

# A Systematic Review of Foreign Language Anxiety

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**Abstract.** Foreign language anxiety, also known as language learner apprehension or second language nervousness, has been extensively investigated in academia as it poses particular challenges to language learners. The paper provides a comprehensive review of foreign language anxiety, exploring its definitions, classifications, potential causes, and strategies to reduce such anxiety. Three classifications of anxiety are listed in section 2, while internal and external causes have been carefully examined in section 3 based on previous works. In the end, possible strategies for reducing this kind of anxiety are proposed in Section 4 based on previous analysis of the types and motivations. By analyzing various aspects of anxious emotion in language acquisition process, this review aims to shed light on the importance of addressing this phenomenon to enhance language acquisition and communication skills.

**Keywords:** Foreign language anxiety; classification; cause; strategy.

## 1. Introduction

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) has emerged as a critical mental factor that exerts a considerable influence on language learners' experiences [1] [2] [3] and performance [3] [4] within educational settings. An increasing number of L2 learners consider FLA as the greatest obstacle in their foreign language learning process [5] [6] [7]. Moreover, research also indicates that foreign language anxiety might bring both negative academic effects [8][9] that hinder the success of their L2 acquisition as well as cognitive impediments impeding their cognitive skills in performing certain designated tasks [10] [11], and more importantly, lowering their performance in L2 acquisition [12]. The intricate interplay between anxiety and language learning has attracted substantial attention from researchers and educators alike. This review endeavors to delve deep into the multifaceted nature of anxiety in language learning environments, providing an extensive exploration that encompasses its definitions, manifestations, causes, and potential strategies for the effective mitigation of such anxiety.

Horwitz et al.'s canonical work explicitly spells out the multifaceted nature of foreign language anxiety by directly pointing out that anxiety about learning foreign language constitutes "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors" stemming from the distinct nature of the foreign language acquisition within the classroom settings [1]. Similarly, MacIntyre characterizes foreign language anxiety as a broader sentiment encompassing stress, nervousness, emotional responses, and concern, particularly associated with the process of acquiring a second or foreign language [13]. The two classical definitions provide valuable insights into the core essence of language learner apprehension by emphasizing the interconnectedness of emotions, beliefs, and experiences deriving from the language learning process.

At its core, foreign language anxiety encapsulates a range of emotional responses and cognitive processes that learners undergo while acquiring a new language. This complex phenomenon can often act as a barrier, inhibiting learners' abilities to engage actively [14], communicate proficiently [15], and showcase their linguistic competence [16]. As a multi-dimensional construct encompassing several interconnected facets that contribute to the overall concept, foreign language anxiety has been extensively studied for the multiple factors attributing to the intricate psychological process. To dissect the complex issue, three types of foreign language anxieties are specifically identified in Horwitz et al.'s seminal article [1], including anxiety of communication apprehension [17], fear of poor evaluation [18], and anxiety about tests and exams [19]. To quantify the level of anxious status and to measure how different factors contribute to the foreign language anxiety, a standardized

measurement has been developed to test the anxiety entitled Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). FLCAS is extensively applied in later foreign language anxiety research among students all over the world studying various different foreign languages such as Japanese, Chinese, and English [20] [21] [22]. Although it is sometimes criticized for its validity and reliability [23] [24], FLCAS is still the most universally applied toolkit for the measurement of second language nervousness to date.

The impact of second language nervousness is far-reaching, affecting various aspects of language learning, performance, and overall well-being [1] [25]. One significant effect is the hindrance of effective language acquisition. When learners experience high levels of anxiety, their cognitive resources may become compromised, making it difficult to absorb new language information, remember vocabulary, and grasp complex grammatical structures. Additionally, anxiety can lead to avoidance behaviors, where learners may shy away from speaking or participating in language activities, ultimately limiting their opportunities for meaningful language practice. Over time, persistent foreign language anxiety can erode learners' confidence, self-esteem, and motivation to continue with their language studies, potentially leading to disengagement from the learning process.

