The Role of Shame in Language Learning

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> We live in an atmosphere of shame. We are ashamed of everything that is real about us, ashamed of ourselves, of our relatives, of our incomes, of our accents, of our opinions, of our experience, just as we are ashamed of our naked skins.
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> —George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman*

I have been teaching foreign languages for over three decades and have always been observant of my students' emotional states and moods and endeavoured to make them feel comfortable with their learning, but over the years, I have grown dissatisfied with the reticence to take part in communicative activities of most of my students of English as a foreign language (EFL). My professional experience as well as a lifetime of excruciatingly painful shyness which makes it extremely difficult for me to speak in public, led me to hypothesize that shame/fear of experiencing

shame could be at the origin of this reticence/unwillingness to use the target language (TL) in instructional settings, and this intuition was the catalyst which stimulated the present project.

The initial findings of the study confirmed my hypothesis as they show evidence of French students' propensity/disposition towards experiencing/feeling language shame when speaking the TL in the context of the classroom. However, it may seem surprising that, to my knowledge, since Cook's Doctoral Dissertation in 2006, shame issues in relation with foreign language learning and use have received so little attention from applied linguists, and has so far been an un-researched area in the French FLL context. This dearth of research into this phenomenon could be explained by the fact that this commonly experienced emotion is also the least discussed and individuals seem to go to great lengths to avoid it, preferring to conceal this weakness from others and even from themselves, and to deny experiencing this emotion.

The present work aims at contributing towards a more complete picture of the psychology of the language learner by filling this gap and it is hoped that it will inspire teachers and help them identify shame-prone learners. The paper discusses some possible options for dealing with it in the language classroom.

Literature Review of Emotions in FLL

Teaching and learning a foreign language can trigger an amazingly diverse array of emotions that may be either facilitative or destructive. Among the emotions experienced in the language classroom, anxiety has received considerable attention in SLA research and has been investigated in a variety of instructional contexts and from a diversity of perspectives. It was found to be responsible for potential differential success at FLL (Horwitz et al.), to impair the learning process at different stages, and was even regarded as the "linchpin of the entire affective reaction to language learning" (MacIntyre, "Language Anxiety" 24).

A significant number of studies sought to clarify its development and maintenance, and to envision the possible remedies that could be used. However, the earlier studies yielded confusing and often contradictory results due to the myriad of definitions of the term 'anxiety' and to the inconsistencies in anxiety measurements.

Recently, in the wake of Positive Psychology (Fredrickson), SLA research has laid particular emphasis on the role of positive emotions in language learning (e.g., enjoyment), and, unsurprisingly, these were found to be facilitative of the learning process (Dewaele and MacIntyre), to encourage risk-taking, to broaden the learner mind-set over time and make students thrive.

However, despite significant advances in the understanding of the language learner's complex and multifaceted psychology and of the differences in language learning achievement, research into the role of other emotions like shame, although vibrant in mainstream Psychology, seems to be scant in the FLL domain. Cook's Doctoral study on the role of shame and anxiety in FLL was the first to establish links between the two constructs and FLL. In 2006, the author interestingly remarked that "the mention of shame has been curiously absent in the literature about second language learning. This may simply be because no one was looking for it. So, no one asked the question" (74).

Since then, this elusive emotion has not benefited from the attention it merits until recently, when some researchers (Galmiche; Teimouri) started scrutinizing its impact on FLL. The initial findings of their studies showed that this debilitative emotion could cause long-term disengagement from FLL, impact working memory, and limit the potential language input, thus sowing seeds for further investigation into this intriguing phenomenon.

Review of Shame in Psychology

Overshadowed by the study of guilt, the emotion of shame escaped thorough scientific investigation for long, but it has recently been the subject of growing attention from psychologists and psychoanalysts. This paucity of research may have been due to the very nature of shame, termed "the Cinderella of the unpleasant emotions" by Rycroft (152), and to it being unspeakable. Additionally, investigation into the nature of shame has often been hampered by the intrinsic complexity and elusiveness of the construct, issues of overlapping and interrelated terminology and confusion with other concepts. Moreover, scholars embrace different views on how to define this phenomenon, referring to feeling states, personality traits, and cultural standards.

However, there is broad consensus about the fact that shame is a self-conscious emotion, that is, one that requires cognitive abilities for its elicitation and involves self-reflection and self-evaluation. The implication of shame on motivation and interpersonal behaviours has been amply investigated in the domain of psychology (Gilbert, "What is Shame?") and relationships between shame, social anxiety and depression were established (Gilbert, "Relationship of Shame").

The experience of shame is characterized by a sense of the entire self being diminished, inadequate or defective. This emotion is generally accompanied with a sense of shrinking, worthlessness, and exposure to the others' gaze, and a preoccupation that the self will be revealed and exposed as being flawed (Tangney and Fischer), and is conducive to autonomous reactions like blushing, sweating, increased heart rate, heightened bodily awareness, downcast eyes, freezing, stammering voice, neurophysiological nonverbal and behavioural markers.

An important distinction must be made between shame as an emotional state, and shame-proneness, which is a natural disposition to experience shame in a diversity of situations (Tangney et al., "Distinct Emotions?"). In the latter case, shame becomes problematic and detrimental to the individual's well-being, as it may be conducive to social anxiety, phobic fearfulness, lack of self-confidence, excessive shyness, self-deprecating tendencies, chronically negative self-appraisals, rumination, and avoidance of risk-taking activities and possible shame-inducing situations.

