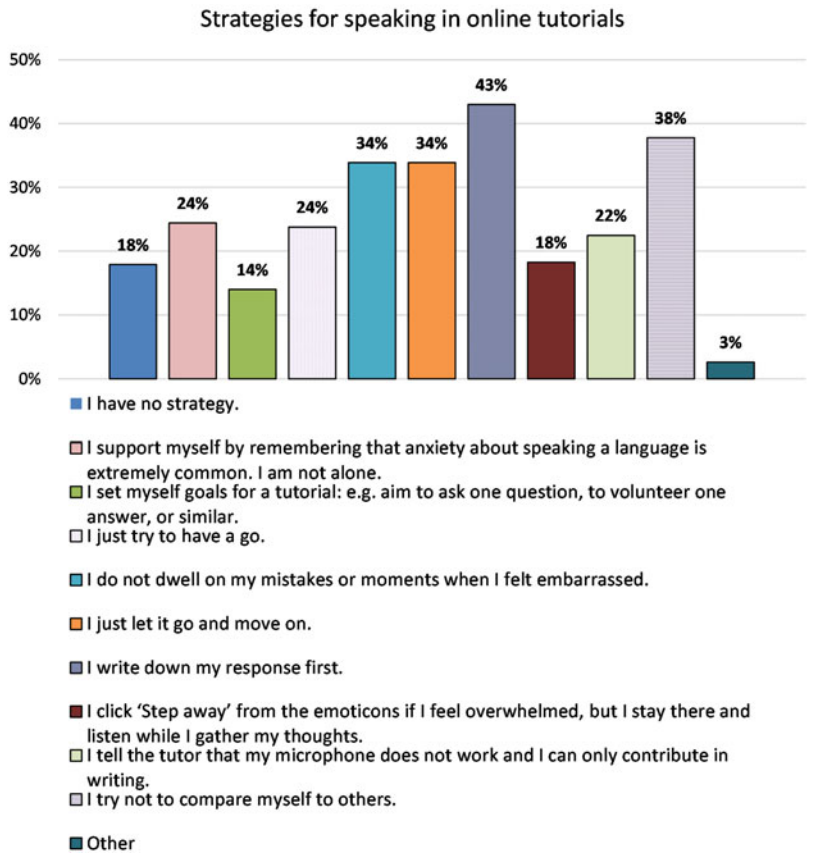

Figure 3. "Which of the following strategies do you use if you have to speak in tutorials? Please choose all that apply." (multiple choices; percentage of students, 307 responses).

3.2 What strategies do fully online language learners apply to overcome FLSA in synchronous tutorials?

Figure 3 gives a general overview of the strategies employed by the participants of this study to manage FLSA (RQ2). Although most of our participants experience FLSA when having to speak in online tutorials, as much as 18% claim not to have any strategy to overcome it. The most used strategy is to prepare for the spoken interaction in advance by writing down the response (43%) – that is, to avoid speaking spontaneously. Many students claim to apply self-talk to regulate their emotions and overcome their apprehension. Around 20% choose not to participate by clicking the "Step Away" button (in Adobe Connect) or saying that their microphone is not working.

The strategies that emerged from the qualitative data are in line with the quantitative findings and can be grouped into six broader topics.

3.2.1 Remembering vocabulary

A frequently mentioned worry is that learners do not know or cannot remember the right vocabulary, so many students say they have a word list or Post-it notes at hand with the words they might need:

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"in the moment not being able to think of the right word"

"I thought if I have a brainstorm of the topic, as well as the relevant vocabulary of the subject [. . .] I felt like I had more control of the conversation . . . "

Having an online dictionary or a machine translation tool open on their computer is also a common practice, but does not solve the fear of mispronouncing the words, in which case phonetic transcription might help: "I would have phonetically how to pronounce it next to it, which really helped." Another successful mitigating strategy employed by students here was translanguaging, as illustrated by this quote:

"So, I tried in the small breakout groups, (. . .) the technique of just saying the word I didn't know in English in order to keep the momentum going in what I was trying to say and that worked superbly well, because if there was somebody else that knew the word they just automatically told me what it was and if nobody did then everyone agreed they didn't know what it was and that made me feel quite good, so that helped."

