

Defining Facilitative Anxiety in Strategic Terms: A Delphi Study

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Abstract: The present study employs the Delphi Technique to establish consensus on the long-needed definition of facilitative anxiety amongst education professionals and to reveal the strategies they resort to in the course of turning debilitative anxiety into facilitative anxiety. Through a literature review the study demonstrates the gap for a definition and the lack of entries for the term in references. Drawing upon the data the study yields a strategy-oriented facilitative anxiety definition paving the way for relativistic reconsideration of the term indicating the possible directions along which the literature on anxiety may proceed. The following emerged as the most salient facilitative anxiety strategies: (1) positive competition & challenge (2) active participation (3) avoidance of individual-specific DA-triggering thresholds (4) positive reinforcement & encouragement (4) preparedness & practice in advance through sufficient exposure (5) motivation to succeed & willingness (7) teamwork & cooperation (8) orderliness & discipline and (9) creation of interest.

[Jahangiri, M., Rajab A. B. **Defining Facilitative Anxiety in Strategic Terms: A Delphi Study.** *J Am Sci* 2014;10(1):74-80]. (ISSN: 1545-1003). <http://www.jofamericanscience.org>. 15

Key Words: Facilitative Anxiety (FA); Delphi Technique; Facilitative Anxiety Definition; FA-Inducing Strategies; Debilitative Anxiety (DA).

1. Introduction

The role of affect and personality factors has always attracted the attention of researchers in academia. For instance, Ansari, Maleki & Mazraeh (2013) investigated the effect of personality factors on employees' Counterproductive Work Behavior, Feizi (2013) studied the role of these factors in academic success concluding that "openness and conscientiousness were the only personality factors associated with school performance" (p. 55) and Jenaabadi et al (2013) who examined the relation between personal characteristics and the quality of life and job skills of high school principals. Making no absolutistic judgments about the nature of personality factors the present paper explores a crucial personal aspect of our daily life, i.e. anxiety, a broad and elusive term encompassing numerous psychological states including fear, apprehension, worry, panic, nervousness, uneasiness, and anger. It is a psychosomatic feeling associated with uneasiness, fear, apprehension, worry, and stress (Zeidner 2011). The sources of ambiguity surrounding the term are numerous. Firstly, the subject has attracted cross-disciplinary studies from various specializations ranging from psychology, pharmacology, psychoanalysis, philosophy, to language teaching. Secondly, many fields have developed anxiety types of their own (e.g. computer anxiety, mathematics anxiety). Thirdly, various terms share what every normal human being feels on a daily basis, i.e. anxiety. While a certain degree of overlap in the semantic field shared by some commonly-used

anxiety-related words (e.g. trepidation, angst) seems to be unavoidable by the layperson the lack of a clear-cut distinction among and the mutually interchangeable use of the cross-disciplinary terms anxiety, stress, and fear in the literature appears to be objectionable. Furthermore, this lack of distinction can also be searched within the terms themselves. For instance, the facilitative aspects of anxiety, the subject of this paper, are largely overlooked and discounted by the current literature. Therefore, it seems logical to believe that any research on anxiety that does not capture this aspect of anxiety (i.e. Facilitative Anxiety or FA) cannot be taken seriously as it might be focusing on a wrong absolutistic rather than relativistic trajectory. In fact, while some researchers seem to be glamourised by the creation of an anxiety-free classroom their total disregard for the possible facilitative aspects of anxiety appear unwarranted. Therefore, the present study, while setting the scene for a reconsideration of anxiety in research tradition tries to come to terms with this indifferentiation and provide a definition of FA setting the scene for turning this disadvantage (Debilitative Anxiety) into an advantage (FA) making it possible for the vast amount of energy locked up in DA to work for us effectively and efficiently. Anxiety does not necessarily trigger negative effects at extreme absolutistic poles of "anxious" and "calm" but along a continuum of degrees. Thus, considering the predominantly-negative connotations associated with the term and the commonly-held views about the detrimental role of anxiety, a heuristic data-driven

reconsideration of anxiety with no previous assumptions about the trends might be in order.

