

Podcast series: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Competences in Foreign Language Teacher Education

## Challenges in foreign language teaching: language anxiety and language aptitude

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Faculty of Teacher Education University of Zagreb

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### Lidija Cvikić:

Welcome to this podcast where the main topic is development of student agency through foreign language learning. This podcast is a part of the podcasts series where we discuss different 21 century competencies. It is created as one of the outcomes of the Erasmus + *Connected* project with 7 European universities from Germany, France, Finland, Norway and Croatia. My name is Lidija Cvikić and I am a member of Croatian Connected team together with my colleagues Željka Knežević and Vlatka Domović from the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Teacher Education.

Being the institution that educates future primary school teachers, including teachers of German and English as foreign language, our main goal is to prepare teachers for education landscape of the future. In 2015 the OECD launched the *Future of Education and Skills 2030* project that aims to build a common understanding of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values students need in the 21st century. At the heart of the conceptual framework for Learning and Teaching 2030 LEIS the notion of student agency. It is defined as the capacity to set the goals, reflect and act responsibly to effect change. To develop and exercise their agency, students need support from teachers. Teachers need to recognize students' individuality and together with them co-create teaching and learning process in order to foster students in developing agency.

Today we are talking about two different factors (language aptitude and language anxiety) that greatly influence individuals in the process of foreign language learning. Our guests in today's podcast will help us understand how to address individual factors in foreign language learning and teaching, with the goal of supporting the development of student agency.

Our guests today are Dr. Ivana Matić, German language teacher in primary school, and Jasenka Čengić, research assistant at the Department for English Language and Literature, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Zagreb. Welcome and thank you for being with us today. So, Jasenka, could you briefly say something more about your previous teaching experiences in teaching foreign languages?

**Jasenka Čengić:** Of course. Okay. So first, thank you for having me and us, of course, Ivana and me both. Well, I actually taught at all levels, I can say. So from young learners to students, I've spent two years in a primary school and then went off for one year and taught at a secondary school and then went back to one primary school. And now I have been teaching future English language teachers for about five and a half years.

**Lidija Cvikić:** Thank you. And what about you, Ivana?

**Ivana Matić:** Well, I didn't have so much experience in classroom. Okay, I have it a lot, but I started working at the construction site in Germany after I finished German as a foreign language. Then I decided to go in primary school to get some experience because I studied the German language. Then I found out I really love that job because it's really rewarding. I love interacting with kids. I teach German from first grade to eighth grade. German as first foreign language and second foreign language. I have to say that the most fun part of that job is playing and singing, I don't know, dancing in classroom. I always try that my classes are so constructed that I as a kid or I as a learner would love to be in that class. Of course, life is life. It doesn't happen every time, but I give my best.

**Lidija Cvikić:** Ivana, did your teaching experience influence your choice of language anxiety as a research topic? And can you tell us briefly what the language anxiety really is?

**Ivana Matić:** Yes, of course. Well, first of all, I wanted to study motivation because motivation is most popular thing when you are a language teacher. But in that time, I was really young. I was just a starter teacher. And then I saw motivation is too broad to explore, to see, and I cannot make it. And then I enrolled the doctoral programme and when the time passed, I saw that there is something else that makes a wall between learning German, me, and the kids. And then through studying, listening to children, and reading a lot of sensitive papers, I saw that the cause of that wall is foreign language anxiety. Language anxiety is, I think, the most widely studied emotion in foreign language learning when it comes to emotions. Of course. This is a situation specific anxiety. It comes from this formal language learning experience. It is a complex thing and it is made of learner beliefs, a low self-esteem, their behavior, and a lot of language stuff like grammar, unfamiliar words, and so on. And the most surprising for me was, of course, we all knew that me also, we all experience sometimes a language speaking anxiety. And we as teachers can see that most of the time because they start to sweat, they get red in the face, the voice is trembling and so on. Sometimes they stop even speaking or they freeze, they block, they forget what they wanted to say and so on. But language anxiety is also this negative feeling, negative emotion, and negative reactions in all language skills, also when they are reading in a foreign language, when they are listening a foreign language, and when they are writing. There is no such thing as cause of language anxiety. We cannot talk about causes because it is so complex, and we can only talk about something that is related to language anxiety. We cannot cure, like in some diseases, the cause. We can only make the situation for the kids in the classroom to break down that wall that is called language anxiety, to make a classroom warmer, safer place, so they don't get in situations when they could feel these negative emotions, which are then connected to low language learning, to low language abilities and even more.