On the psychoanalytical level, shame-proneness is a pathogenic belief over one's unworthiness and inadequacy. This prototypical shame-proneness or trait shame must be addressed in earnest since studies conducted with diverse age groups and populations have consistently established close relationships between proneness to shame and a wide range of psychological symptoms, personality problems and psychiatric disorders. These include anxiety, eating disorder symptoms (e.g., bulimia, anorexia), depression, pessimism, introversion, low self-esteem, and internalization of shame, which is a pathology in which the individual experiences shameful situations as trauma that activates past traumatic experiences (Kaufman).

Chronic or internalized shame is wired into the brain and is excruciatingly painful, as individuals who suffer from it attribute negative outcomes, failures or lack of success to characterological faults or personality characteristics that they regard as being fixed. Another distinction was made by Gilbert in 1998 between internal shame (i.e., when individuals are focused on negative evaluation of the self) and external shame (i.e., when individuals are focused on the others' evaluation). Following experiences of shame, individuals often feel frozen and want to escape at all cost.

The devastating and toxic nature of shame is illustrated in Michael Lewis' contention that "Shame is like a subatomic particle. One's knowledge of shame is often limited to the trace it leaves" (34). It is also noteworthy that shame is often confused with a number of other sibling constructs, like guilt and embarrassment. While shame focuses on the defectiveness of the self, guilt is centred on the badness of behaviour. In terms of behavioural consequences, shame is conducive to concealment of the perceived or real deficiencies, whereas guilt encourages apologies and mending of the situation (Tangney et al., "Moral Emotions").

Finally, shame is also often confused with embarrassment, which does not have such negative and lasting consequences on the sense of self, and represents a distinct affective experience. Shame is linked to perceived deficiencies of one's core self, while embarrassment arises from perceived deficiencies in one's presented self (Klass).

Relationship between Shame and Anxiety in Psychology

In order to further understand the sense in which the term 'shame' is used in this article and to give value to the claims that are made, it is important to understand the nature of the relationship between shame and its cognate, anxiety, and see in what ways they are similar or different. The American Psychological Association defines anxiety as follows: "Anxiety is an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes like increased blood pressure. People with anxiety disorders have recurring intrusive thoughts or concerns. They may avoid certain situations out of worry. They may also have physical symptoms such as sweating, trembling, dizziness or a rapid heartbeat."

This definition is interesting as it shows the closeness of the two emotions as far as their cognitive and physical reactions are concerned. However, the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis were traditionally interested in 'anxiety' to a far greater extent than in 'shame'. Shame was long regarded as the 'sleeper' emotion, the 'villain' in the psychotherapy room (H. B. Lewis, "Shame and Guilt"), an ignored or neglected affect, while anxiety was seen as an essential emotion in the psychological apparatus, and at the origin of a number of psychological and emotional diseases and disturbances.

Freud, for instance, saw anxiety as 'the master emotion' and contended that shame and guilt derived from it. Likewise, Mead, an American anthropologist, characterized it as a form of anxiety. In the seventies, shame was rehabilitated as one of the most significant constructs in psychotherapy, seen as the "quintessential human emotion" (M. Lewis), or the "master emotion" (Scheff), and Helen Block Lewis ("Shame and Guilt") demonstrated that patients' therapy stagnated when shame was unacknowledged. In 1987, Harder and S. J Lewis, using the Personal Feelings Questionnaire, a self-report measure, found that shame was associated with depression, anxiety, hostility and low self-esteem.

What is to be retained is that there exist close relationships between the two phenomena, and Wurmser (17) interestingly, yet rather enigmatically, illustrates the intertwining of shame and anxiety: "[…] it is clear that anxiety is a cardinal part of it. Yet evidently shame is more than anxiety, and anxiety is more than shame." He further suggests that 'shame anxiety', a particular form of anxiety, arises from the "imminent danger of unexpected exposure, humiliation, and rejection" (49).

In the same vein, British clinical psychologist Gilbert (1998) holds the view that anxiety arising from the evaluation by others is a key factor in the experience of shame. He notes that a particular kind of anxiety, social anxiety, which is the fear of being scrutinized by others, has features that are closely related to the concept of shame, and he highlights the similarity between descriptions in the psychological literature of social anxiety, shyness and shame.

Methodology

The main goals of this exploratory study were to verify the hypothesis that shame is one of the sources of language learners' unwillingness to communicate in the FL, and to answer the three overarching questions, (1) What are the sources of foreign language classroom shame (FLCS)? (2) What are the consequences of FLCS? and (3) Are there means of overcoming FLCS?

This study therefore takes an essentially participant-relevant perspective as attention was focused on the interviewees' retrospective accounts of their experiences, beliefs and feelings about foreign language learning, with an aim to identifying the factors that may contribute to FLCS and those that may reduce it. The reason for the choice of a qualitative approach through the use of in-depth, face-to-face interviews as a first step to collecting my data was that such an approach can provide depths of insights into this complex and multifaceted phenomenon, since shame is not easily observable for obvious ethical reasons. This qualitative approach allows for a deep analysis of shame to be carried out at the level of the individual and considers learners as "real persons rather than [...] theoretical abstractions," and views them as "thinking, feeling human being[s]" (Ushioda 220).

The Settings

The interviews took place in two different settings: first, at an Apprentice Training Centre (*CFA*) situated in the North East of France. The population is composed of apprentices – aged 16 and over – who combine on-the-job training and off-the-job acquisition of skills and knowledge. The Centre works in partnership with local companies and apprentices obtain recognised qualifications. They are bakers, chocolatiers, butchers, pastry chefs, hairdressers, beauticians, and dental technicians. According to the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR), the students' level of proficiency ranged from A1 (Breakthrough, i.e., basic user) to C2 (Complete mastery, i.e., proficient user).