Accustomed as they are to public speaking, teachers are sometimes unaware of the unease, uncertainty, reticence, and anxiety they evoke among students when they call on them to perform in front of others. As a lecturer, the first author has frequently observed the lack of self-confidence, self-image, and self-efficacy of many otherwise overachieving students experiencing extremely high levels of unnecessary discomfort, apprehension, and DA in classes. These negative, unproductive, and sometimes counterproductive feelings seem, to the researchers' intuitive experience, to exacerbate as students are required to perform what they potentially know but fail to present in face to face (F2F) encounters or exam. It appears that their very sense of whole person, autonomy and integrity has been called into question. The researchers' experience, the pursuit of which inspired this research, is supported by the literature on language learning anxiety. The authors have always been in search of and applying innovative methods to boost student morale to present course material in front of the class independently and with remarkable aplomb removing themselves from the traditional dominant position assumed by teachers allowing students plenty of opportunity to bring their hitherto-unknown talents on the scene and not to be a copycat imitating the teacher verbatim, and to stand on their own feet. This has been practiced to ultimately instill Learner Autonomy (hence LA), *inter alia*, in the minds of the students. It has also been the researchers' experience that this procedure has given rise to a certain level and type of anxiety and dominance which, as student testimonials suggest, is largely different from what they experienced beforehand prompting them into action and F2F interaction in their daily classroom work paving the way to make them whole persons. The researchers believe that a new definition of anxiety seems to be in order here which they have, in all likelihood, been resorting to, in their teaching career, "facilitative anxiety", a construct which has not been clearly defined in the literature to date. Interestingly, there have been many former students referring to the researchers narrating their experience of this FA experience. One former student of the first author who is presently teaching as a university lecturer states something to the effect that he was sitting in the researcher's class unaware of the fact that he might be called on to present in public. He managed to answer a question raised by the teacher when he (i.e. the first author) handed him the board marker asking him to take his seat and assume the teacher's role which was quite unusual and challenging. He had no way out nor round it except to

present, or better to say, teach in front of the class. He narrated this facilitating experience emphasizing the role this experience had played in his not assuming a passive role in any scientific discussion ever since the teacher trusted him with the board marker to teach face to face with his classmates (personal communications).

These first-hand experiences and testimonials stress the importance of defining FA, a potential teaching asset, and the optimal means and procedures whereby it can be achieved. The authors also believe that teachers should be cognizant of the procedures and symptoms whereby FA and DA surface prior to teaching. This is in line with Hewitt & Stephenson (2012: 170) who maintain that "continued research into anxiety matters" as it can also "enhance language performance through facilitating anxiety".

As a core construct, "anxiety" has been defined in general references in a variety of ways and from a variety of perspectives, as determined by the discipline. Taking a glimpse of general works of reference it can be inferred that these discipline-oriented references present definitions necessarily appealing to their large readership revealing substantial variation in the use of the keywords. Psychological references, for instance, mostly stress the mental processes involved in anxiety. On the other hand, medical references, not surprisingly, provide the readership with definitions mostly focused on the physical aspects of the phenomenon. Dorland's Medical Dictionary for Health Consumers (2007), for instance, defines anxiety as "a feeling of apprehension, uncertainty, and fear without apparent stimulus, associated with physiological changes (tachycardia, sweating, tremor, etc)".

Reflecting on these definitions, several observations can be made. Firstly, as Table 1 depicts, the general references unanimously attach entirely negative connotations to the term anxiety which is hardly surprising in view of the popular beliefs about anxiety. Secondly, there have almost been no distinctions made between the terms "fear", "anxiety", "apprehension", and "worry" with the words being used interchangeably as true synonyms. Thirdly and most importantly, no entries have been devoted to "facilitative anxiety" in the general references. Fourthly, it appears that the term "anxiety" assumes and denotes a variety of meanings across different fields with varying degrees of intensity ranging from a simple fear, to phobias and mental disorders. Against this backdrop of differing views on anxiety it is not surprising that the literature is very frequently shrouded in obscurity when it comes to a clear definition of the term further necessitating a consensus on its definition and measurement.

The literature abounds in articles capturing various aspects of DA (e.g. Horwitz 2010; Tallon 2009). This is in sharp contrast to what is the case for the relatively-unexplored and under-represented construct “FA” where there is a scarcity of research studies specifically dealing with the positive effects. In summary, despite the preponderance of data on anxiety, there is conflicting and sometimes inconclusive evidence which is scattered and often difficult to interpret which is hardly surprising as

most studies solely take the negative effects of anxiety into consideration. This may partly be explained by the fragmented and disparate nature of the literature which is, for instance, yet to come up with a clear-cut definition of FA. The authors’ in-depth review of the literature could not unearth any research project juxtaposing FA within the general framework of anxiety stimulating the present research which can be considered as a response to this call for clarity and disambiguation.

