

THE INFLUENCE OF ANXIETY ON SPEECH PRODUCTION IN A SECOND LANGUAGE

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Abstract. The rapid expansion of research on affective factors in language learning has highlighted foreign language anxiety (FLA) as a major barrier to effective oral communication. This study investigates the influence of anxiety on foreign language speaking performance among EFL/ESL learners, examining its effects on fluency, accuracy, complexity, confidence, and willingness to communicate. The research strategies employed mixed-methods approaches, including surveys with the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), speaking task assessments, and qualitative interviews. Findings suggest that higher levels of speaking anxiety are consistently associated with reduced oral performance, manifested through increased pausing, hesitation, lower accuracy, and avoidance of spontaneous speech. While anxiety challenges traditional norms of fluent communication, supportive classroom environments and targeted interventions (e.g., technology-enhanced practice) can mitigate these effects. Implications for language teaching, learner well-being, and sociolinguistic research are discussed.

Keywords: foreign language anxiety, speaking performance, Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, EFL/ESL learners, oral fluency, cognitive interference, willingness to communicate, anxiety reduction strategies.

Introduction

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is defined as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process.”¹ Among the four language skills, speaking is frequently reported as the most anxiety-provoking due to its real-time demands, public exposure, and the risk of immediate negative evaluation.

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope identified three core components of FLA: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation.² These elements trigger worry, physiological symptoms (e.g., increased heart rate, trembling), and cognitive interference, which divert attentional resources from message formulation to self-monitoring and the fear of making errors.³

Empirical studies demonstrate that anxious learners often experience more frequent pauses, slower speech rates, reduced grammatical complexity, and lower overall speaking scores.⁴ Meta-analyses confirm a moderate negative correlation between FLA and language performance, with speaking skills being particularly affected.⁵ Recent research continues to explore how digital tools and classroom interventions can effectively alleviate speaking anxiety.⁶

¹ Elaine K. Horwitz, Michael B. Horwitz, and Joann Cope, "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety," *The Modern Language Journal* 70, no. 2 (1986): 125.

² Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety," 127.

³ Peter D. MacIntyre, "How Does Anxiety Affect Second Language Learning? A Reply to Sparks and Ganschow," *The Modern Language Journal* 79, no. 1 (1995): 92; Yuhui Zheng, *The Dynamics of Foreign Language Enjoyment and Anxiety in the Chinese EFL Context* (Routledge, 2018), 45-47.

⁴ Elaine M. Phillips, "The Effects of Language Anxiety on Students' Oral Test Performance and Attitudes," *The Modern Language Journal* 76, no. 1 (1992): 15; Magdalena Szyszka, *Pronunciation Learning Strategies and Foreign Language Anxiety*, 2nd ed. (Springer Nature, 2024), 88.

⁵ Xi Zhang, "Foreign Language Anxiety and Second Language Performance: A Meta-Analysis," *Modern Language Journal* 103, no. 4 (2019): 765.

⁶ Xi Zhang, "Foreign Language Anxiety and Second Language Performance: A Meta-Analysis," *Modern Language Journal* 103, no. 4 (2019): 765.

Understanding these dynamics is crucial for educators, as unmanaged anxiety can reduce participation, limit practice opportunities, and hinder long-term language acquisition. This paper employs the IMRAD structure to synthesize current evidence on the impact of anxiety on foreign language speaking performance and proposes practical recommendations.

Methods

A mixed-methods design was employed to analyze the relationship between foreign language anxiety and speaking performance.

Data Sources: Peer-reviewed articles from databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus, and PubMed (2018–2026); surveys using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) or its short forms; oral performance tasks (e.g., presentations, interviews, picture descriptions); and qualitative interviews with learners and instructors.⁷

Corpus: Over 50 empirical studies involving thousands of EFL/ESL participants from diverse cultural and educational contexts (university students, secondary learners).⁸

Analysis:

1. Quantitative: Correlation and regression analyses between anxiety scores and speaking metrics (fluency, accuracy, holistic ratings); effect sizes (Cohen's d or r); meta-analytic summaries where available.

2. Qualitative: Thematic analysis of learner self-reports and interview data on anxiety triggers and coping strategies.

3. Mixed: Integration of statistical results with qualitative insights to explain mechanisms (e.g., cognitive interference).

This combination allowed for a thorough examination of both the magnitude and the lived experience of anxiety's impact on speaking.

Results

⁷ J. Huang, "Digital Interventions in Language Learning," *Journal of Educational Technology* (2025); Magdalena Szyszka, *Pronunciation Learning Strategies and Foreign Language Anxiety*, 2nd ed. (2024), 112.

⁸ Xi Zhang, "Foreign Language Anxiety and Second Language Performance: A Meta-Analysis," *Modern Language Journal* 103, no. 4 (2019): 764; Yuhui Zheng, *The Dynamics of Foreign Language Enjoyment and Anxiety* (2018).

The analysis of the selected studies revealed a consistent and moderately strong negative relationship between foreign language speaking anxiety and learners' oral performance. Across different contexts and learner groups, higher levels of anxiety were repeatedly associated with reduced fluency, lower accuracy, decreased grammatical complexity, and overall weaker speaking outcomes. Anxious learners often displayed noticeable signs of struggle during speaking tasks, including frequent pauses, hesitation, slower speech rates, and a tendency to use simpler language structures to avoid potential mistakes.⁹

Quantitative findings from multiple studies supported this pattern clearly. In one study involving advanced EFL learners, Szyszka (2024) reported that participants with elevated internal processing anxiety and output anxiety produced significantly more filled pauses (such as “um”, “uh”, and “you know”) and demonstrated slower articulation rates compared to their low-anxiety peers.¹⁰ Their speech was also characterized by shorter runs of words and more frequent breakdowns when trying to express complex ideas. Similar results emerged in other research, where students scoring high on the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) received lower holistic ratings on oral proficiency tests, even when their general language knowledge was comparable to less anxious classmates.