The second setting was a Training Centre for adults (*Greta*) situated in the north-east of France. The population is mainly composed of pensioners, unemployed people and job seekers – aged 20 to 49 – of

diverse educational and social backgrounds. It is to be noted that a few of them come from foreign countries and have another language than French as their mother tongue. The students' level of English is between B1 and B2.

There were 30 participants in the study, 19 females, and 11 males, aged 13 to 49 – one of the interviewees being under sixteen, her parents' consent was asked. They had been studying English for 4 to 10 years at the time of the interviews. According to the CEFR, their level of competence ranged from A1 to C2.

Most of the participants had French as their first language and some of them also spoke an additional mother tongue (e.g., Arabic, Turkish, German, Italian or Spanish) and had gone through the French educational system. Some of them had the *Baccalauréat* (i.e., the French national school-leaving certificate, usually taken at age 18), some others had lower rank certificates than the *Baccalauréat*, and a few of them had higher rank certificates (e.g., Bachelor's, Master's, or Doctorate degrees).

The sample that was interviewed in the present study was composed of miscellaneous participants, most of whom were apprentices in a vocational school from various stages of their studies, but also college, university students, a school principal, working mothers, unemployed people, and a football player. Out of the 30 participants, 27 were my students. This population was selected as it was anticipated that, given their age (sixteen and over) these students would have had a variety of L2-related experiences to report upon. The last point which is worth mentioning is the question of the relation between the researcher and the researched, which is based on inherent power imbalance between the parties (and even more so when the researcher is the teacher, like in the present case). It was my constant preoccupation and concern that the relation between me and my researched/interviewees should be a non-authoritarian one, and that an atmosphere of mutual understanding should be created during the interview encounters.

The Focal Research Participants

In this article, I deal mainly with the data coming from six of the thirty participants I interviewed. More details about their background are given in table 1. Although the thirty participants provided rich and

detailed data, the six focal participants yielded particularly interesting insights not only into L2-related shame, but also into the role of vision and interviews in developing resilience to shame. What is particularly noteworthy in the choice of these participants is that they not only were willing to participate in the study, but they confided their stories about their FLL journey, including their most intimate vulnerabilities, in a way that enabled me to gain a holistic picture of them as 'whole persons'. However, useful data were also generated from the non-focal participants. The article therefore includes interview excerpts which complement and extend the insights gained from the six focal participants. For the sake of anonymity, pseudonyms were used throughout the paper.

Table 1: The six focal interviewees' characteristics

Focal participant pseudonym	Age	Gender	Background	Shame-related episodes
Linda	15	F	A college girl. L2 English, L3 German, L4 Spanish. Her first years of life spent in the US.	Strong L2 self. One single acute episode of shame in L2 classroom which she overcame through visualisation of her past and future successful L2 self.
Lucie	42	F	A working mum who has been dreaming of going to Australia since her childhood, and is actively planning to go to Australia on a family trip soon. Committed to re-learning English to go to Australia. L2 English.	Used to be humiliated and to feel shame at school/college. Powerful vision of her future successful English-using self abroad.
Maria	20	F	A dental technician trainee. L2 German, L3 English.	An unsuccessful female learner, who shows lack of self-confidence

				and a general feeling of worthlessness. A history full of humiliation and repeated shame episodes. Shame-based personality.
Fernando	49	M	A French football player of Spanish origins. L2 Spanish, L3 English.	Reports no feeling of shame in English but in Spanish, his grandmother's tongue. Introduced the concept of 'complex' in my data. Very enlightening account of his FLL journey. Strong self-efficacy beliefs.
Ferenç	29	M	A pastry chef and chocolatier who left Hungary to study pastry in France. An exceptionally gifted student in the pastry domain, shows a very high level of motivation to learn French and English. Native tongue Hungarian, L2 German, L3 French, L4 English.	No episode of shame in either language. Exceptional trajectory of learning French with very active self-regulatory mechanisms. Strong vision of his future L3 self.
Annelise	23	F	A pastry chef and chocolatier. Very desirous to progress. L2 German, L3 English.	Many instances of shame in her narrative.

Ethical Considerations, Procedures, and Data Collection

After obtaining permission from the school principals to conduct my study in their schools, and receiving ethical approval from my University, possible informants were asked to participate on a voluntary basis in the research project. Consent forms in English and French were distributed in order for the possible participants to understand what was involved in the research. The consent forms provided information about (a) the study's general purpose, (b) the right to confidentiality and anonymity, (c) the right to ask any question relating to the aim of the study, (d) the right not to participate in the study without any negative outcome, (e) the right to withdraw from the study at any time without repercussion or penalty (Kvale and Brinkmann), and (f) that there was no 'correct' answer and nothing of what they said would get them into trouble.

It is to be noted that, shame being a particularly sensitive topic that individuals generally tend to conceal from others and from themselves, the participants were blind to the exact topic of my research. They were informed that the aim of the study was to help them lead happier and more fulfilled lives as language learners. Whenever possible, the participants were interviewed three times, that is, once at the start of the academic year, another time in the middle of the academic year, and finally, at the end of the academic year, in order to round out the data collected earlier during the year. The interviews followed a semi-structured format to allow focus to be directed to the most significant issues that had arisen.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed entirely by myself with the participants' permission, and selected segments were translated into English for the discussion and analysis for this paper. The questions that were asked in the interviews included: what were learners' current and past experiences with FLL? How had their first approach to FLs been? How did they see themselves in the future, as individuals as well as language users?