**Lidija Cvikić:** Thank you. We are going to talk about the implication for the teaching practice a little bit later. Jasenka, at the moment, you are finishing your doctoral thesis, or you have finished already your doctoral thesis, and in the thesis, you are dealing with a completely opposite phenomenon. Namely, all those people who are working as language instructors or language teachers can notice that some people are better in language learning, that they learn it in an easier way, faster, or let's say better than the other students, that they are in general more successful. What is it that makes someone being better and more successful in language learning? Is there something that we can call talent for languages or giftedness? What is this that is in the research literature known as the language aptitude? Can you tell us more about it? And where actually your motivation for investigating language aptitude came from?

**Jasenka Čengić:** Well, I would actually first like to say that I have given much thought about this question of whether aptitude and anxiety are maybe somehow interconnected in a way that we cannot really call them opposites. We could say that, okay, so students with higher level of language anxiety would ultimately, and this is what actually research has shown, would ultimately display lower levels of language aptitude. They would actually score lower on some language aptitude test, measure, whatever. The same goes for the high aptitude scores. They would usually be followed with lower levels of anxiety. But this does not really mean that individuals that are more prone to more success based on some language program that they absolutely lack any language anxiety. It probably means that they cope with some emotion that inhibits away the cognitive abilities that make them more prone to succeed in a complex task like language learning. When we actually say language aptitude, we are actually trying to define a specific combination or complex of mostly cognitive skills that enable individuals to learn better faster, as you said, so to score higher on some language achievement or proficiency test. We cannot really say for sure that we have defined exactly the number of those skills or abilities or complexes, because what research has shown is that they actually differ to a great extent for individuals depending on their age, on their learning background, even on the context of learning. That's where I really like what Ivana actually pointed out, that it is the context that is the most important one when we investigate either language aptitude or language anxiety. We cannot really speak about the causes because there are so many different influences behind each of these concepts. We can only say that, okay, so individuals with a higher level of language aptitude definitely display a better learning rate. That means that they can learn faster than other individuals. They can learn it with greater ease. But we cannot really say that we know exactly what specific cognitive ability is responsible for that for each and every individual.

**Lidija Cvikić:** Thank you. So you have mentioned the importance of the context and both of you did the research in Croatian context with the learners from Croatian primary schools. But as any other successful research, I would say it has the implications for the wider research community and it can be important beyond our context, in many other European countries, especially within the countries with a similar educational system. Can you please share a little bit more information about your own research? What is that you did in your research? What are the main results and why those results are important, not just for our situation, for Croatian situation and Croatian educational system, but for, let's say, wider research community. Ivana, can you tell us more about your research on learning German as a foreign language.

**Ivana Matić:** Yes, of course. As I said, I started with this motivation, which was a myth then. Then I started to study anxiety. Of course, when you start to do a research, you do it with your own students. At that time, I had luck to be in fifth and the eighth grade, and I wanted to study anxiety between those groups of kids. I didn't want to study foreign language speaking anxiety because it was there. I wanted to study something else and it was reading because reading is so individual, we don't hear when kids are reading. Of course, we can hear when it is reading aloud, but when they are reading text to make a comprehension or when to find something in grammar or when they need to answer some questions, we cannot hear it and we cannot see the anxiety. And then I researched within these two groups and it showed, of course, they felt anxiety and there wasn't a difference between those groups. I had two options. My expectations were that the students of the eighth grade would have less anxiety because they learn a little bit longer, they are familiar with the teacher or with the methods of teaching...

But on the other hand, I thought maybe the fifth grade would have a higher level of anxiety because they are afraid of a new teacher because we start with new teaching system from fifth grade. They are new in studying German at a little bit higher level. But as said, the levels were equal. Then I wanted to see what are those specific situation in a classroom that are anxiety provoking. Then I found that was the reading unknown words in a text, misunderstanding the content, difficulties with reading comprehension when they read a text with some unfamiliar topic, when texts are a little bit longer, and when they find an unfamiliar grammar inside of the text. And as I said that, you can see that there is a lot of thing that the kids are thinking about when they are reading, and they are not always focusing on the content, which is the main test. Okay, I found those situations, but I didn't know what is going on next. What are their reactions? Because the reactions are actually the thing that we can connect to seeing an anxiety. I didn't know when they are reading a text with unfamiliar words, do they think about the understanding the words? Do they freeze? Do they block? Do they give up? Do they think about what happened yesterday on a football practice? I don't know. Then I did one research with a little bit smaller group and with open ended questions. I found that exceptional and wonderful answer from one A student. She said, Well, yes, I feel nervous when I see some unfamiliar words. But despite then, I try to do my best to understand this sentence. I was like, Yes. Let's study that. That will be my thesis. I needed to dig deeper into psychology and I found the explanation. The explanation is actually in the cognitive theory of emotions, which say that we all find ourselves in some situations that could be interpreted in two ways. For example, when you need to speak in a public, we are all teachers, but when we need to speak in front of thousand people, of course, we could be nervous and we start to sweat, our palms get wet, and so on, but our cognition kicks in then. We can interpret the situation in two ways, either as a threat or as a challenge. If we interpret it as a threat because we are scared of our image in front of those people, we can block, we can freeze, we can run away from the stage. And if we interpret this situation as a challenge, we see that there's an opportunity to show how much we are good in public speaking, we do our best and we do our best and we continue to talk. In that case, I found really good solid ground explanation for this kid's answer. I decided to see what are the student's reaction in these situations when they feel anxiety, not only the negative ones, but also the positive ones. I was really happy that my research really showed that despite the anxiety, despite these negative reactions when they give up on reading text, when they skip over the words they don't know, they really react positively in all the anxiety provoking situations. They did their best and they fight to comprehend this text really better. The most beautiful part of the study was when they have positive reactions in one anxiety provoking situations, they do this positive reaction. They react positively in all the others, not some, but all