3.2.2 Study tips

Our data confirm that students often feel that improving their knowledge in the TL boosts their confidence, so activities aiming to practise different linguistic subskills are perceived as efficient mitigating strategies. Most of the study tips participants shared refer to improving their pronunciation or fluency. Although pronunciation is generally not the main worry, it is often mentioned. Many participants claim to struggle with it and feel they "sound awkward". Linked to worries about "mispronouncing", they feel they might offend the tutor as they are "butchering the pronunciation [. . . of the tutor's] beautiful language". The study tips recommended include watching children's programmes in their TL, listening to and singing songs, or "talking to any inanimate object [. . .] vocalising your own internal dialogue".

Some students have one-to-one conversation partners or try to practise together. Watching recorded tutorials is also deemed to be a very useful language learning strategy and at the same time a mitigating strategy as they see how their peers work in synchronous tutorials. There is a common belief that the activities that take you "out of your comfort zone" are actually more beneficial than the activities students enjoy more, but there is an agreement that exercises should be meaningful:

"I don't join tutorials. I prefer to watch the recordings."

"I take more notice in things that I would use in my everyday life, so, for example, saying I'm an only child rather than talking about how many siblings I have, because I don't have siblings."

3.2.3 Help from tutor

Participants generally agreed that their tutors are helpful and encouraging. However, they think more preparation time should be given during speaking activities, especially "before going into a breakout room", or a guided preparation at the beginning of tutorials. Many would also appreciate more use of English from the tutor:

"I need help in translating this, I need to know what we're doing."

" . . . just getting a bit of clarity in English for those who are struggling."

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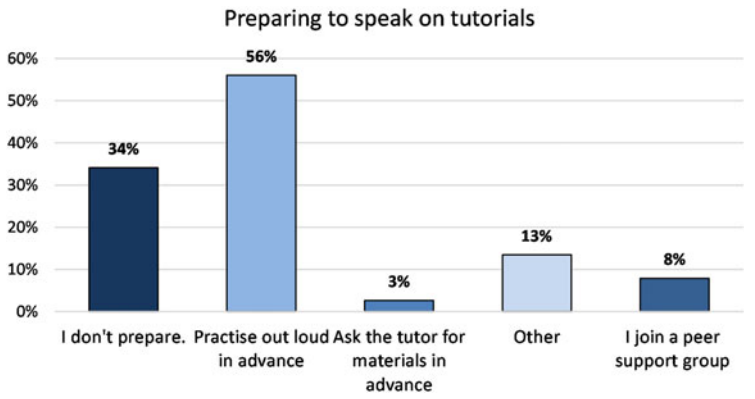

Figure 4. "How do you prepare for speaking in tutorials? Please choose all that apply." (multiple choices, 305 responses).

Also, they would like the tutor to encourage translanguaging when they "freeze and can't think of the right word".

3.2.4 Self-talk strategies

Most strategies in this group involve positive self-talk or a plan to try something new in the sessions:

> "So, it's really just that attitude of not being so afraid of something I actually want to do."
>
> "I have to remember [. . .] no one cares if we, or me personally doesn't remember a word or messes up pronunciation."
>
> "People are too busy mulling over the mistakes they made when speaking that they don't have time to think about the mistakes you made."
>
> " . . . maybe have a word with yourself and maybe recognise this is what you're feeling at the moment . . . "
>
> "I just gave myself a little talking to, just saying, why are you learning a language."
>
> "So, I decided, right, next lesson I'm going to ask something and I'm going to try and jump in with an answer."

Strategies used to alleviate panic are also seen as useful, like taking three deep breaths or forcing the brain to "[get] away from the frozen part" by thinking of something completely different like a phone number or postcode, or visualising themselves in a situation when they are speaking the language.

3.2.5 Preparation

A way to alleviate FLSA in the online tutorials is to prepare for attendance; some of these overlap with the "study tips" described in Section 3.2.2. Quantitative data show that while one third of the participants of this study do not prepare in advance (Figure 4), over half claim to practise out loud what they think might come up during the online session. It is interesting to note that very few students seek support from their peers (8%). On the one hand, students would like to practise with

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people who are not "better" – that is, of more or less their level. Despite this, they usually do not see each other as a resource for practice. On the other hand, they consider only native speakers are worth practising with: "I speak to two native German speakers each week". And although they expect help from their tutors, surprisingly only 3% actually turn to their tutors.