In most cases, the interviews were complemented with observations of the participants in their academic settings. Immediately after each interview, I noted in a research journal my own impressions and all the non-verbal cues I noticed during the course of the interviews, such as gaze avoidance, head down, redness of the face, voice quality, facial

expressions, and body movements, which I thought to be as revealing as the verbal discourse itself. I also took into consideration silences, hesitations, laughter, and giggles, and considered what the interviewee did not say. Silences, for instance, were regarded as very revealing of the fact that they had found it painful to recall shameful experiences. Finally, the data obtained were analysed through latent content analysis (Braun and Clarke; Kvale and Brinkmann) to elicit themes and patterns regarding the symptoms, sources, and the situations that might engender shame experiences.

First, the relevant extracts in the transcripts were assigned codes. Then, the codes were examined and broader themes based on the research objectives and questions were established (e.g., shame-eliciting situations, behaviours and feelings when experiencing shame, language versus general shame). Each broad theme was then analysed deeper, which enabled to identify more specific categories under each theme (e.g., fear of negative evaluation, fear of failure, change of identity).

General Findings

The present study was motivated by the gap in the research literature regarding baseline data on L2-related shame. Out of the 21 participants who claimed having great difficulties in FL, 12 spoke about L2-related shame, to a high or minor degree (see Figure 1). It appears thus that, given the tentative results of this exploratory study, shame is a widespread feature of the French language classroom. Experiences of shame were reported by learners at all levels of proficiency, from low to high, and at beginning as well as more advanced stages.

Out of the 12 participants experiencing L2-related shame, 8 were females. The fact that the participants tackled the issue of shame themselves without me having to steer the conversation towards my research focus indicates that this emotion is an integral part of their FLL journey, as well as their linguistic self-image. Further analyses revealed that motivation to learn a L2 may be influenced by past history of shame and humiliation and that the role of the teacher is crucial in triggering the feeling of shame in learners: emotionally-supportive and caring teachers foster positive motivational outcomes and risk-taking, while intolerant and shaming teachers sap students' self-esteem, confidence

and perception of ability, leading to reluctance, unwillingness to communicate in the target language, lack of enjoyment and disinvestment.

Surprisingly enough, it was found that, in some cases, the perception of themselves as incompetent language learners and users, and the shame feeling were 'contagious' to other school subjects and may have repercussions on their whole self (i.e., feeling depreciated and worthless in everyday life). Shame-prone language learners reported having developed negative attitudes toward L2 learning due to recurrent shame and humiliation episodes in the classroom. The data suggest that this phenomenon can be critical to students' learning developmental trajectories as well as their psychological and physical well-being, and might also impact classroom atmosphere and relationships among individuals. Most participants stated having developed pervasive and debilitative feelings of anxiety and apprehension when approaching certain activities like speaking, because of the likelihood of showing an incompetent self.
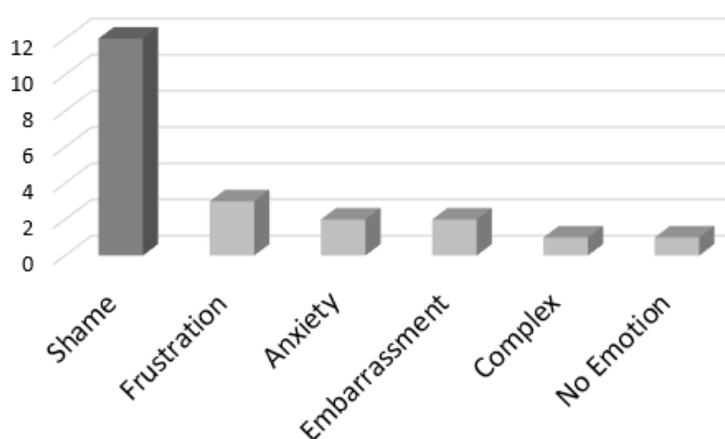

Fig. 1. Interviewees' emotions distribution

No participant reported shame as being appropriate and useful (i.e., it does not foster desire to move on or make progress). It is generally felt as a paralysing force as it is conducive to global attributions like "I am stupid," or "FLL is not for me, the situation is hopeless, I am a failure," and to feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. A good illustration is the following: "When I felt ashamed, it was like I was struck on the

ground, unable to move or react, or think, I was stuck." The data allowed answering the following questions:

What Are the Sources of Language Shame?

FLCS is linked to a range of learner-internal variables and teacher/classroom-specific variables.

Learner-Internal Factors

Personality Characteristics: The Shame-Prone Self. When asked whether she remembered a particularly painful episode in the language classroom, Lucie, (her pseudonym) answered unhesitatingly: "I can't think of any in particular, actually, because, you see, it was a general atmosphere of downgrading and judging in the classroom. And I was kind of used to being ridiculed and criticized every time I opened my mouth, I am a very anxious type of person, always on the lookout for mistakes, always afraid of being *ashamed*. So, it made things even worse!"

The above quote shows a strong personality-related characteristic of shame that can be defined as a trait. Shame is obviously linked to personality traits. Personality or dispositional traits and learner-internal variables like shyness, introversion, inferiority complex, lack of self-confidence, social phobia, or embarrassment, which are generally regarded as being cognate to shame (Nathanson). Moreover, two constituents of foreign language anxiety, fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension, were regularly cited by the participants as being related to FLCS.