the other anxiety provoking situations. And that's exactly what Jasminka has said. And I would just say that the reason, so to say, is the optimal level of anxiety. Of course, when we have too much levels of anxiety, they will freeze. It's impossible. When they have too low levels of anxiety, they are just pragmatic. They don't have any motivation. But there is some such thing that is called optimal level of anxiety. Well, another research is need to be made in that field, but I think optimal levels are really positive for students.

**Lidija Cvikić:** Thank you. What I've heard from your words are two things, basically. Please correct me if I'm wrong. The first thing is that your research show being in the situation of using a foreign language, students actually have two types of influences, I would say. One is linguistic influence, meaning not knowing the language well enough. And another one is psychological, being in a new or unfamiliar situation. And the language anxiety happens or comes as a result of both of it. Not just not knowing the words or meeting unfamiliar structures or unfamiliar topic, but also being in a new situation, let's say, to read or speak in another language that's not always pleasant. Am I right?

**Ivana Matić:** Well, yes, you're right. But sometimes I have to say that it is a learned response. Because language anxiety comes sometimes, not only in new situations, of course, in new situations, but sometimes when the negative emotions, negative situations are repeated. When these situations are repeated in a lot of years, in a lot of grades, even when someone says German language or English language, they feel anxiety immediately. Sometimes it's a learned response. And if they have it for a longer period of time, then this wall called anxiety is harder to break.

**Lidija Cvikić:** Okay. So we will come later again to this because this is something that is really important in our opinion. But another thing that is very interesting for me is, and I will try to paraphrase it or summarize it, when the stakes are high, the fear kicks in, which means that we should make language learning not to be something that has this really high value, that is something that is expected from us to perform the best we can, but to make it something that's a part of everyday life, something that does not provoke the negative emotions. And maybe we can talk a little bit later about how the teachers can do it in the classroom.

**Jasenka Čengić:** I recently... I'm sorry, question about how can somebody be anxious when they're presented with a new test? So they have never taken that test. It's a test, but they have never actually taken that test. So how can they be anxious when they take that test? And I automatically thought of myself when I was a language learner, I would be anxious if any test or any exam. I didn't care if it was a new one or a completely familiar one. It's a test, right? So it can result in a grade. And we know that grades are very important in the Croatian educational system because they take you places. They take you from elementary school to high school, from high school to university. So everything is actually about grade. So I would say that in our context, yes. So when the stakes are high and it's so seen that we tend to rely, or teachers tend to rely more on numbers. So on grades, on tests, on very defined outcomes, and not a lot on feedback, which should be maybe a way out of these anxiety provoking contexts.

**Lidija Cvikić:** So, Jasenka, can you briefly describe your own research as much as you are allowed to at this point since it's a part of your PhD thesis, and let us know what did you do in your research and what are the main results or the main outcomes, I would say, from the research.