Table 1: Anxiety in References

Ref. & Year	Field	Keywords In Def.	Connotation	FA Entry/ In-Text Ref.
Am. Heritage Medical Dict. (2007)	Med.	uneasiness, apprehension	Negative	None
Dorland’s Med. Dict. for Health Consumers (2007)	Health	apprehension, uncertainty, fear without apparent stimulus, physiological changes	Negative	None
Ency. of Phobias, Fears, and Anxieties (2008)	Psy.	unpleasant feeling, generalized fear and apprehension, unknown origin, physiological symptoms, anticipation of danger, thoughts, environment	Negative	None
Oxford Pocket Dict. of Current En. (2009)	Gen.	worry, nervousness, unease, uncertain outcome	Negative	None
Am. Heritage Dict. of The En. Language (2009)	Gen.	Fear, apprehension, worry, persistent doubt	Negative	None
Collins En. Dict. (2009)	Gen.	uneasiness, tension, apprehension, misfortune, danger, worry.	Negative	None
Merriam Webster (2013)	Gen.	uneasiness, impending or anticipated ill, apprehension, fear, physiological signs, doubt, threat, self-doubt.	Negative	None

Despite the many studies reporting monolithically-negative relationships between anxiety and second language achievement, positive associations have also been indicated. Thus, the present paper attempts to, in a lucid explication of the division between FA and DA, disambiguate the situation defining the cusp between the two constructs. It appears that researchers are divided in their views of anxiety with the vast majority laying emphasis on the negative effects and a small minority believing that some anxiety can provide students with the necessary motivation and even enhance their learning. While the negative effects of language learning anxiety have been, so far, a frequent focus of many investigations, few have explored FA in the context and context of language classrooms.

Every attempt was made to care for the ethical concerns of the participants to maximally and

invariably protect them against any harm arising from their participation observing their privacy rights such that no undue pressure was brought to bear. Accordingly, prior to undertaking the study, permission was sought from the subjects as to their participation informing them of the voluntary nature of the project and their right to withdraw at any stage (as exercised by four participants) clarifying the goals to them. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured throughout the research and afterwards via various safeguards (e.g. assigning numerical codes). Furthermore, to secure the confidentiality of sensitive information the authors plan to destroy all original identifying features from the documentation (including the questionnaires). These measures were adopted to ensure that nothing untoward would come to the participants building further trust so as the participants would feel comfortable revealing their true opinions.

2. Method

Due to the scarcity of literature on FA, as opposed to its debilitating counterpart, the study focused on how practitioners and professionals viewed FA. The Delphi Technique, whose range of applicability has extended beyond humanities, e.g. Jafarnejad & Salimi (2013), was considered to lend itself well to the study as it utilizes open-ended questions, makes it possible to interview practitioners in remote locations, and investigates the likelihood of reaching a consensus (Linstone 1975). This Delphi study systematically employs questionnaires interspersed with controlled opinion feedback to establish a communication process whereby education professionals can achieve consensus on a definition of FA and to refine the strategies adopted in the course of turning DA into FA. Dalkey & Helmer (Linstone, 1975) submit that the advantage of this method is its capability to elicit “independent thought” through avoidance of “direct confrontation” which might induce “hasty formulation of preconceived notions” while Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2007) consider advantages to be “not requiring participants to meet as a group”, “clarity”, “privacy”, “voice” and “collegiality”. They describe the Delphi method as comprising of three phases: a) asking a series of general questions, b) designing the second questionnaire based on responses to the first collating responses into clusters, analysing data in frequencies, asking respondents to review, to agree or disagree and c) reiterating the process to achieve a polarization of responses or “a clear identification of areas of consensus and dissensus” (pp 309-310). In sum, the rationale for the choice of the Delphi technique lies, *inter alia*, in the iterative process of refinement and feedback to the participants, the opportunity for participants to adjust their opinion(s) anonymously without losing face, and the capability of the Delphi method to identify consensus and dissensus or divergence of opinion. (Reynolds, Woods & Baker, 2007). The literature recommends 10 to 15 participants to obtain satisfactory results (Linstone 1975).

A panel consisting of 36 international experts from various backgrounds was selected on the basis of their publications, academic positions, and qualifications. Thirty two of the invitees agreed to participate. To qualify as an expert certain requirements had to be met. The 32 participants hold a minimum of a PhD degree in various fields related to education including educational psychology, language teaching, psychology, guidance and counselling. These international academics and researchers have varied but relevant research backgrounds in one or more of these areas, have

published work on the topic (a minimum of two ISI papers). The “rigorous guidelines” for panel selection were followed to “increase the confidence with which researchers can use the results in subsequent studies” (Okoli and Pawlowski 2004: 15). Furthermore, the varied backgrounds may secure the more comprehensive perspective necessary for the definition of the construct. It hardly needs stressing that the viewpoints expressed by the participants do not necessarily represent their colleagues throughout the world. Nevertheless, they were regarded as experts in their related fields in view of their research profiles. They all had worked in the field of education as an academic or a researcher or both for at least 10 years. 33 % of the participants hold counselling positions outside the university in addition to being academic members of the faculty with a further 23 also holding managerial positions relevant to the field.