Others revise the materials in advance, if the tutor sends it to them, but would not ask for these; watching recorded tutorials is also a preferred mode of preparation (Section 3.2.2). Students are trying to find the strategy that works best for them. Some take private one-to-one classes or participate in a conversational exchange, but for many, the solution is not to attend tutorials: "I have not been attending live tutorials"; "I haven't done a tutorial" (see also Section 3.2.6).

3.2.6 Avoidance

Avoidance strategies can range from reluctance to speak spontaneously (i.e. preparing the oral interaction in advance), through unwillingness to speak in the tutorial, to completely avoiding synchronous tutorials. While some learners may be unwilling to speak, they can, for example, pretend that their microphone does not work and still fully participate in the activities, by interacting in writing in the chat. A step further is to avoid interaction (e.g. by clicking the "Step Away" button); that is, it appears to the tutor and other students as if they are not present, but they still take part in the session passively. This strategy is often advised to students with anxiety to attend tutorials to reap the other benefits of being present and to potentially become confident enough over time to fully participate. Note that these strategies are very specific to the online context.

3.3 What are students' speaking practices in asynchronous online language learning?

Finally, to respond to RQ3, asynchronous speaking practices have been analysed. While preparation practices also include asynchronous speaking, in this part we focus on how students work with the module materials and how they prepare for spoken assignments.

3.3.1 Strategies for module work

The proportion of students who claim not to engage with the listening and speaking activities at all during their module work is much lower than those who do not attend synchronous tutorials (Figure 5). The majority prefer working on speech perception by replaying the audio or using the transcript; fewer students are keen on practising speech production (speaking out loud; recording themselves).

Teaching materials are designed so that students can practise speaking autonomously. However, one third of our respondents rarely or never do the recording activities (Figure 6) and, out of those who do, one third rarely or never actually listen to their recording (Figure 7).

As for their feelings regarding the recording activities, about one third feel too anxious to record their answers (Figure 8) and about the same proportion feel confident not only to record but also to share their recordings with their fellow learners (Figure 9).

Independently of whether students do the asynchronous speaking activities or not, they dislike listening to their own voice (Figure 10).

3.3.2 Strategies for asynchronous work on assignments

A lot of students perceive speaking practice as something they do on their own. Even at home, they experience FLSA though and worry about being judged by family members or their tutor when recording themselves speaking:

"I won't do speaking practice with others but I'm fine on my own"

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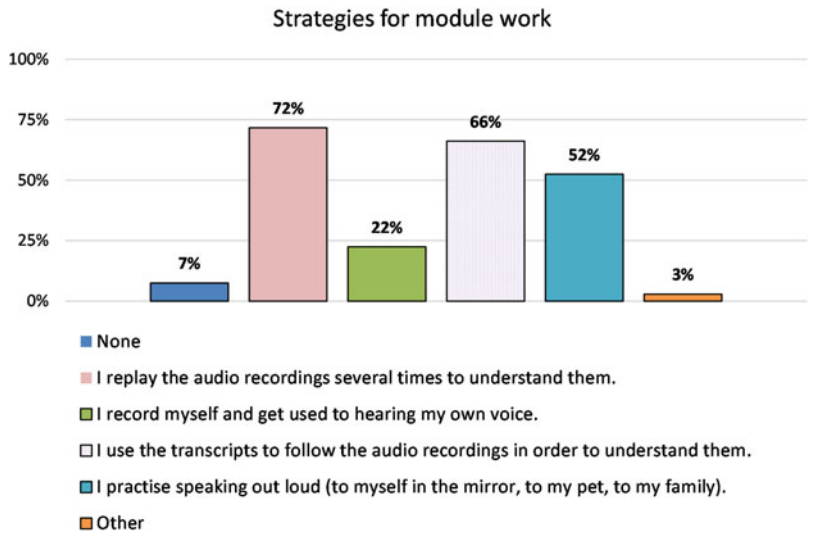

Figure 5. "Which of the following strategies do you use for your general module work? Please choose all that apply." (multiple choices, 307 responses).