Finally, the overwhelming majority of the respondents expressed the idea that they lacked language aptitude. Maria's quote is representative of the link between FLL and students' beliefs about their capabilities: "The problem was that I used to think that I had no natural gift for FLL, while my friends had this gift. Sometimes I thought I was really stupid, and it made me feel even more *ashamed* of this innate inability."

Some participants' remarks revolved around the idea that shame had developed from an early period of their life, and consequently, had become a "second nature" (Maria), or "something I can't fight, a kind of natural tendency to *fear shame* in a diversity of situations" (Annelise), which suggests that these individuals will experience shame in all kinds

of situations and in several walks of their life. These shame-prone individuals will anticipate potentially shame-inducing situations, which is detrimental to their sense of self, and generates enduring low sense of self-worth and self-esteem, rumination and prolonged anxious states.

Pronunciation and Accent-Related Issues. Another powerful source/elicitor of language shame which was associated with painful and vivid memories was reported to be the accent and pronunciation (see Figure 2), and the participants reported feeling judged on the *accentedness*, *intelligibility* and *comprehensibility* of their utterances. The question of accent − defined by Munro and Derwing as "the degree to which the listener believes an utterance differs phonetically from native-speaker utterances" (454), or perceived when one pronounces differently from the accepted standard (Gluszek and Dovidio) − is a particularly sensitive issue and a major concern in the participants' accounts. In fact, it was reported that accent is felt as a key component of L2 learners' identity, and an inadequate or too strong accent was claimed to be perceived as a visible testimony to their incompetency/low proficiency, and a tangible proof of their "intellectual limitations" (Jacques).
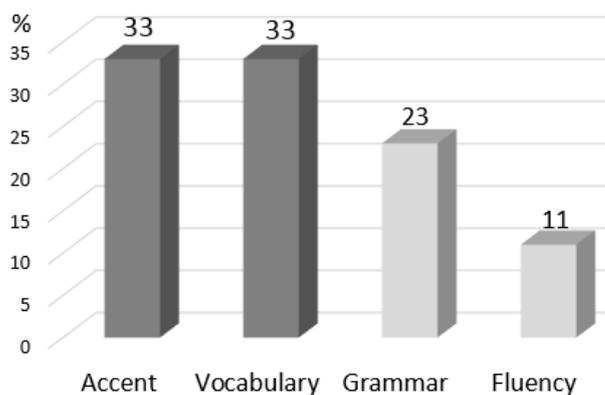

Fig. 2. Sources of shame when speaking

Although not all participants use the term 'shame' proper when referring to their struggles with accent and pronunciation, the taxing and shame-provoking experience of being targeted because of a strong/inadequate accent is obvious in the data. The overwhelming majority of the respondents remembered being laughed at, the butt of

criticism or jokes, and having felt "downgraded" (Maria), or "diminished" (Annelise) when they were stigmatised for the strength of their accent. Speaking with a French accent was recurrently claimed to be a "socially highly traumatic experience" (Maria, Lucie), as it involved the idea of being exposed as less proficient, less intelligible, or even less talented. Lucie's interview excerpt illustrates this point well:

> While in class, I would dread being called upon to speak up because I was afraid of making a fool of myself, with this accent, you see, I was always nervous, afraid that they would shame me, and I felt like I was [hesitating] … freezing, was kind of paralyzed. And when I spoke up, I was always on the alert not to make mistakes, being forced to go out of my comfort zone made me feel extremely tense and stressed. All this was traumatizing! So, I never volunteered answers, I preferred to stay in my shell. Sometimes I would pretend to be sick.

Accent-related stigma was claimed to have psychological and behavioural consequences on the way learners approach interactions in the TL, thus impairing their willingness to communicate (see below, "Consequences of Shame on Learners' Behaviours and Attitudes").

Some participants in the sample see inadequate or strong accent as an important factor that separates them from the TL and its culture but some others see it as a major marker of identity, as explained by Annelise: "The accent you have says a lot about you. It reveals who you are at the core, and I feel somehow that having a bad accent is tantamount to being stupid. Speaking badly displays a deficient and poor image of yourself, it betrays that you are lacking in something. You really feel bad and inferior, kind of isolated. Such a shame!"

The results corroborate the findings of a study by Baran-Łucarz, which showed links between pronunciation anxiety, perceived pronunciation skills, and willingness to communicate in the foreign language, and that concern over pronunciation mistakes causes embarrassment and anxiety. The findings of her study are in line with those of Price, which revealed that the cause of learners' foreign language anxiety is "great embarrassment", derived from their belief that they have a "terrible accent" (105). Although this goes beyond the scope of this paper, it may be interesting to note that the focal interviewees insisted that accent/pronunciation-related shame occurred *in the instructional*

setting, and was absent during stays abroad or when they were exchanging with natives.

Poor Vocabulary and Grammatical Inaccuracy. Likewise, poor vocabulary or grammar inaccuracy elicited shame in learners (see Figure 2), as illustrated by Annelise: "Not finding the right word, or putting words in the incorrect order, that would make me feel uncomfortable. It's so embarrassing you see, you feel ashamed of your inability, you are just a child struggling to find the words."

Failure to Produce a Positive Image of Oneself in Others' Minds. The data show that learners may experience shame following a failure to create a positive impression in the mind of others (peers, teacher, parents). This very failure generates a vicious circle of feelings of insecurity and a sense of oneself being unlovable, unworthy or de-valued in the eyes of others, which eventually may lead to rumination, self-derogation and self-devaluing. This is all the more true in the case of adolescents, whose main preoccupation is to seek social acceptance by their peers. How one exists in the eye of others is of major significance at this stage of life, and everybody strives to be viewed as competent, talented, desirable and loved/admired, and failing to do so necessarily triggers feelings that one is unworthy of others' attention.