Recognizing the nuances of foreign language anxiety is vital for educators and scholars alike. Effective mitigation strategies can foster a conducive learning environment that supports learners in overcoming their anxiety-related hurdles [26] [27]. Promoting a supportive atmosphere, where mistakes are seen as valuable learning opportunities rather than failures, can alleviate learners' apprehensions. Integrating communicative activities that simulate real-life language use scenarios can boost learners' confidence in their abilities to communicate effectively. Mindfulness and relaxation techniques can be taught to learners, equipping them with tools to manage anxiety and maintain emotional balance during language learning.

The present paper therefore will delve into the various dimensions of foreign language anxiety, exploring its categorizations, causes, and potential strategies to mitigate its negative impact on language learners. By understanding the intricacies of this phenomenon, the review will hopefully illuminate the theoretical study of second language anxiety and advance future researchers' understanding of this issue, and ultimately help educators to develop more effective approaches or strategies to create supportive and conducive foreign language learning environments that empower learners to overcome the challenges posed by second language anxiety.

## 2. Classification of Anxiety

Anxiety, as a complex emotional state, permeates various aspects of human experience, and its manifestations are particularly poignant within the realm of language learning. Within the context of language acquisition, anxiety assumes diverse forms, each contributing to a nuanced understanding of learners' psychological experiences. Although there is an argument around the classification of foreign language anxiety (FLA), the canonical categorization of Horwitz et al is still the most frequently used in academia to date [1]. It focuses on three key facets: fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety, and communication apprehension, offering insights into how these categories manifest, interact, and impact language learners [1]. One thing that is particularly noteworthy is that there is a misunderstanding of the three key facets by taking them as three components contributing to language anxiety, which fails to be evidenced from Horwitz's original work [1]. Rather, they regard the construction of second language anxiety as a unidimensional one [1].

The three different dimensions proposed by Horwitz et al include communication apprehension, anxious status for tests, and fear of poor evaluation. Among them, communication apprehension refers to the fear of engaging in verbal interactions in the target language. Learners may experience anxiety when they anticipate speaking or communicating in the foreign language, worrying about making mistakes, being misunderstood, or facing embarrassment. Test anxiety simply refers to the apprehension associated with language assessments, evaluations, and examinations. The pressure to perform well in language tests can intensify anxiety, leading to negative emotions and hindering the

learners' ability to showcase their true language competence. Additionally, being afraid of receive poor evaluation from teachers plays a crucial role in foreign language anxiety, as learners may worry about being judged by peers, instructors, or others in the language-learning environment. This fear can hinder participation, self-expression, and overall language development, creating a challenging emotional backdrop for the learner. These classifications of anxiety collectively influence language learners' experiences, shaping their attitudes, motivations, and performance outcomes.

To measure the anxiety quantitatively, some scholars developed the FLCAS, which is a self-assessment tool with 33 questions, rated on a 5-point Likert Scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree [1]. These 33 questions could help gauge a student's foreign language anxiety through their personal feelings, views, negative sentiments about foreign language courses, and tendencies to avoid them [1]. The FLCAS primarily focuses on the anxiety related to speaking in a foreign language context.

However, Horwitz's work was refuted by many other scholars' works. Aida identified 4 factors rather than 3 factors, including anxiety for giving speech in public, fear of receiving bad evaluation, fear of failing the class, preference in speaking native Japanese, and negative attitudes toward the Japanese Class [24]. Aida's research considered the first reason, namely, the speech anxiety and fear of negative assessment, the primary element that contributes most to students' foreign language anxiety [24]. This primary factor contributes to over half in the factor analysis and hence is identified as the only primary factor. Therefore, Aida's study is partially consistent with Horwitz et al.'s claim of a unidimensional construct. Furthermore, Gardner and MacIntyre attempt to apply factor analysis to optimize the original FLCAS and to reduce the redundant items [25]. They confirm the existence of a significant number of factors in the three dimensions, which again supports the unidimensional construct. They further claim that although some sort of redundancy exists, it does not influence the overall effectiveness of the FLCAS and they also developed a shortened FLCAS, which could be used interchangeably with the original longer form developed by Horwitz et al [1].