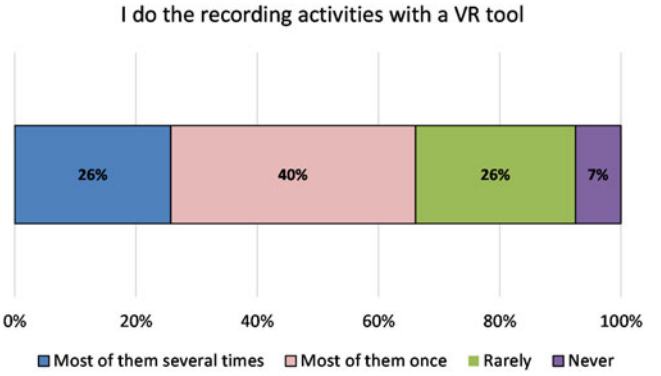

Figure 6. "I do the recording activities with a voice recording tool" (single choice, 307 responses).

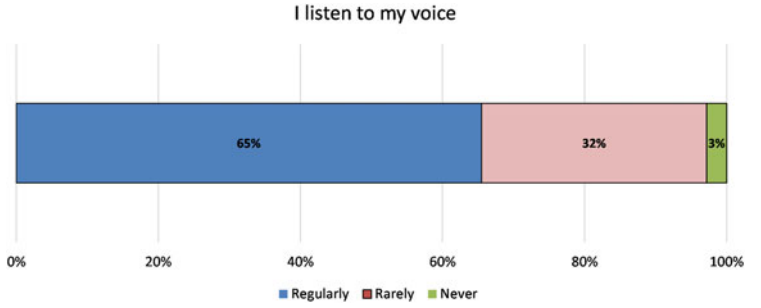

Figure 7. "When I do the recording activities, I listen to my voice" (single choice, 284 responses).

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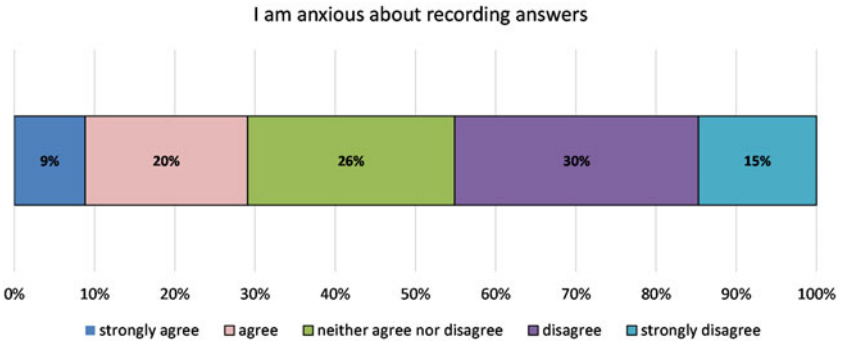

Figure 8. "Rank the following statement about your speaking practice: When working through module activities online I am anxious about recording answers" (single choice, 306 responses).

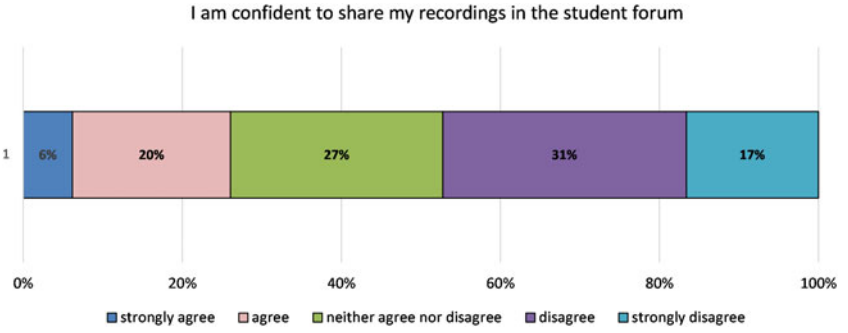

Figure 9. "Rank the following statement about your speaking practice: I am confident to share my recordings in the student forum" (single choice, 307 responses).