A Delphi study consisting of three rounds was adopted to investigate the research questions thus exploring how professionals define FA in terms of the main strategies whereby it can be implemented in various contexts such as classrooms, work environments, counselling sessions, and social work.

In phase 1, the first questionnaire was emailed to the panel who were asked to write down their preferred FA definition incorporating FA-generating strategies. It addressed the general and highly-subjective question “Please define the term “facilitative anxiety” in your own words incorporating the key strategies involved in the definition”. Subsequently, the key themes and FA-inducing strategies (either appearing in the definitions or in isolation) were extracted demonstrating as clearly as possible what the professionals meant by FA. The panel offered definitions ranging from succinct views based on experiential knowledge to extensive elaborations drawing heavily on the construct DA, in the absence of a definition for FA, to conceptualize the concept. For instance, Expert # 2 notes: “Facilitative anxiety means the creation of the required level of anxiety through competition and participation”, Expert # 7 observes: “Facilitative anxiety, as the term implies, facilitates performance through assigning (moderately) difficult but achievable tasks to learners”, participant # 17 refers to laughter as [debilitating] anxiety-alleviating strategies, participant # 15 makes a case for atmosphere and physical environment espousing a (semi)circular layout, eye contact and warm but formal greeting, and participant # 31 maintains “facilitative anxiety may be triggered in the learner’s mind through encouraging him/her to participate in the task during which s/he can achieve membership of a desirable community (e.g. speakers, drivers,

writers, swimmers, etc)”. Altogether, 16 FA-inducing strategies emerged (Table 2). The authors then proposed three strategy-oriented FA definitions encapsulating FA-triggering strategies. Whilst the panel defined FA in a variety of ways, their definitions revealed some commonality in the strategies involved showing the fact that a consensus is likely to be achieved.

Phase 2 involved the derivation of the most frequently-advocated strategy-oriented FA definitions and strategies. In phase 2, the second questionnaire was developed on the basis of the analysis of responses to the first questionnaire. It presented a list of 16 FA strategies nominated by the panel in response to the first questionnaire and the three

definitions. Administering the second questionnaire the participants were reminded of the three strategy-oriented FA definitions and the FA-producing strategies emerging in the previous stage and asked to indicate the extent to which they (dis)agreed with the definitions and the proposed strategies marking a six-point scale ranging from “strongly agree” and “mostly agree” to “strongly disagree” while justifying their rationale for their vote. Investigating the level of agreement among the members of the panel, the authors found the panel to agree on only nine facilitative strategies and two definitions with the highest “strongly agree” and “mostly agree” votes (Table 2).

Table 2: Phase 2 voting results

FA-Generating Strategies		Strategy-Oriented FA Definitions	
Phase 2: the 16 FA Strategies	%	Phase 2	%
**positive competition&challenge	*87.5	FA can be defined as anxiety individuals experience in the course of achievement through various strategies including competition, participation, creation of interest, and teamwork and participation.	*40.6
**active participation	*78.1		
**avoidance of individual-specific DA-triggering thresholds	*62.5		
**positive reinforcement & encouragement	*75		
**preparedness & practice in advance through sufficient exposure	*78.1		
positive selftalk	*31.2	FA refers to the transition, by the anxious, from the counterproductive debilitating anxiety to productive facilitating anxiety by means of strategies such as creation of interest, motivation, orderliness and discipline, competition, and encouragement.	*59.3
**motivation to succeed & willingness ability	*56.2		
moderate difficulty & familiarity	*40.6		
plain language addressing the audience in the second person & in a friendly tone	*31.2		
**teamwork and cooperation	*65.6	FA refers to levels of anxiety used to produce performance-shaping results through strategies such as motivation to succeed, practice, familiarity, competition, and participation.	*53.1
on the spot error correction	*21.8		
establishment of deadlines for the learner	*37.5		
**orderliness & discipline	*68.7		
**creation of interest	*65.6		
Atmosphere & Physical Environment: others' positive expectations, (semi)circular classroom layout, eye contact, warm but formal greeting, laughter.	*46.8		

Notes: * represents percentages that strongly or mostly agreed and ** represents strategies and definitions receiving the highest votes

Phase 3 involved administration of the third questionnaire which asked the participants to vote on the two popular definitions emerging from the analysis of the second questionnaire and an alternative refined definition encapsulating the entirety of the majority-vote second-round 9 strategies obtaining the “strongly agree” and “mostly-agree” options proposed by the authors (It is evident

that there still remains relative value in the 7 strategies falling into disfavour especially “Atmosphere and Physical Environment” which may be further investigated in future studies). The participants were, again, asked to vote, one final time, on their level of (dis)agreement on the final three proposed strategy-oriented FA definitions using a 6-point scale. Subsequently, the votes were tallied again

to specify the most preferred strategy-oriented FA definition. Table 3 outlines the results of vote tallies for the FA strategy-oriented definitions in the third

phase. Finally, the votes were tallied and analyzed to arrive at a consensus on the preferred definition for FA.