Maria's quote highlights that the impossibility to produce positive impressions in the eyes of others can be detrimental to the sense of self: "I felt null and bad at the core. I thought to myself 'what is she going to think about me?' I displayed such a negative image of myself, I was unable to speak intelligibly, like a baby you see, it wasn't my true self actually, but that's what the others thought of me, that I was incompetent. I felt different you see, kind of isolated."

Fear of Failure. Another prominent feature in the participants' reports was fear of failure. Pierre's following statement shows that shame is at the core of fear of failure: "I was always afraid of failing, of making mistakes, especially in front of my classmates, like stumbling over the words, it was so shaming to show a negative image of yourself. So, I preferred not to try."

However, although shame is at the core of fear of failure, it seems that it does not increase achievement strivings by stimulating learners to avoid shame in the future, as expressed by Maria: "I was afraid of failing, of getting bad results, but the fear of failing was just…paralysing me, it didn't motivate me to do better in the future."

Learner-External Factors

Inappropriate classroom management techniques (e.g., isolating or humiliating students with difficulties, showing indifference), peer teasing and even bullying, were reported as important elicitors of shame. Teacher-induced shame was reported to be a prominent feature in the classroom. It was found that when learners' frailties/failures are exposed before those in whose presence they do not feel safe or respected, the feeling of inadequacy can turn into the deepest forms of self-deprecation, self-contempt, shame and mortification.

Corrective Feedback, Assessment and Treatment of Errors. A significant trigger of shame was the way teachers deal with students' errors. Teachers' oral corrective feedback can cause potential affective damage among learners. A representative example is Pierre's statement: "What I dreaded most was when the teacher interrupted me when I was trying hard to express myself. He would correct every word I said, and this was so shameful! I felt like a babbling child!" This participant's remark is reflective of the general feeling that corrective feedback – a controversial issue – and assessment can disempower students, and conduce to lasting shame feelings.

Reflected Appraisals and Teacher Beliefs. Non-verbal messages that are sent to students by teachers and the way they interact with them were also found to be a non-negligible source of shame. Teachers' expectations and beliefs about their learners can elicit long-lasting feelings of shame, and in some cases, be conducive to self-fulfilling prophecies, which consist in voluntarily performing at levels consistent with these expectations.

Maria intriguingly reports: "The teacher always said that I was not gifted for languages, he said I was null, worthless and useless, he even

said I was a good-to-nothing, so I believed he was right, and I eventually did my best to show him he was right." The findings confirm Stevick's statement that "Success [in language learning] depends less on materials, techniques and linguistic analyses and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom" (4).

What Are the Consequences of Shame?

The findings allowed to identify the following consequences of shame.

A Vicious Circle of Shame-Anxiety

Another prominent variable that was found in the data and has received considerable research attention is foreign language anxiety. Associated with shame and the fear of being/feeling ashamed, anxiety, nervousness and apprehension of being placed again in potentially shame-inducing situations were reported by an overwhelming number of participants. Lucie's quote is illustrative of the links between shame and anxiety: "I was always anticipating being ashamed in front of the others, this would make me feel extremely nervous and apprehensive, so I never volunteered to speak up in class, only if I was forced to, for fear that I would be ridiculed and ashamed. It made me feel anxious all the time." These findings hint at the idea that shame is difficult to distinguish from anxiety (Galmiche).

The participants' testimonies stressed the similarity of the two constructs in terms of the cognitive and physical reactions they engender and highlighted the "complete interconnectedness" (de Bot et al.) of shame, anxiety and the self, thus suggesting that the fear of displaying a shamed version of one's self is conducive to ingrained and lasting anxious states, avoidance behaviour and self-saving strategies.

Maria's quote stresses the links between psychological discomfort, rumination, and shame, and illustrates her fear of future possible shame-inducing situations and how she builds a system of defence against potential shame experiences:

> When I made mistakes and the teacher shouted at me in front of the others, I would feel so bad, so ashamed of myself, and I would think over it all the time until the next course. Sometimes I dreamt of what had happened during the course, I was afraid that the same things would

> happen again, and this made me feel very nervous and anxious. So, I did everything not to experience this again, like pretending being sick.

Finally, the findings revealed that shame impairs cognitive functioning, since learners who are afraid of experiencing shame may learn less and not retain what they have learnt as easily as their more self-confident counterparts. They may have difficulties *using* the FL in particular. They therefore experience more failure, which in turn leads to shame, anxiety and may eventually hamper proficiency in the FL.