### **3. Potential Causes**

Given its significant and adverse effects on language acquisition process, educators are keen on identifying the potential causes of second language anxiety to help alleviate it for their students [29] [30] [31]. Extensive research has identified a myriad of sources that contribute to this phenomenon.

The causes of foreign language anxiety are multifaceted and arise from various dimensions, which can be further summarized as two sub-types: internal causes and external causes [32]. The internal causes refer to intrinsic motivators stemming from the learner's inner-self, such as personalities, self-perceptions and anticipations [33] [34] [35]. The external causes are closely related to extrinsic motivators induced by the outer environment, including sociocultural factors, classroom settings, language testing, and teacher characteristics [36] [37].

#### **3.1. Internal Causes of Foreign Language Anxiety**

Following this vein, enormous research probes into the internal motivations of second language anxiety. It claims that the personal characteristics of learners such as a competitive personality, high self-esteem or perfectionism are essential to the production of foreign language learning. For instance, Bailey suggests that the competitive personality of language learners will lead to comparisons and idealized self-images, which act as potential triggers for language anxiety [38]. Furthermore, low self-esteem can instigate worry and fear of negative evaluations from peers [39]. Others focus and argue that striving for perfection in language use can lead to heightened anxiety due to the fear of making mistakes [40] [41]. Moreover, personal factors such as perceptions and learning ability may also contribute to this phenomenon. Negative perceptions about themselves, others, language learning and performance, as well as poor learning abilities may lead to poor anticipations and negative evaluations, ultimately heightening the anxiety in language-related situations [33] [34]. Then, communication apprehension is also an influencing factor in interpersonal level, which is closely linked with learning

and memorizing new lexical items [42]. Besides, foreign language anxiety could also arise from learners' impractical opinions about language learning and the corresponding failure of achieving their expectations. For instance, a study conducted by Horwitz et al. shows that students' concerns about utterance accuracy led them to avoid attempting the target language without correction [1]. Some students underestimate language learning difficulty and expect rapid proficiency within two years [43]. These misconceptions and doubts about their learning abilities may lead to anxiety because of the inability to attain high standards [44].

### 3.2. External Causes of Foreign Language Anxiety

On the other hand, some works concentrate on the external causes of foreign language anxiety, which are mainly two-fold: classroom-induced and culture-imposed. Classroom-induced foreign language anxiety pertains to the apprehension experienced by language learners arising from their engagement within the instructional arrangement [45] [46]. It is found that factors such as classroom atmosphere, teaching styles and peer interactions are collectively contributed to the amplification of anxiety levels among learners [42] [47] [48]. Classroom atmosphere plays an instrumental role in shaping the emotional tenor of language learners, which can be greatly affected by instructor factors such as instructor beliefs, error correction methods, perceived support levels and pedagogical styles. Instructor beliefs about how to conduct language teaching have been identified as a source of anxiety [49]. It was proposed that language anxiety will be greatly increased by the involvement of a constant error-correcting teacher. Pedagogical approaches marked by undue strictness and rigid authoritarianism can generate an ambiance where learners are reticent to experiment or engage due to a fear of errors and ensuing reprimands [50] [51]. Moreover, the strictness of teachers may lead to less student participation and more silence in the classroom [52] [53]. Besides, since foreign language anxiety is mainly situational and specific [54], external stimuli such as language assessments and exams can significantly contribute to foreign language anxiety [55].