Table 3: Phase 3 definitions and voting results

Phase 3 Definitions	% (n=32)
(A) FA refers to the transition, by the anxious, from the counterproductive debilitating anxiety to productive facilitating anxiety by means of strategies such as creation of interest, motivation, orderliness and discipline, competition, and encouragement.	*46.8
(B) FA refers to levels of anxiety used to produce performance-shaping results through strategies such as motivation to succeed, practice, familiarity, competition, and participation.	*31.2
** (C) Alternative definition encapsulating the 9 strategies advocated by the panel: FA refers to the building of anxiety into the environment up to a level immediately below the threshold at which debilitating anxiety surfaces (hence the DA- δ) as demonstrated by presentation of severe psychosomatic anxiety symptoms by the individual with the mostly-intuitively-known threshold being specific to each individual as different individuals present debilitating anxiety symptoms at different levels. Facilitative anxiety can be triggered in individuals through resorting to strategies including (but not limited to) positive competition, active participation, avoidance of individual-specific DA-triggering thresholds, positive reinforcement & encouragement, preparedness & practice in advance through sufficient exposure, motivation to succeed & willingness, teamwork and cooperation, orderliness & discipline, and creation of interest.	*65.6

Notes: * represents percentages that strongly or mostly agreed and ** represents strategies and definitions receiving the highest votes

3. Results

This study can be considered as an attempt to identify strategies which can be subsumed under a definition of “facilitative anxiety”. The strategy-oriented definitions proposed for facilitative anxiety differentiated among the levels/thresholds of anxiety, the anxiety-performance relationships, the psychophysical environment, and the influence of other constructs (e.g. competition). Subsequently, the most commonly-occurring strategies conceptualized in the proposed definitions were retained to elicit the two definitions and a second alternative definition encapsulating the 9 strategies proposed. The final voting revealed the fact that the participants were mostly in favour of the alternative definition, Definition (C), which contained most of the elements of their own feedback considering it to be succinct and to the point. Participants advocating Definition (C) justified the rationale behind their choice by stating that it contained all the strategies nominated while those opting for Choices (A) and (B) criticized it for not being economical (i.e. too long) and discounting major strategies such as physical environment and atmosphere. Participants supporting Definitions (B) and (C) mostly admired the succinct rendering of the term and its treatment of the most salient strategies.

4. Discussion

In general, the results of the three rounds yielded support for a consensus on the definition of FA. The present research is indicative of the fact that education professionals and practitioners follow various FA strategies defining the term in different words and from different angles. Nevertheless, it was shown that a consensus on the definition of FA and the associated strategies intended for the creation of this teaching asset could be reached drawing on the commonality indicated by the majority votes. The findings emanating through this study yielded an almost inclusive definition of the construct “facilitative anxiety” which may deepen, enhance or shift one-dimensional absolutistic perspectives towards the term to different multidimensional perspectives. The consensus on the strategy-oriented definition was achieved through involving a scholarly community of international experts. Whilst certainly admitting the fact that a total consensus may never be forthcoming in view of the complexity and the lump of factors involved in the construct, the authors reached the level of agreement considered to be sufficient by the literature on the Delphi Method for the definition to attain a consensus of opinion bearing considerable weight. The results also suggest that both facilitative and debilitating anxieties are equally-important, mutually-meaningful and dependent, highly-changeable and dependent aspects of the anxiety phenomenon and that each merits equal

consideration in its own right. The difficulty encountered in the conceptualization of the term “facilitative anxiety” may be indicative of the fact that any future research either treating anxiety as a monolithic construct or failing to capture the facilitative counterpart cannot be taken seriously. Facilitative and debilitating anxieties are equally-important performance-shaping constructs with distinct but related outcomes. In the end, the authors would like to encourage other researchers to draw upon the FA definition proposed to expand their research agendas and to further explore this vital aspect of every living creature’s psychology.

Acknowledgement:

Authors are grateful to the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), for support to carry out this research.

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1/14/2014