

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety - PRAXIS Project Report

Other

How to cite:

Barkanyi, Zsuzsanna; Brash, Baerbel and Kotschi, Susan (2022). Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety - PRAXIS Project Report. The Open University.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© [\[not recorded\]](#)

Version: Version of Record

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's [data policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk



PRAXIS Scholarship Research Full Project Report Form – 1 Year Term

1. Project Details

Project title:	Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety		
Project number:	PRAXIS 2021/22 19 ZB		
Project lead name:	Zsuzsanna Bárkányi		
Project start date:	22 November 2021	Project end date:	31 July 2022
Date of project approval:	4 November 2021	Date of full project report:	23 September 2022
Final project summary:			
<i>This should be only 2 or 3 sentences and will be shared on both the PRAXIS internal intranet and external website</i>			
<p>In online and distance learning contexts, students with and without mental health issues worry to the same extent when they have to speak in a foreign language, however, their main fears are different. Students with mental health issues fear that their self-image is threatened, while students with no such conditions are worried about their inadequate knowledge and performance in the target language. Mitigating strategies that students apply to cope with Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) can be grouped into three categories: (i) skills-oriented strategies; (ii) general strategies in the online and distance learning context; and (iii) self-talk strategies.</p>			
Research questions:			
<i>These will be shared on both the PRAXIS internal intranet and external website</i>			
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the main worries of our students when speaking a foreign language in general and communicating in synchronous online tutorials and asynchronous speaking activities? 2. To what extent do age/level of study/languages spoken and mental health conditions impact on FLSA? 3. What individual strategies and interventions work to mitigate FLSA? 			

2. Project Team Details

Please add more members if required.

Project member 1:	Full name	Role/responsibilities within project
	Dr Zsuzsanna Bárkányi	Project lead

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project administration (ethics, SRPP, reports) • Brief ALs • Undertake literature review • Lead data collection and analysis • Disseminate results 		
	Job title	AL?	External contractor?	No. of research/ study days
	Lecturer in Spanish	Y/ <u>N</u>	Y/ <u>N</u>	14
Project member 2:	Full name	Role/responsibilities within project		
	Bärbel Brash	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback on project reports • Brief Als • Data analysis • Disseminate results 		
	Job title	AL?	External contractor?	No. of research/ study days
	Staff Tutor	Y/ <u>N</u>	Y/ <u>N</u>	5
Project member 3:	Full name	Role/responsibilities within project		
	Susan Kotchi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback on project reports • Brief Als • Data analysis • Disseminate results 		
	Job title	AL?	External contractor?	No. of research/ study days
	Staff Tutor	Y/ <u>N</u>	Y/ <u>N</u>	8
Project member 4:	Full name	Role/responsibilities within project		
	Sarah Aldred	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead Focus Group sessions • Participate in final FG 		
	Job title	AL?	External contractor?	No. of research/ study days
	Tutor for L194 and L116	<u>Y</u> /N	Y/N	3
Project member 5:	Full name	Role/responsibilities within project		
	Palma Mackenzie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead Focus Group sessions • Participate in final FG 		
	Job title	AL?	External contractor?	No. of research/ study days

	Tutor for L194, L116 and L226	<u>Y</u> /N	Y/N	3
Project member 6:	Full name	Role/responsibilities within project		
	Dr Laura Puente Martín	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead Focus Group sessions • Participate in final FG 		
	Job title	AL?	External contractor?	No. of research/study days
	Tutor for L194, L116 and L161	<u>Y</u> /N	Y/ <u>N</u>	3

3. Project Report

1. Abstract

The present research aims to examine the role of learner age and mental health conditions on Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) by answering three research questions: (i) what the main worries of our students are when speaking a foreign language in general and communicating in synchronous online tutorials and asynchronous speaking activities; (ii) to what extent age/level of study/languages spoken and mental health conditions impact on FLSA; and (iii) what individual strategies and interventions work to mitigate FLSA. A mixed methods research design used quantitative and qualitative data gathered from self-reflective questionnaires with closed and open-ended questions and focus groups sessions with students and tutors. Our preliminary results reveal that the main fears for students with declared mental health conditions (MH) differ from those students who have no additional requirements (NR), although both groups experience FLSA to the same extent. While MH students feel that their self-image is threatened when they have to speak in their target language, NR students are more worried about inadequate performance when speaking in the target language. FLSA and the main worries do not seem to be related to age. Although spoken interactions are not face-to-face in this learning context, apprehension and anxiety prevent many students from fully participating in tutorials as well as asynchronous speaking activities. Furthermore, false beliefs about the value (or lack of it) of non-native speakers and peers deprive students from valuable oral practice.