Internalization of Shame

Another major finding was the internalization of shame. When shame experiences are repeated over and over again, shame becomes internalized and therefore turns into a debilitating and destructive force or a trauma that is re-activated and relived every time one experiences failure or humiliation. In this case, it leads to long-term feelings of worthlessness and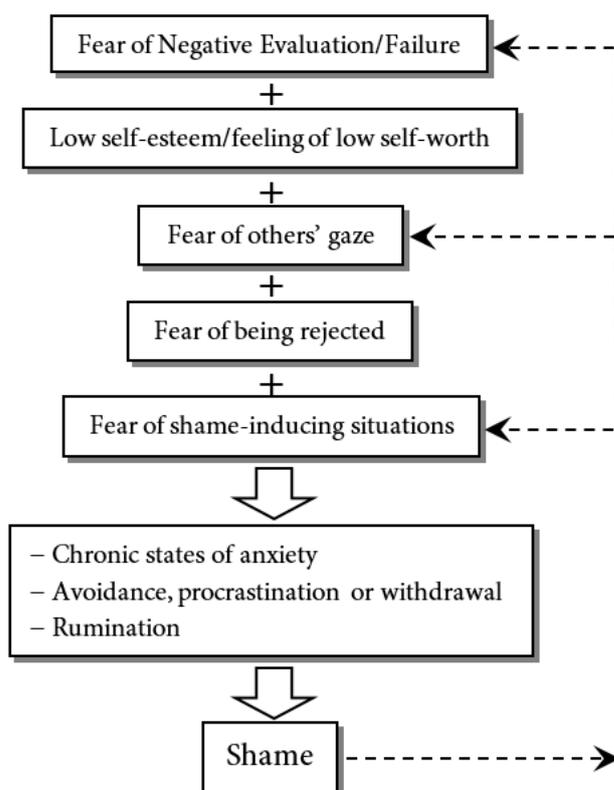 incompetency (Morrison) which can be generalised to other domains of students' life. "I was traumatized by the repeated shame experiences in the language classroom, to the point I dreaded going to *all* my classes." (Maria, her emphasis).

Figure 3: Shame-shame cycle diagram

For fear that they might fail and of the negative consequences of shame (i.e., loss of a positive self-image, loss of self-esteem, loss of admiration/love by significant others), learners behave in particular ways; for instance, by refusing to volunteer answers or engage in communicative tasks

unless they are certain that their answer is right, procrastinating, skipping classes, refusing to take risks, or withdrawing from language learning. The following diagram illustrates the interconnectedness of shame and anxiety and the vicious circle of FL shame and the potentially noxious effect of this emotion on learners' behaviours (see Figure 3).

Consequences of Shame on Learners' Behaviours and Attitudes

The results of the present study confirmed the findings of studies in mainstream psychology that claimed that shame carries out no adaptive functions. It was reported to be felt as a profoundly inhibitory and debilitating emotion, sometimes referred to as *a traumatic experience* (Annelise, Maria, Pierre) which can impact individuals' learning potential and also their psychological well-being in a lasting manner.

In some cases, the respondents complained about psycho-physiological symptoms like "feeling my face blushing" (Maria), or "feeling my heartbeats" (Lucie), and even more serious psychosomatic disorders such as stomach aches, heart or lung-related issues, as in the case of Pierre:

> I was so stressed and was so affected by this shame episode in the English classroom, when the teacher yelled at me that I got a one out of twenty at a written assignment, and that I was such a jerk, putting me down in front of my peers, that for a few days, I was unable to breathe properly, I felt I was stifling, and I had terrible nightmares. So, my parents had to take me to the doc's and he said that I had a problem with my lungs due to too much anxiety and stress.

Another negative impact of shame was also the lowering of the affective filter, and the data seems to suggest that shame restricts the range of potential language input, and impacts working memory. Maria explains: "In the moment I was speaking, I was so afraid of shame that my mind was going blank and I couldn't proceed anything, couldn't understand a word of what was being said, like it was Chinese."

Some participants also reported the following interesting reactions: "I felt an urge to disappear from the others' view," or "Suddenly I had the feeling that the ground opened under my feet and I would be swallowed." It is to be noted that some of the symptoms characteristic of shame could be observed during the interview sessions themselves (e.g., fidgeting,

gaze avoidance, crying, throat clearing), revealing the pervasiveness and severity of this emotion, and confirming research that found that remembering past shame could be conducive to trauma, and that the mere remembering of past shame experiences in the FL classroom sometimes triggered feelings of psychological discomfort. In such cases, the participants were offered to interrupt, postpone or cancel the interview session.

Corroborating studies on the consequences of shame in terms of behaviour, the present study shows no movement towards 'repairing' the situation. The shamed participants reported a passive attitude following repeated shame experiences and some of them acknowledged having withdrawn − consciously or not − from L2 learning, for a more or less prolonged period of time.

Another prominent and detrimental consequence of language shame was learners' unwillingness to communicate in the target language. The concept of willingness to communicate (WTC) − the decision to speak a foreign language as a volitional act (MacIntyre, "Willingness to Communicate") − has received considerable attention in SLA research, and is to be taken seriously, as language attainment depends on the use of the TL.

The following statement by Maria, which mirrors a number of other participants' comments, is enlightening of the role of the entwining/combination of language shame and anxiety in impacting willingness to speak: "I refused to speak English in the classroom because I was afraid of making a fool of myself, of being ridiculed and ashamed. I was afraid that the teacher would humiliate me, belittle me in front of the others. Speaking in public is so embarrassing, it made me very nervous and anxious. I was panic-stricken when the teacher asked me to speak. It even affected my whole life."

Are there means of Overcoming Shame?

Verbalising shame and self-exploration
During the journey with these participants, it became clear to me that some of them actively engaged in a process of meaning making, and the stories they told during the interviews allowed them to create narrative

coherence in their narrating of their development as language learners, and as some of them argued, this very process enabled them to move on and develop resilience to shame. As Lucie expresses: "Putting words on all this, my past negative experiences in the language classroom, has done me a lot of good!"