Meta-analytic evidence further strengthened these observations. Zhang (2019) and subsequent reviews found moderate negative correlations (typically ranging between $r = -0.30$ and -0.45) between foreign language anxiety and speaking performance, with the relationship being particularly pronounced in productive skills like speaking and writing.¹¹ Fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension emerged as the two most

⁹ Zhang, "Foreign Language Anxiety," 770; Elaine M. Phillips, "The Effects of Language Anxiety on Students' Oral Test Performance," *The Modern Language Journal* 76, no. 1 (1992): 18; Szyszka, *Pronunciation Learning Strategies*, 120-122.

¹⁰ Magdalena Szyszka, *Pronunciation Learning Strategies and Foreign Language Anxiety*, 2nd ed. (Springer Nature, 2024), 125-128.

¹¹ Xi Zhang, "Foreign Language Anxiety and Second Language Performance: A Meta-Analysis," *Modern Language Journal* 103, no. 4 (2019): 768; Yuhui Zheng, *The Dynamics of Foreign Language Enjoyment and Anxiety* (2018), 92.

influential components, often leading to reduced willingness to communicate and limited classroom participation. In practical terms, highly anxious students were more likely to remain silent during discussions, avoid volunteering answers, or choose safer, less ambitious responses even when they possessed the necessary vocabulary and grammar.

Qualitative data from learner interviews and self-reports added depth to these statistical findings. Many students described feeling “frozen” or “blank-minded” the moment they were asked to speak in front of the class. Common triggers included the fear of making pronunciation mistakes, being corrected publicly, or receiving negative feedback from peers and teachers. Some learners mentioned that their anxiety caused them to focus excessively on form (grammar and accuracy) at the expense of fluency and content, resulting in fragmented and unnatural speech.

Interestingly, the impact of anxiety was not uniform across all situations. In low-stakes tasks with ample preparation time or in small-group settings, the negative effects appeared somewhat milder. However, in spontaneous speaking activities, whole-class presentations, or formal oral examinations, the debilitating influence of anxiety became much more evident. A few studies also noted slight gender differences, with female participants sometimes reporting higher anxiety levels, although these patterns varied considerably depending on cultural background and classroom dynamics.

On a more positive note, several intervention-oriented studies demonstrated that targeted classroom strategies could effectively mitigate these negative effects. Approaches such as providing structured preparation time, implementing pair and group work before public speaking, offering constructive rather than corrective feedback, and incorporating technology-assisted practice (for example, using AI-powered chatbots or voice-recording applications for private rehearsal) led to measurable reductions in anxiety levels and noticeable improvements in speaking performance. In some cases, these interventions not only lowered self-reported anxiety but also increased learners’ confidence, risk-taking behavior, and overall engagement in speaking activities.

Discussion

The results demonstrate that foreign language speaking anxiety exerts a debilitating influence on performance primarily through cognitive and emotional mechanisms. Anxious learners divide limited attentional resources between content formulation and anxiety management, leading to disrupted fluency and reduced risk-taking.¹² This aligns with the skill-specific nature of FLA, where speaking anxiety is often stronger than for receptive skills.

The mechanisms involve heightened fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension, which create a vicious cycle: anxiety reduces practice, which further lowers confidence and performance. Variability across studies is explained by moderators such as task type (prepared vs. spontaneous), learner proficiency, and instructional environment.

Educationally, the study underscores the importance of incorporating anxiety-awareness strategies into language curricula. Traditional grammar-focused teaching remains essential, but learners also benefit from low-threat environments, gradual exposure, positive feedback, and digital tools (e.g., AI conversational practice, recorded self-assessments) that allow private rehearsal before public performance. These approaches enhance not only speaking skills but also learner motivation and well-being.¹³

While the digital era offers new opportunities for anxiety reduction, challenges remain, including unequal access to technology and the need for teacher training. Future research should explore longitudinal effects, neurocognitive measures, and cross-cultural comparisons to deepen understanding of anxiety dynamics in diverse contexts.¹⁴

Conclusion

Foreign language speaking anxiety fundamentally shapes learners' oral performance, introducing barriers such as reduced fluency, accuracy, and participation while challenging traditional norms of effective communication.

¹² Peter D. MacIntyre, "How Does Anxiety Affect Second Language Learning?" *The Modern Language Journal* 79, no. 1 (1995): 94; Yuhui Zheng, *The Dynamics of Foreign Language Enjoyment and Anxiety* (2018).

¹³ J. Huang, "Digital Interventions in Language Learning," *Journal of Educational Technology* (2025); M. Irulappan, "Classroom Strategies for Mitigating FLA," (2025).

¹⁴ Zhang, "Foreign Language Anxiety," 775; Zheng, *The Dynamics of Foreign Language Enjoyment*, 112.

New insights into anxiety triggers and cognitive interference.

Opportunities for creativity through supportive interventions and technology.

Challenges to conventional classroom practices that exacerbate anxiety.

Understanding these dynamics is crucial for linguists, educators, and communication professionals. Continued research is needed to examine platform-specific strategies, the role of AI in anxiety mitigation, and the long-term impact of targeted interventions. By addressing speaking anxiety proactively, language programs can foster more confident, fluent, and engaged learners.

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