2. Literature review

Oral communication is often viewed as the ultimate goal in foreign language (FL) education. Speaking a FL, however, can be a very exposing and intimidating task and the importance of affective factors such as anxiety, self-esteem and motivation has long been acknowledged (e.g. Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Dörnyei, 1990; Jung & McCrosky, 2004). Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) a term coined by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) has been described as a very common phenomenon among language learners. The term *anxiety* in psychology is defined as the “subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (Spielberger, 1983: 15). Spielberger (1983) distinguishes between “trait anxiety” which is defined as the individual’s likelihood of becoming anxious in any situation and “state anxiety” experienced by an individual as a reaction to a specific situation. In language learning, however, a third type of anxiety is defined: “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986: 128). Several instruments have been designed to measure FLA such as Attitudes and Motivation Test Battery (Gardner, Clément, Smythe & Smythe, 1979), and Language Class Discomfort (Ely, 1986). Furthermore, MacIntyre and Gardner’s (1994) Input, Processing and Output Anxiety Scales aimed to measure anxiety at different phases of language learning. The most widely used instrument is Horwitz *et al.*’s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS); it has been used to investigate the reliability and validity of the measure, to successfully test various psychometric properties in the classroom and to assess the effect of FLA on acquisition and performance. Most studies discussing FLA report on its negative effects on language learners in terms of the learning process (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Steinberg & Horwitz, 1986) and assessment results (Zhao, Guo &

Dynia, 2013; Zhang, 2013, just to mention a few).

Research on FLA has investigated its role on the development of different skills: reading (Lee, 1999; Zhao *et al.*, 2013); writing (Leki, 1999; Abdel Latif, 2015); listening (Elkhafaifi, 2005) and speaking (Koch & Terrell, 1991; Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009; Çağatay, 2015). Any of these skills may trigger FLA. However, reading seems to be the least anxiety provoking skill while speaking is the most anxiety provoking activity (Young, 1992). Factor analysis of FLCAS reveals that the most significant triggers of FLA are fear of making mistakes / fear of inadequate performance; fear of negative evaluation; general speech anxiety / fear of speaking spontaneously / understanding and communication apprehension (Young, 1990; Aida, 1994; Tóth, 2008; Mak, 2011; Park 2014). Thus, it is not surprising that researchers and educators have been focusing on tools and strategies to create low anxiety classrooms and to help students overcome these obstacles and improve their speaking skills.

However, very few studies examine FLA, and even less speaking anxiety, in the context of online learning, and almost all are carried out with adolescents and young adults. Russell (2020) as a response to Covid19, focuses on techniques to support online language learners to feel less isolated and less anxious in general. Bárkányi (2018 and 2021) explores speaking anxiety in non-formal online education on Language MOOCs and concludes that FLSA can be inhibitory even in the context of LMOOCs. Martin and Alvarez Valdivia (2017) study the relationship between the type of corrective feedback and speaking anxiety in online synchronous oral tasks. The authors show that anxious students appreciate teacher feedback more and prefer less explicit types of correction. Melchor-Couto (2017) tries to link FLA to other personality traits, but her results are inconclusive due to lack of sufficient data. She argues, though, that anonymity provided in a virtual world learning environment helps to reduce anxiety at the beginning of the course and it is beneficial for instigating oral interaction. Other researchers, however, show that the lack of body language and visual information may in itself cause anxiety, which can be aggravated by anxiety related to the use of technology (Hampel, Felix, Hauck & Coleman, 2005). De los Arcos, Coleman and Hampel (2009) conclude that actually both a facilitating and a hindering effect are possible in computer-mediated contexts.

The majority of studies on anxiety in speaking do not test empirically whether the suggested mitigating strategies are effective or not. A notable exception is He (2017) whose findings are based on data from over 300 Chinese students of English. The author prepared a list of strategies to alleviate anxiety when speaking during the learning process. Some of the strategies are directed at the teacher, others at the student, and some at both. Our focus group discussions and tutor briefings draw on He's research adapted to the distance learning context.