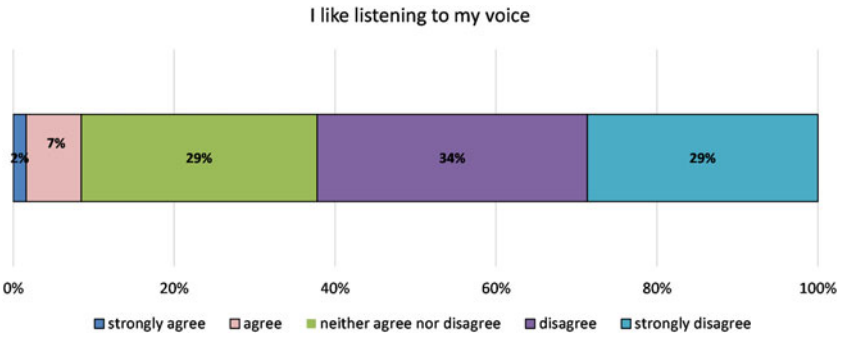

Figure 10. "Rank the following statement about your speaking practice: I like listening to my voice" (single choice, 307 responses).

"I go into a room by myself with the door closed and read through everything at a whisper . . . then I speak louder when I have to record"

"I get scared occasionally because I am afraid the tutor will find my recordings and listen to them"

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While some students connect to native speakers, friends, or peers, the value of tutorials to overcome lonely speaking situations is rarely mentioned.

Asynchronous preparation for tutor-marked assignments (TMAs) can also trigger FLSA, as students worry about their pronunciation, confidence, language ability, and often do not like hearing their own voice:

> "I feel nervous and anxious when taking part in group activities and TMA speaking. I worry about my pronunciation and do not feel confident."

> "I only tend to record my voice for listening assignments and tend to do them in one take to minimise the amount I have to speak"

> "I will regularly practise using the TMA recording tool to familiarise myself with having to hear my own voice and speak confidently. I find that I often get anxious to the point that I forget what I'm saying and have to type out the entirety of what I want to say on the screen in front of me to remember, but then I sound robotic and unnatural in conversation."

4. Discussion

Our results, on the one hand, align with previous research on mitigating strategies in the in-person classroom (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004), as preparation, positive thinking, but also resignation are frequently used strategies by our participants. On the other hand, the study reveals several new insights into speaking practices and mitigating strategies linked to FLSA in online and distance language learning.

4.1 Transitioning into breakout rooms: "A little virtual dance" begins

Researchers agree that the breakout room facility is invaluable, as it enhances collaborative learning (e.g. Bastos, 2022) and allows students to develop and apply their understanding of concepts that were explained in the main room (Tutton & Cohen, 2024). In breakout rooms they can also raise questions or concerns with peers that they may have kept quiet about in the main online tutorial room (see Chandler, 2016; Tonsmann, 2014). Thus, breakout rooms can empower students. A novel finding of our research was that in the synchronous online context, one of the main triggers of FLSA are precisely breakout rooms.

Tutors can create a structured and mostly predictable learning space by managing conversational turns in the main online tutorial room and ensuring each student can get similar speaking time. This can create a false sense of security and lead students to expect that they do not need to initiate interactions themselves in online tutorials. Muñoz-Basols, Fuertes Gutiérrez, Strawbridge and Acosta Ortega (2023), investigating the interaction in online coursework, concluded that student interaction and participation were overwhelmingly initiated by the instructors present. However, management of turn-taking in breakout rooms, with the tutor typically not present, becomes the joint responsibility of the breakout room participants, and assuming such agency can result in uneven, and anxiety-inducing, conversations where efficient learning might depend on others. The breakout room space can then appear unstructured, unpredictable, and out of the student's control. Hilliard, Kear, Donelan and Heaney (2020) also confirm that the major cause of anxiety for students in an online collaborative project in a computing module were feelings of uncertainty. Navigating this space with other students can be a little virtual dance, where no one can predict who will lead or follow, which steps are next, and which direction the conversation may take.

