Exploring foreign language anxiety and self-disclosure relationships in task design for e-tandem speaking practice

Marta Fondo[1] and Iker Erdocia[2]

Abstract. The emergence of videoconferencing tools in the 1990s provided language learners with opportunities to carry out speaking practice anytime and anywhere. However, the presence of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) in this interactional setting can hinder such ubiquitous benefits as FLA inhibits learning and communication in the Foreign Language (FL) (Horwitz, 2001). This article presents a case study developed in a five week e-tandem project in which 12 language learners (six Spanish and six English native speakers) participated via videoconference. Based on a mixed methods approach, the study explores the relationship between four different communicative task types with different levels of required Self-Disclosure (SD), the participants' levels of SD and FLA, and the resulting SD elements present in the conversation. Results showed that the different task types seem to have an effect on participants linking FLA and SD. However, the real trigger for SD events was not the task but the learner's characteristics and familiarity with the partner and topic.

Keywords: FLA, self-disclosure, e-tandem, communicative tasks.

1.   Introduction

With web 2.0 communication tools, new opportunities for language practice were opened up as, for instance, e-tandem, the online equivalent of 'tandem language learning'. E-tandem provides FL learners with online speaking practice with native/near-native speakers of the target language and culture. However, learners

usually interact one-on-one with no teacher assistance, so supporting this speaking practice with communicative tasks is recommended to guide the conversation and foster FL skills development. Often, speaking practice activities and tasks invite learners to use themselves as a conversational topic, presenting themselves and sharing personal information. Since FLA is considered more an identity-based than a linguistic construct (Alrabai, 2015), self-consciousness and fear of negative evaluation, two FLA factors (Yon Yim, 2014), can be triggered by SD events increasing learners' FLA levels. As, to our knowledge, SD and FLA have not been jointly explored so far and their study requires a multilevel approach from the individual (learner) to the context (tasks). Analysing not only task compositions and effects, but also participants' profiles and perceptions in order to understand how all the elements interplay. Hence, this study aims to explore to what extent SD and FLA factors are linked in speaking practice and, in more detail, what is the relationship between task types, SD elements, and FLA levels.

2.   Method

The study took place on the *SpeaQ With Me* platform, a free social networking and language exchange service through video conference and text chat. A total of 61 users were contacted on the platform, 14 learners of English and 47 learners of Spanish. The selection was done by the level of English and Spanish, native or near-native, and an intermediate level of the target language. Due to the low activity of users on the platform, a call for participation among colleagues at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya learning FLs was needed to complete the 12 required participants. The five-week project counted on nine active participants who interacted on the platform carrying out five sessions with four different task types in the spring of 2017. Participants were paired up with different partners weekly.

The present case study is based on a mixed-methods approach. Participants answered two different questionnaires before starting the interactions. The first one measured their FLA levels in an e-tandem setting, the *E-Tandem Foreign Language Anxiety Questionnaire* (ETFLAQ), specially tailored for the study. The second one measured their SD levels (Magno, Cuason, & Figueroa, 2008) in order to explore if FLA and SD could be related as personality traits. After each session, participants answered a Task Evaluation Questionnaire (TEQ) to explore the level of required SD perceived by the learners, the effect of the topic (depth-breadth SD), and the possible effect on their FLA levels. Due to technical problems, the TEQ could not be answered by all the participants after every interaction. Hence, a complementary

questionnaire was sent by email at the end of the project aiming to explore the participants' perception of the different task types regarding SD and FLA. As a means to better understand the participants' perception of SD, FLA, speaking practice, and communicative tasks, online semi-structured interviews (N=4) and a focus group (N=4) were carried out by the main researcher. Interactions were audio recorded and shared with the researchers for observation. Interviews and focus group notes taken by the researcher, as well as partial transcription, was done transcribing the pieces of the discourse relevant for the study after two rounds of observation. The same partial transcription process was applied in the observations in which discourse elements regarding FLA and SD were transcribed and categorised for analysis.

3.   Results

3.1.   FLA and SD potential relationship

The first exploration was to measure participants' FLA and SD levels in order to find FLA and SD relationships on an individual level. As the sample was not sufficient to carry out statistical analysis (for statistical results about SD and FLA as personality traits please see Fondo, Jacobetty, & Erdocia, 2018), the levels of each construct were compared (Table 1). Unexpectedly, three out of four anxious participants were also high self-disclosers.

Table 1.   Participants' FLA and SD levels

Participants	ETFLAQ (Anxious > 54)*	SD scale (self-disclosers >150)*
PSE1	24	146
PSE2	24	133
PSS3	73*	167*
PSS3	75*	203*
PSS1	50	157*
PSS5	59*	182*
PSS2	23	163*
PSS7	32	189*
PSE13	93*	139

Results from the qualitative data analysis show a relationship between constructs, as different factors of FLA and SD elements influence each other during the

speaking practice (Table 2), which also supports FLA and SD link at individual levels (Table 1).

Table 2. Common factors found between FLA and SD

Statements by participants	Observed in interaction	FLA and SD potential relationship
When I get nervous I talk more about myself.	Pairs who did not know each other talk about themselves.	Anxiety triggers self-disclosure
Talking about familiar topics like my family makes me feel more comfortable.	Participants tend to adapt the topic or aim of the task to their interest and knowledge.	Familiar topics do not trigger FLA.
I can disclose information about what I do or have feeling comfortable.	Participants talk about common and general topics.	Breadth self-disclosure does not trigger FLA.
I do not feel comfortable talking about feelings and relationships.	Participants did not develop deep SD.	Deep SD triggers FLA.

3.2. The tasks

Four different communicative task types (spot the difference, role-play, problem-solving, and opinion-exchange) and a free-talk session (without task) were used for the study. The preferred task by anxious learners to meet a person online for the first time was *spot the difference*, and less anxious learners, on the contrary, liked the free-talk session more. Decision-making and free-talk were marked as most anxiety provoking. In addition, participants in the interviews and focus group agreed on the benefits of having a task as guidance for carrying out the speaking practice. They indicated to feel more comfortable in *role-playing* as they do not act as themselves, and in the *spot the difference* tasks if they know the necessary vocabulary.

4. Discussion

From participants' performance observation, tasks did not seem to have a direct effect on triggering SD besides the opinion exchange tasks. The triggering element in all the cases in this study was the fact that participants were interacting for the first time and, surprisingly, had higher levels of FLA. Participants who knew each other beforehand just carried out the task with no presence of explicit self-disclosure elements. Participants preferred breadth self-disclosure and felt more comfortable talking about topics that were familiar to them. None of the observations found any

SD element regarding feelings, difficult situations, or personal relationships. On the contrary, participants openly shared their opinions and daily life activities. This could be an indicator that tasks with familiar topics in breadth levels of required SD could be positive to reduce anxiety in interaction during FL speaking practice. In summary, the results linking FLA and SD from observation, interviews, and focus group data (Table 2), and the ones expressed by the learners through the TEQs, seem to be consistent.

5.   Conclusion

First hints seem to link FLA and SD at individual levels as anxious non-native speakers expressed that they tend to start 'over talking' about themselves as a means to mitigate FLA. This is supported also by the relation found between FLA and SD participants' levels (three out of four anxious participants were also high self-disclosers). Results also highlight the importance of the topic and partner beyond the effect of different task types. This first exploratory analysis of the relationship between FLA and SD in e-tandem speaking practice sets the starting point for further research on the elements analysed in this study at individual, contextual, and interactional levels. More consistent and valid results are needed to better inform FL teachers and task designers of the effect of SD on FLA in FL speaking practice.

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