3. Methodology

The project aims to contribute to the limited research on FLSA in online and distance learning, so we intended to explore the patterns and relations between FLSA mental health conditions and age as well as get an in-depth insight into the nature of students' fears and the coping strategies students apply. For this reason, we employed a mixed methodology: quantitative and qualitative data were collected via surveys and focus groups.

In order to identify the main causes and to catch students' views on their fear to speak a foreign language and to determine the correlations between the speaking situation, demographic features, linguistic and personal variables, a questionnaire with closed and open questions was administered on JISC Surveys. In this way with little effort and a low participation threshold enough data can be gathered to carry out inferential statistical analysis. 1000 OU languages students were invited to participate, we had a surprisingly high response rate (307 responses) also indicating how topical the project is.

In the design we drew upon data from earlier events. According to the Student Support Team, the second most common reason (after change in personal circumstances) for deferring from a language module is lack of confidence and subject-specific anxiety. For this reason, in the previous academic year, members of the present project team organised an online Student Event "Feel the fear and do it anyway!" which was so popular and well-attended that a second event had to be organised where students shared their attitude and main worries with regard to speaking in their target language (TL).

The four Focus Group sessions with students had a coaching approach, i.e. they were solution-focused rather than problem-focused by building on strength and finding positive ways forward often through scenarios, but in the meantime this allowed us to identify and examine problems and barriers as well. Session 1 focused on what FLA means for students and whether it affects them. They also identified a strategy they would try out. Session 2 analysed the strategies they tried and evaluated whether they worked. Session 3 focused on environments (synchronous, asynchronous, cultural differences, etc.), mind sets and enjoyment in language learning as well as the specific triggers of FLSA in students' learning journey (e.g. tutorials, spoken TMA, residential schools). Lastly, Session 4 focused on the types of activities students find easier or more difficult (e.g. grammar exercises, pronunciation practice), the ways of working in synchronous online tutorials and the use of other resources, especially social media, for asynchronous language learning. In the final Focus Group session, tutors reported on their insights and reflected on how they changed certain practices as a result of their participation in the project.

4. Findings

As a data collection finished in August only and a wealth of data has been gathered full data analysis will take several months and will be disseminated at conferences and in peer-reviewed publications.

The Open University has a growing number of students who struggle with mental health issues, for this reason it is imperative that we find out how these impact on their learning, and what solutions can be integrated into our module presentations. Respondents were asked whether they had any additional requirements that may impact on their study (such as depression, anxiety, dyslexia, mobility issues, etc.). On the basis of this, respondents were assigned into five groups: students with (i) mental health conditions (e.g. depression, anxiety, affective disorder, schizophrenia, etc.); (ii) mobility issues (e.g. wheelchair user, back pain, etc.); (iii) developmental issues (e.g. dyslexia); (iv) other (e.g. "awaiting eye surgery", "I'm a single mum with two young children"); (v) No such requirements. (See Figure 1).

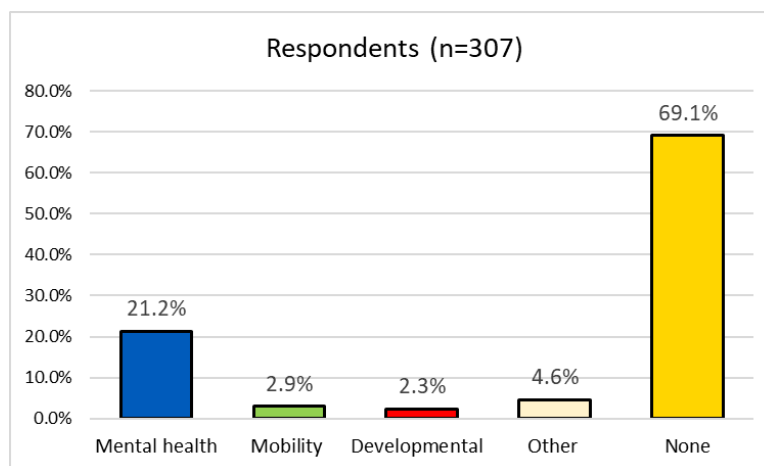


Figure 1 Requirements that impact on students' learning.

In the quantitative analysis that follows we are comparing the two largest groups, namely student with mental health issues (MH) and students with no declared additional requirements (NR) with regard to their main worry when having to speak in their TL. Contrary to our expectations, both groups experience FLSA to the same extent (Figure 2).