Furthermore, students cannot hide as easily behind their computers as in the main room, which means they might not be able to apply the same mitigating strategies either. It might be

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more embarrassing in this space not to activate the camera or choose not to activate their microphones and in this way use technology as a way of opting out of contributing. The fear of group work may result in students leaving the tutorial or deciding not to engage in language activities in the breakout room. Topalov, Knežević and Halupka-Rešetar (2023) concluded that the highest levels of anxiety were found where students took part in lessons by means of a camera and recommended that video communication should be reserved for small group discussions or pair work. Our data show that the use of cameras is not so straightforward in breakout rooms either, and students might prefer shielding even if it means feeling more isolated. It has been shown that viewing oneself during synchronous online sessions might increase appearance anxiety and lead to a decrease in learning (Tien, Imundo & Bjork, 2023), while "Zoom fatigue" can also increase when cameras are used. Fauville *et al.* (2023) report that people online might feel that they are constantly watched so they must continuously produce nonverbal cues, besides having to constantly monitor others' nonverbal cues. In their study, women are more likely to experience nonverbal overload than men. As generally the majority of language learners are female (72.3% of our respondents identified as female), the aversion towards the use of cameras found in this study might be worse than in other disciplines. Apart from this, for some learners, simply navigating the technological affordances of online tutorials can be anxiety-inducing, as they need to be able to interact with their peers and tutor through the use of cameras and microphones, as well as engaging through emoticons and writing in text chat or on whiteboards, and this can amplify FLSA.

Both the lack of direct physical contact with peers and limited visual cues result in lower levels of social cohesion. It has been noted that students may find breakout rooms far more demanding than working f2f (Peacock *et al.*, 2012). In addition, comparing yourself to other students' perceived levels of competence and confidence of speaking in the TL can invoke FLSA, and the work in small groups in breakout rooms can then distort these perceptions and accompanying emotions so much so that all the peers appear to be much better.

Hence, careful scaffolding is needed to enable a successful transition from main room to breakout room. Ensuring students know exactly what they are expected to do and how to go about it, including accompanying instructions in breakout rooms, can alleviate some fears during this transition. Douglas (2023) warns that there is often a gap between what tutors regard as clear task setting and efficient breakout room management and how students perceive it. We found that the use of English by the tutor and with peers might be helpful in the transition process. Despite the widely held belief that in the foreign language classroom the TL should be used exclusively or almost exclusively, research on the applications of pedagogical translanguaging that challenges this starts to emerge (e.g. Adinolfi & Astruc, 2017). The online context requires more explicit instructions and more scaffolding in student–student interactions. Translanguaging might be an efficient means to prevent communication breakdowns and achieve successful meaning-making when the adequate vocabulary is not available. This can involve the tutor explaining the task in English, and students asking for clarification and confirming their understanding in English. Or it can be just slipping in the odd word in English to ensure clarity or to keep the communication going. Our observations corroborate Back, Han and Weng's (2020) assertion that translanguaging can prove useful for effectively managing participants' emotions in situations involving homogeneous groups. It can also be used to build rapport with peers and thus increase social support, which is important for anxious learners (Tutton & Cohen, 2024). Interestingly, the social aspect of translanguaging was only marginally mentioned by the participants of this study.

Allowing some time for silent preparation before students go into breakout rooms might also help effective small group work. Yamagata-Lynch (2014) points out that tutors should consider carefully the allocation of students to groups and providing a structured framework for the time spent in breakout rooms. In the context of the OU, tutors will not know all the students attending their sessions, and this will impact their ability to devise appropriate groupings for breakout rooms.

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4.2 Vicarious learning

Although it is well attested in the literature that students need a learning community to thrive (e.g. Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem & Stevens, 2012), and that social connections might help to mitigate anxiety (e.g. McLean, Asnaani, Litz & Hofmann, 2011), in the present research participants sought support from their peers only to a very limited extent. This is probably a direct result of the settings this research was conducted in, namely, that tutorial attendance is optional, so students might end up with a different tutor and different group of students every time, thus it is harder to build relationships and develop a learning community. Since a widely used preparation technique was to watch recorded tutorials, it might be a way to develop the feeling of belonging to the learning community.