Pavlenko and Blackledge also emphasise the importance of narratives in individuals' lives and in their negotiation of L2 identities (Pavlenko and Norton). It is, indeed, through narratives that we can resolve tension and impose coherence between the past, the present and the future (Pavlenko and Blackledge). What emerged from the data as a point particularly worthy of further investigation is the self-explorative and transformative potential of interviews/narratives. Maria expresses this point clearly:

> Being interviewed did me a lot of good, talking about the way this teacher humiliated me. Thank you so much for that! It's like I was talking to a Psy, I feel good now. It's great to be listened to, to be allowed to confide. I feel different today, I feel boosted, my self-esteem is much higher. I never talked about that, all this shame, to anybody before. I feel I am a new person! [smiles]

Her words are echoed by Annelise: "I think we should generalize this kind of experience, being interviewed and allowed to open up to talk about our past negative experiences in the FL classroom is a way of making us feel better and put at a distance all the bad things. I feel like I am a new person now, this helps me change my vision of FLL."

These testimonies corroborate research which showed that shame is so painful that it is usually hidden (Dearing and Tangney), and highlight the role of researcher/interviewer as a facilitator of change in interviewees. Another point which must be emphasised here is that these students had never been given the opportunity to voice their concerns about FLL, and most of them felt an urgent need to express themselves. This very process of telling their stories through interviews – which some of them said were like psychotherapeutic sessions – led to a change in their vision of themselves not only as language learners/users but also in their everyday life identity. Thus illustrates the potential transformative - and I may say healing power - of interviews/narratives, which can be seen as privileged places for making sense of one's experiences and for

reinvesting one's identity. All this is in line with Helen Block Lewis' findings in 1987 that bypassed shame is damaging for the self and at the root of a number of psychological disorders. So, it can be said that being allowed to disclose and verbalise their struggles with this emotion may have opened up the way to healing.

This is clearly illustrated by Nunan and Choi's statement that "the opportunity for learners to tell their own stories, and the control that they have over those stories, is empowering" (228). In this sense, they become active participants in the study as they are "no longer individuals who have research *done* to them. They are *collaborators* in an ongoing, interpretive process" (228, my emphasis).

These findings corroborate Şimşek and Dörnyei's contention that, through interviews, students gain a "narrative identity" (57): "People regularly produce narratives to create cohesion in their experiences and perceptions so that the unified narrative can become a kind of guide."

Developing and Nurturing a Successful Vision as a Successful TL User

Although this goes beyond the scope of this paper, it is noteworthy that what was claimed to be an efficient means of counterbalancing the negative consequences of shame was to develop a powerful vision of oneself as a successful TL user in a community of practice through the implementation of self-regulatory strategies and the development of self-efficacy beliefs that direct learners' mental processes towards the achievement of their personal goals.

Interestingly, it seems not unreasonable to assume that the learners who become resilient to language shame are those who exercise their personal agency and engage in actively promoting and substantiating a plausible, elaborate and vivid vision of themselves (Dörnyei and Kubanyiova) as successful users of the target language in a community of practice (Lave and Wenger).

Conclusion

To offer possible guidance for future research, it is hypothesized here that shame-reducing techniques would involve training students to become aware of their shame and "capitalize on the positive-broadening power of facilitative emotions" (Gregersen and MacIntyre xiv). By sustaining their

hope that the shamed self is not immutable and fixed once and for all, there is all likelihood that learners will be able to reach unexpected achievements. Since shame is conducive to global and stable/fixed dispositional attributions where learners feel that their entire self is flawed and incompetent, recovery solutions would involve a movement towards specific and unstable attributions of failure and helping students develop a sense of power and control over their future actions (Pekrun et al.) as well as promote their sense of self-efficacy (Bandura). All this would contribute to making them feel that they can change their unwanted identity and make progress.

The data emphasise the need to establish a supportive and emotionally-friendly teaching environment, to adopt a humanistic approach to FLL that is conducive to an atmosphere of interpersonal safety, and to consider learners holistically, that is, on the cognitive, emotional, and physical levels. It is suggested here that shame should be addressed with, and counterbalanced by, the use of a range of Positive Psychology constructs such as hope, optimism, emotional intelligence, and with the eliciting of positive emotions like joy, pleasure, and satisfaction. Certainly, having an unconditional positive regard (Rogers), that is, seeing students in a caring and non-judgmental manner, and considering them as individuals of flesh and bones who live lives and experience emotions beyond the classroom, is also part of the solution, as it will contribute to making them feel more comfortable and to generating a positive classroom atmosphere.

It is to be noted that, through the process of interviewing, I gained a better understanding of my students' struggles with shame. This project has contributed to empowering my students, but it also served as an impetus towards a questioning of my professional and moral/spiritual role as a teacher. I am deeply convinced that the acknowledging of shame can help us on the path towards a better understanding of our learners as complex emotional human beings.

I am grateful to all the participants who were not too ashamed of confiding their most intimate wounds and vulnerabilities to me. Although the interplay among shame, cognition, and motivation needs to be further investigated, a point particularly worth mentioning is that, following the interviews, positive changes in some learners' perception of

their FLL classes and in their engagement occurred. It is interesting to note that a number of participants reported feeling "more positive about FLL," "more optimistic," and "more apt to resist failure and setback in the future and to engage with their learning."

However, the present study being a small-scale exploratory research, one should avoid making sweeping generalisations about the shame-proneness of French learners of FLs. It is therefore suggested to build upon the tentative findings through the means of questionnaires in order to complement the picture obtained through interviews and to confirm the patterns uncovered.

Certainly, one of the most encouraging findings for the future was that reflecting on their past FLL experiences − positive and negative − and on the role of shame in particular, was claimed to be an efficient means of implementing positive motivational and ontological changes in these learners, in the language classroom but also in their everyday life. It is hoped that the current study will inspire further research along these lines and help teachers recognize shame-indicating cues in their learners, so that "their eyes may shine" (Kubanyiova) in the language classroom.

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