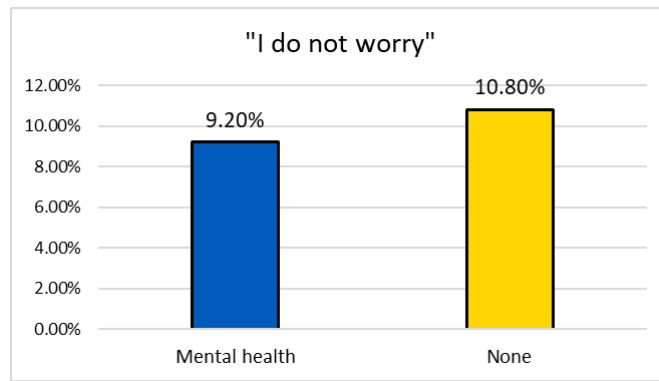


Figure 2 Proportion of students not experiencing FLSA.

The leading cause for worry in both groups is not to remember the vocabulary they know (MH: 18.5%; NR: 20.8%). We might assume that this is because our cohorts are typically older than students at a “brick” university. This however, again contrary to our expectations, does not seem to be the case, actually younger learners (aged 21-29: 25%) are slightly more worried about not remembering the right vocabulary than mature learners (aged 60-69: 16%).

For students with no additional requirements, it is twice as likely that the main worry refers to their knowledge of the target language (Figures 3 and 4). On the other hand, students with declared mental health issues are more likely to fear situations when their self-image/self-esteem is threatened (Figures 5 and 6).