Culture-imposed foreign language anxiety, conversely, refers to the anxiety that arises in language learners due to cultural factors inherent to their background or upbringing, such as region, gender, age, race, education level, etc. [56]. These cultural aspects can significantly influence an individual's attitudes, behaviors, and emotions related to learning and using a second language [57]. It has been widely testified with cross-regional, linguistic and education-levels evidence that female L2 language learners are significantly more anxious about their behavior than male students [37] [58] [59]. Regarding educational attainment, data indicates a linear rise in foreign language anxiety based on the college year of study (e.g., freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior, graduate) [60]. Yet this correlation has not been found in Chinese language learning process [37] [58]. Similarly, proficiency levels are also an essential factor for language anxiety [61] [62], but the results differ in regional studies. For instance, EFL learners in China with a high fluency level tend to be less anxious [61], while high-proficient Spanish learners in America. Are more concerned about their performance [62]. Ethnic background may also contribute to language anxiety by affecting the attitude and motivation for language learning [3]. Socio-cultural elements such as 'silence is gold' in Chinese culture may result in reluctance to answer questions in front of classmates or to participate in class activities [52]. On the other hand, the expectation of parents is considered as an essential source of language anxiety [63]. For instance, Taiwanese junior high school students felt anxious because of their parent's obsessive attention to English learning.

## 4. Potential Strategies

Addressing foreign language anxiety is crucial for creating a conducive learning environment and improving students' learning experience. Many strategies have been identified as effective in reducing students' foreign language anxiety.

First and foremost, it is proposed that instructors could promote a supportive atmosphere in order to help students reduce their nervousness in foreign language acquisition [49]. Supportive learning

atmosphere simply means that the instructors can create a classroom atmosphere that fosters positive interactions, provides constructive feedback, and emphasizes the value of mistakes, which altogether can reduce anxiety and encourage participation among students [64]. Instead of focusing on the mistakes made by students, teachers should give more praise to learners by acting like a 'facilitator'. This will greatly encourage L2 students to answer more questions and participate in more interactive activities in the classroom.

The second effective strategy identified from existing literature is to incorporate communicative activities [65]. Integrating communicative activities that simulate real-life language use situations can help learners become more comfortable with using the language in practical contexts. Typical such communicative acts include speaking loudly in the classroom or reading a newspaper, which simulates the communicative activities occurring naturally in daily settings.

The third recommended strategy is utilizing some mindfulness and relaxation techniques [66] [67]. Teaching learners' mindfulness techniques can help them manage anxiety by promoting emotional regulation and reducing stress. For instance, the research of Mrazek et al proves that mindfulness training can possibly help in the management of second language anxiety and eventually improve the language test score among university students learning English [66]. Similarly, Lueke and Lueke unveil that mindfulness can possibly improve learners' working memory by speeding up their encoding process [67].

The final strategy concerns gradual exposure, which means gradually exposing learners to anxiety-inducing situations and progressively increasing the complexity of tasks can help desensitize them to their fears and build their confidence [68]. This gradual exposure strategy could help students adapt to the tasks gradually rather than directly challenging them with a difficult task that might cause panic. The preparation process and training process could effectively help them deal with the sudden nervousness in language learning. This proves to be particularly effective in speech acquisition of a foreign language, especially in mitigating anxieties associated with public speaking.

## 5. Conclusion

Foreign language anxiety is a pervasive challenge for language learners, affecting their motivation, performance, and overall language proficiency. Understanding the classification of three sub-categories of anxieties including communication apprehension, anxiety for exams, and fear of poor evaluation and how each element relates to each other advances the understanding of language anxiety on a theoretical ground. Further, FLCAS is also reviewed in this paper to help other researchers understand how the abstract mental status of foreign language anxiety could be measured quantitatively in a study. Moving a step further, the research also makes a brief analysis of the causes and lists the possible effective strategies used to mitigate such anxiety. Typical strategies might include promoting a supportive atmosphere, including communicative activities, incorporating mindfulness and relaxation techniques as well as adopting the gradual exposure strategy. With these strategies, language teachers can hopefully empower learners to overcome this psychological barrier in the classroom environment and enhance their language learning experiences.

In conclusion, this review provides a systematic review of foreign language anxiety with a specific focus on how such foreign language anxiety could be measured and reduced. It is a synergistic work that helps readers better understand foreign language anxiety. Future research in this field could look into the effectiveness of different anxiety reduction strategies and their implications for language acquisition and teaching practices.

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