**Jasenka Čengić:** Okay. I would just like to say that I was listening to Ivana now. I remembered that I haven't answered a question that I was actually meant to answer before, and that was what motivated me to do research with language aptitude in the first place. When I started to teach, I had absolutely no idea that I would teach young learners. My first job was actually, I got 135 learners ages six, seven, and eight, and I did not expect that. I thought that I would teach older learners because that was somehow the way that I imagined my teaching to actually go. And then when I ended up teaching young learners, and then the year after that, I got young learners as well. So another group of 100 and something first graders. And then when I went back to elementary school, I got first graders again. It seemed that this career path always led me to the same age group. What I actually found out from them was that they actually fascinated me with a number of their own language learning traits that I could not actually find in older students. So they could be very anxious. There's this common belief that young learners take this language learning task with a lot of ease and that they don't feel anxiety at all, that they are all very talented for language learning. And what I saw is that the language learning task is not an easy task for all students. This goes for young learners as well. Basically, what led me to language aptitude was this fact that I wanted to know more about their language learning process. And aptitude research has moved away from this prediction that it was all about in its past. So we wanted to know, basically, what we wanted to do with using an aptitude test was to predict how fast or how successful someone would be. Now, we still want to predict, but we also want to find out what basically lies behind this prediction. So we would like to know more about the nature of the language learning process, and that's why I actually combined two things. So this age group that kept me, that actually was and made a large part of my teaching life up to now. And this phenomenon or construct that would actually enable me to find out more about the way that they learn. And what I did was actually I had to make up or design, construct a new instrument. An instrument that would actually enable me to find out more about how young learners actually cope with language learning. This led me to three part construct. I don't know if I'm actually allowed to maybe mention what I thought would actually allow me or show me some results about how young learners cope with learning a new language. I took a completely unknown language to the learners. That language was Hungarian, partly by convenience, because this was my other major, so I studied Hungarian and English. I had access to native speakers who were so kind to actually help me record the material I needed. I designed a language learning game, we can actually call it, that goes from learning first unknown words to learning the plural of those words and also to learn numbers from one to three and then numbers from 10 to 20 and so on. So they actually had to learn basically how the number learning game works when we have to combine ones and tens and twenties and twos and so on. So these constructs are actually called in aptitude research as rote learning, language and analytic ability, and auditory alertness. I also included some other cognitive and individual differences like working memory and also nonverbal measures like the mental transformation task. I wanted to see also what phonological awareness was like in the learners L1. I also collected data about their language learning history, about who their parents are, how much they make, and what their language learning history is all about as well, what their attitudes towards language learning are. I wanted to know a lot. Basically, what my research showed is that for a language learning at such an early age to be successful, we can actually say, is that we need both what we call domain specific and domain general cognitive abilities. So both language based and nonverbal based type of tasks could actually predict successful language learning.



**Lidija Cvikić:** And what about motivation?

**Jasenska Čengić:** Yeah. Okay. So when we actually think about other nonlinguistic or extra linguistic measures, I included a very short questionnaire about how motivated the students were at the end of their first year of language learning. A part from those cognitive variables that by definition make up language aptitude, it turns out that what predicted the young learners' success in language learning were primarily some noncognitive variables, and those were the learners' motivation and this variable of the parent's income. So it turned out that those two actually predicted success with the highest variance. Even though we know that both two domain specific and domain general cognitive abilities play a very important role in how young learners learn, we actually have to conclude that what we knew up until now is that how learners feel about or how motivated they are towards learning plays even a greater role. This could mean that we should also consider including those constructs in the definition of language aptitude. It cannot be really thought of as only and purely a cognitive domain if we really want to know what predicts, what comes into the equation when we try to investigate the nature of the language learning process at a young age.

**Lidija Cvikić:** Thank you. Both of you basically showed us or proved that when you talk about such a complex phenomenon as language aptitude and language anxiety, they do not come only as the result of cognitive and psychological processes in the learner, but also as the result of the processes that are happening in the classroom to, I would say, really great extent. What would be the implications for the teachers? Or more precisely, what would be your advice to the foreign language teachers? What to do or how to teach it, how to perform their classes with their students to, on one hand, lower the language anxiety and on another hand to, I would say, improve the language aptitude. What would be your professional advice to teachers? Ivana?

**Ivana Matić:** Well, when I listen to Jasminka, I would say, of course, on my experience also, I would say that we need to start to see these young students as individuals. They are not just Marco, Pero, and Janko. They are really complex people with emotions, with their cognitive abilities, with their background, with their social interactions. They are really a whole being. I would say that language teachers should be aware of this thing. Plus, I need to say something about cognition also. There is something that is called cognitive capacity of a learner. When we ask, for example, during a normal exam, when we ask a question to a student and we raise him up in front of all his friends, he doesn't hear only our question and think about the answer. He thinks about a lot of stuff. He thinks about why me, why today, I didn't study, I didn't make homework. Now my crush is going to hear me, I don't know this question. And this cognitive capacity has their limits. It is not limitless. So we have to be aware that when all these thoughts are in his or her head, he doesn't have much left capacity to think about and find the right answer because he thinks about a lot of stuff. And we don't see that. We just see a pretty young face in front of us who doesn't say anything, and we think he doesn't know anything, and that is possibly not right. So that is one of the main things that young teachers should be warned about. Because when kids are not saying anything, it's not only because they don't know, maybe they know, but they are afraid of thinking a lot of other stuff. Then, of course, yes, the emotions. They have really big influence on how do kids perform, and they have influenced all the research that's shown on their grades, on their language learning proficiency in the end. I think we need to focus on young teachers to be braver to find strategies or to teach them about the strategies, to see the