While the results regarding the benefits of recorded university lectures are somewhat contradictory (see Pleines, 2020, for a review), Pleines (2020) shows that, in contrast to the f2f classroom, in online and distance learning environments students who attend more live online sessions also access more recordings. She also found a significant positive correlation between the use of recordings and assessment grades, which is due to deeper engagement with the course. We conclude that vicarious learning is an effective FLSA mitigating strategy for our learners and there might be various reasons behind it. Recordings serve as a language practice resource to consolidate knowledge that students can use when they want to. They allow focus on linguistic forms and interactions in a low-stakes context. Literature shows that engagement with a variety of perspectives – in this case, offered by different tutors and their peers – can lead to deeper learning (Mayes, 2015). It also allows students to see that their peers have similar concerns and that they are not alone with their worries, which might reduce their feelings of isolation. The importance of role models in language learning has been long acknowledged (e.g. Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2013), which vicarious learning can provide. Our participants are used to learning alone and often prefer this mode of study. Still, recordings may help them position themselves within the group and strengthen their belief in accomplishing similar tasks. As Mills (2014) notes, seeing the accomplishments of peers can boost self-efficacy beliefs. Vicarious learning and certain avoidance strategies are the two sides of the same coin. Similar to watching recorded tutorials, clicking the "Step Away" button to indicate to other participants that you are not currently at your computer or unable to participate means opting out of contributing actively, but still allows students to be present and listen to the tutorial – that is to say, stay engaged.

5. Conclusions, limitations, and lines of future research

This study aimed to contribute to the limited literature on FLSA in the online learning context. Although the OU is a specific context, online collaborative components are increasingly included in higher education (language) learning in the post-COVID-19 era, and, as Gourlay (2021) notes, higher education institutions in the UK have prioritised boosting digital education. Institutions aim to provide learners with meaningful online educational experiences, including the development of a variety of 21st-century employability skills, such as remote teamwork abilities. Thus, our findings are transferable to other online learning contexts like MOOCs and to the initial phases of courses where students do not yet know each other.

Our results show that although most learners feel anxious, not all of them have mitigating strategies in place. Additional practice, various preparation techniques, and the use of technology were the strategies most commonly mentioned alongside different aspects of avoidance. Heightened anxieties around transitioning into small group work in breakout rooms and the need for their effective management were noted.

The study is not exempt from limitations. It is crucial to acknowledge that students who experience FLSA were probably more inclined to respond to the questionnaire. Consequently, any interpretation of the data should consider this potential bias.

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Breakout rooms remain under-researched, and future studies might consider investigating the transition from main room to breakout rooms more closely, as well as the interaction and participation in breakout room work. Specifically, more research on the following avenues might be fruitful:

1. How can tutors manage the transition into breakout rooms more effectively? How can they ensure that breakout rooms are perceived as safe and predictable spaces that students can manoeuvre together and without a tutor present? It would be valuable to explore, for example, whether introductory icebreaker activities before a tutorial, such as video introductions, might benefit group members in getting to know each other before meeting synchronously online, or whether the asynchronous nature of these create further obstacles for students. In addition, further research is needed on how an inclusive "cyberculture" that develops all students' sense of belonging (Liasidou, 2023) can be fostered and which allows everyone to recognise that making mistakes is part of the learning process.
2. How do interactions and collaborations develop in breakout rooms, and how are they affected by FLSA? How can tutors sensitise students to and prepare them for a different kind of interaction and collaboration in breakout rooms? Allowing the chat option in breakout rooms is a recognised way of reducing anxiety levels (Namaziandost, Razmi, Hernández, Ocaña-Fernández & Khabir, 2022) and is felt to be a safer environment that enhances students' willingness to communicate and as such fosters interaction in the TL, as shown by Freiermuth and Jarrell (2006). It would be helpful to investigate further when to use chat or microphone, and whether to use them concurrently or successively.
3. How do students move from passive to active participation in breakout rooms, and how can tutors facilitate this? Participation is recognised as one key to success in breakout rooms, but it is variable. Tutors setting clear tasks for breakout rooms and visiting them regularly have been recognised as effective ways to facilitate breakout rooms (Douglas, 2023), but we need to explore other aspects that impact student participation in breakout rooms as well to ensure students can take more control over the situation.

The recent emergence and rapid expansion of positive psychology in L2 education might provide new angles to the investigation of breakout rooms by strengthening our understanding of factors such as emotion regulation, resilience, and grit (Derakhshan, 2022). Educators may leverage these insights to ease students' transition from main room to breakout rooms, ensuring that they not only manage FLSA effectively but also feel prepared for a little virtual dance in these virtual spaces.

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