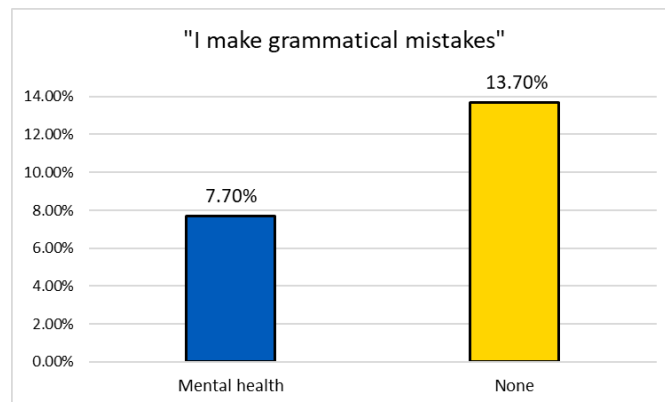


Figure 3

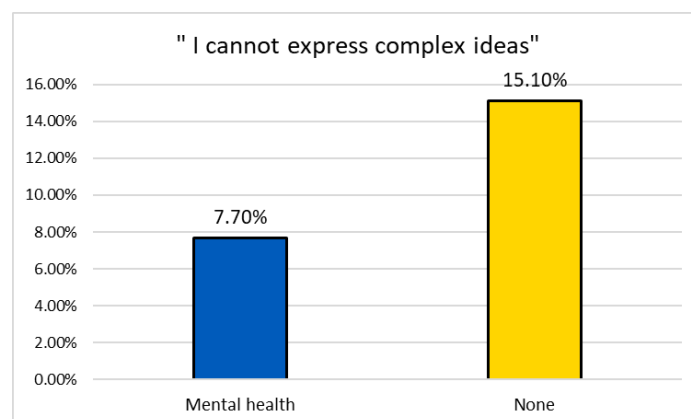


Figure 4

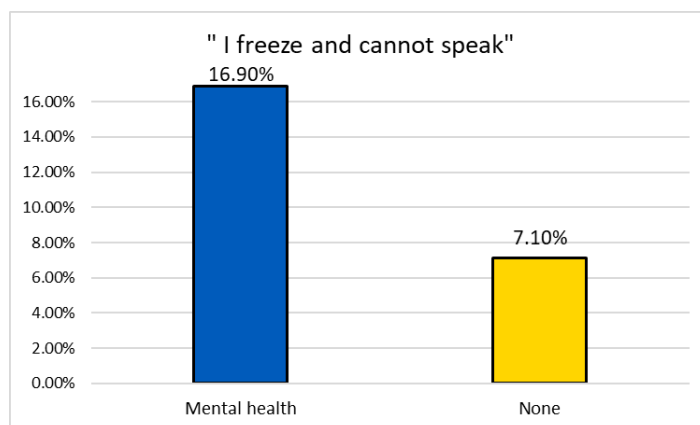


Figure 5

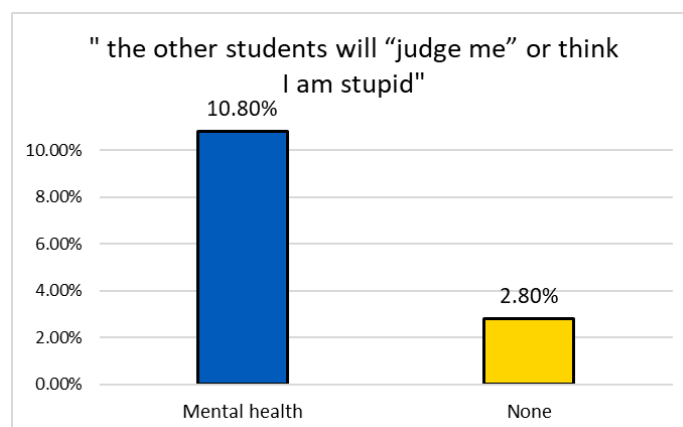


Figure 6

Our preliminary results coming from open-ended questions and focus group discussions suggest that both groups feel stressed about making mistake and feel apprehension when having to speak spontaneously. Students also feel that the pandemic has reduced their opportunities to practice oral skills as it is more difficult to speak with other language students or native speakers. While both groups are worried about the effects of poor memory, it is a more recurrent topic for the NR group. This group also thinks that speaking practice is hindered as conversations in practice sessions do not feel natural, while the speed of conversations, and the potential lack of understanding in natural settings is anxiety provoking. Reading aloud is also a worry, as they feel it is difficult to decipher the alphabet. The most recurrent topic for the MH group is the fear of having to speak in front of others, especially native speakers, but also their tutors and fellow students. They mention that they fear the other students will judge them, they feel they do not belong to the group as "everyone else is better", it is also worrisome that the tutor might find their recordings of module activities and listen to them. And, not only having to speak in front of others, but also feeling uncomfortable when hearing themselves to speak, that is, their own voice. As a result, they perceive speaking practice as an activity to do on their own, and a significant number of students do not engage in speaking practice at all. Typical comments were: "I don't like hearing my voice", "I am generally alone", "I do activities on my own", "I generally don't like being watched and judged" etc. Many students believe that speaking practice is only effective if done with native speakers, and younger students (typically below 50 years) mention the use of social media as a opportunity to increase speaking practice.

As for the mitigating strategies in the online and distance setting, we identified three broad groups: (i) skills-oriented strategies; (ii) general strategies referring to the online and distance context; and (iii) self-talk strategies. Skills-oriented strategies refer to activities that help developing competence in TL and as self-efficacy beliefs grow, confidence grows and anxiety eases. Students find the use of other media like YouTube videos, music and film beneficial for improving their oral skills. The use of TL in various contexts is also helpful, e.g. reading poetry, talking to your pet, role-play activities, shadow reading and singing songs. Strategies mentioned by participants that are generally useful in the online language learning context were the following: translanguaging (i.e. using the word one cannot remember in

English), having a list of useful vocabulary items nearby (e.g. “repeat it please”), muting your mic while still participating aloud in online synchronous tutorials, in this way easing oneself gradually into a more active participation. Adobe Connect is the preferred tutorial software for the Open University, and it features an “away” button to signal to other participants that the user is not at the computer or unable to participate at a particular time. Using the “away” button while still listening to the tutorials, and taking part in the ice-breakers to get that first word out in the TL was considered a useful strategy by students to deal with FLSA. Self-talk strategies also play an important role in mitigating FLSA. Students think they have to change how they see their mistakes when they are speaking, they must acknowledge that mistakes form part of the learning process. It helps if they make themselves aware that other students are probably very busy with their own speech and with trying to understand what is being said, so they probably do not really pay attention to other people’s mistakes. It is more likely that they do not even notice them. It is very helpful to remind yourself why you are studying the language and where you are coming from rather than thinking of what you do not know yet. Several students referred to strategies to get out of being “frozen” by, for instance, resorting to memory processes that are not difficult (e.g. remembering colours or numbers) rather than what is actually being covered at that point.