anxiety, to recognize the anxiety, and to give them strategic methods or models, how to overcome that anxiety, and how to create a classroom which is safe for learners to make mistakes, because we need to be aware. We are Croatian speakers. We don't always speak perfect Croatian. Firstly me, because I come from Zagorje, we have this dialect form and I make a lot of mistakes in my classroom. Sometimes it's not something I should be proud about. But my kids sometimes correct me, teacher you don't say that in Croatian or this pronunciation and so on. But we understand each other. When they learn a foreign language, it's a foreign language. They should feel pleasant in that classroom and they could make mistake because we have to be honest, we learn from our mistakes and why we don't give a kid opportunity to learn from their mistake. Inform, as I said, inform feedback. Not red pencil, not a lower grade, he can talk and he can improve his mistakes. But especially when these grades are correlated with anxiety, not when they don't know the language material.

**Lidija Cvikić:** You Jasenka, do you have anything else to add to how to teach the foreign language?

**Jasenka Čengić:** I think even actually explained it all by saying, so we should somehow find a way to individualize our teaching. And that's absolutely not an easy task, knowing that teachers who have up to 28 students per class, per group, cannot really always individualise their teaching for every single learner. I mean, of course, they can. It's an enormous amount of work. We could work on their working memory. So we know by now that that's trainable as well. But what we need more of are interactional studies. And those studies are the one that actually could explain how certain approaches to teaching correlate with certain cognitive abilities. This could mean that students with, let's say, with stronger memory could benefit from this approach and that approach. This would also mean that, let's say, students with higher analytical skills could benefit from another approach. We still don't have a lot of data in that department, so we could actually find out a lot more by trying to, let's say, strike the right match between an approach and what each and every individual student's strong and weak points are.

**Lidija Cvikić:** Thank you. Now for the very end, both of you are in daily contact with your colleagues and you Jasenka with the future teachers. In your opinion and your experience, is there anything we could do to improve the way how we educate future foreign language teachers. What would be your suggestion to the universities and the creators of the study programs for foreign language teachers?

**Ivana Matić:** Well, I don't have that much experience in that area, but I think from my point of view and my experience, I think the practical work when you are studying is too low for what expect us when we come to the classroom. I think in first years of when you're studying to be a teacher, they don't need to do classroom work, but they can observe. They can go to the university to study some methods or some theories, and then can come to classroom and see that in real life situation. And after, when they got some experience by looking at the teacher with professional course and educated and up to date with the research and the methods and so on, then they could do some little part of the class and so on. So in that five or four years, they're experienced and they're ready to go in the classroom. So I would say that - more practical work, more real life situation, and then all these theories can come to life.

**Lidija Cvikić:** Thank you. Jasenka, do you agree?



**Jasenska Čengić:** I agree completely. I would just like to add that there is somehow, after a year that novice teachers spent teaching, they come to take their state exam. Somehow somewhere, I regret I actually have to say this, they somehow seem to lose their way. I think that is what Ivana said is absolutely true. But I agree that students should and must have a lot more practice while they're still undergraduates or graduates. But what happens with the mentors or some advisor that they get when they enter schools? It seems that they're completely on their own with very little experience, like Ivana said. So they seem that they are offered almost no guidance.

**Lidija Cvikić:** During the novice year?

**Jasenska Čengić:** Exactly. During that time, they seem to even regress in their way of thinking about what their role in the classroom is. But advisors also need to be compensated for their work, to be motivated. Maybe they need some training routine, some protocol that will help teachers once they enter the classroom to be able to still learn and not just be thrown into the water or into the ocean and swim because they still need a lot of guidance. So that's my point.

**Lidija Cvikić:** All right. Now after we have discussed phenomena of language aptitude and language anxiety from various angles, we can conclude that their sources, complexity and influence to foreign language learning prove the importance of individual approach and co-creation of learning process. They are at the same time key elements of learning environment that fosters development of student agency. Also, in order to become effective co-agents teachers need constant support in their professional development, in Croatian context especially when entering profession.

Thank you, Ivana and Jasenska, for sharing your knowledge, your experience and your thoughts, on such exciting and important topic. And thank you, our listeners for sharing your time with us.

**Ivana Matić and Jasenska Čengić:** Thank you.