5. Discussion and recommendations

The present research is motivated by our experience as course producers, leaders and tutors. Over the years we have identified some points in the learning journey of OU languages students that act as specific triggers of anxiety – and more so for students with mental health conditions – and which have a strong impact on students’ learning experience and success, and as such on retention and progression. It is very important that we make students understand that becoming a confident speaker in a foreign language is much more than being completely accurate and sounding like a native speaker.

As we have seen, it is only a small proportion of languages students who do not experience FLSA (Figure 2 above) so this has to be taken into account in tutorials, day schools, residential schools or even the development of module materials. Our data clearly shows that Foreign Language Anxiety, or in the present case FLSA, is a specific type of anxiety linked to the uniqueness of the language learning process (as claimed by Horwitz et al. 1986), but not only related to the face-to-face classroom language learning context, but very much present in online and distance learning both in synchronous activities (e.g. virtual classroom tutorial) and asynchronous activities (speaking practice, recordings, etc.) and, in some cases, aggravated by apprehension toward technology.

While a general apprehension to speak spontaneously, speak with native speakers, the fear of inadequate performance has been widely attested in the literature, some studies also mention the fear of not remembering the right vocabulary, no study so far to the best of our knowledge identified the differences in the causes of FLSA in relation to mental health issues. This means that we have to address worries that are more “content-based”, i.e. refer to inadequate performance in the target language, and more “self-image” based, i.e. refer to a fear of negative judgement of the self. Students in the MH group often report loneliness or the need for loneliness related to speaking in TL which often triggers a complete lack of engagement with oral activities, thus getting into a vicious circle when wanting/having to speak in TL. A recurrent theme is that students do not view their peers as a valid resource for oral practice, many of them only consider native speakers as worth speaking to in their TL. This reduces their chances to simply becoming used to their own voice, taking part in a conversation, finding ways to express their thoughts in their TL and very importantly becoming used to speaking spontaneously.

The following recommendations are grouped according to our findings regarding valid coping strategies (mentioned in Section 4). Many of these have already been addressed/offered on student events, induction sessions and a teaching forum. The recommendations are worded as if addressing students, however, tutors and course designers must keep them in mind and adapt their tutorials, materials or (pro-active) support accordingly.

Tips for language learning skills

- Try to create a mental (and physical) space just for your language learning, e.g. play some music in the TL, change the backdrop on your screen, etc.

- Explore different ways of learning and practising your language skills (e.g. different ways of acquiring vocabulary, understanding the grammar, practising pronunciation).
- Contact your tutors if you need help.
- Contact other learners if you need help.
- Find a study buddy in your module.
- If a particular language point is too challenging, leave it for a while and come back to it later.
- Make use of any opportunities to practise speaking (on your own, with your peers, with friends, with strangers...)
- It is beneficial to separate the occasions when you practise accuracy and others when you practise fluency.
- Practise speaking aloud.
- Remember that you don't need to understand everything, try to understand just enough.

Tips particular for the online and distance learning context

- Prepare in advance what you can/might say in a tutorial.
- Set specific goals for your tutorials.
- Take part in the tutorial with your mic off
- Click "away" button in Adobe Connect, if you feel overwhelmed.
- Ask for any materials that are available beforehand, if you feel anxious.
- If you can't remember a word in your TL just say it in English and move on.
- Talk about your anxiety with your peers and tutors.

Self-talk strategies

- Stay positive and remember why you are learning the language and how far you have got.
- This is not a competition! Don't compare yourself to others.
- Get moral support, if you need (friends, family).
- It is very common that students feel that the others are much better. This means you are not alone! Actually, most students feel like this.
- Do not forget that your TL speaking skills do not define who you are.
- The more you do, the easier it will get.
- Just move on if you think you made a mistake or feel embarrassed. No one else will be thinking about it. The others focus on what they need to say and what they need to understand.
- Give yourself a treat (e.g. listening to a song) after a tutorial.

Becoming a confident speaker in a foreign language takes effort and dedication. Positive internal dialogues have a vital role in encouraging our students to become autonomous learners who are able to manage errors and cope with negative feelings during their learning journey.

6. Conclusion

The present research demonstrated that the main worries for students with declared mental health conditions and students with no such additional requirements differs although both groups experience FLSA to the same extent, and this feeling is not related to age. This means that for the NR "Tips for language learning skills" have to be prioritised, while for the MH group "Self-talk strategies" are vital to mitigate FLSA.