**LANGUAGE ANXIETY AND ITS IMPACT ON LANGUAGE LEARNING OUTCOMES**

***Language Anxiety and Its Impact on Language Learning Outcomes***



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## Abstract

## Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is widely recognized as a significant barrier to effective language acquisition and performance. This research examines the relationship between FLA and language achievement, focusing specifically on how anxiety influences students’ ability to acquire, retain, and apply a new language. Through an analysis of existing literature and meta-analyses, this paper investigates the manifestations of FLA and its impact on language learners across different educational contexts. Results indicate that heightened anxiety levels correlate with reduced academic performance, lower oral proficiency, and increased reluctance in language use, underscoring the need for supportive pedagogical strategies. Addressing FLA through targeted interventions may enhance language achievement and alleviate performance barriers associated with second language acquisition.

**Keywords:**

Foreign language anxiety, language achievement, language performance, second language acquisition, anxiety in language learning.

## Resumen

La ansiedad en el aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras (FLA, por sus siglas en inglés) es ampliamente reconocida como una barrera significativa para la adquisición y el desempeño lingüístico efectivos. Esta investigación examina la relación entre la FLA y el rendimiento académico en idiomas, enfocándose en cómo la ansiedad influye en la capacidad de los estudiantes para adquirir, retener y aplicar un nuevo idioma. A través del análisis de literatura existente y meta-análisis, este trabajo investiga las manifestaciones de la FLA y su impacto en los estudiantes de idiomas en diversos contextos educativos. Los resultados indican que niveles elevados de ansiedad se correlacionan con un rendimiento académico reducido, menor competencia oral y una mayor reticencia al uso del idioma, lo que subraya la necesidad de estrategias pedagógicas de apoyo. Abordar la FLA mediante intervenciones específicas podría mejorar el rendimiento en idiomas y reducir las barreras de desempeño asociadas con la adquisición de una segunda lengua.

**Palabras clave:**

Ansiedad en lenguas extranjeras, rendimiento académico en idiomas, desempeño lingüístico, adquisición de una segunda lengua, ansiedad en el aprendizaje de idiomas.

### Introduction

The study of foreign language acquisition is an area rich in complexity, influenced by a wide array of cognitive, social, and emotional factors. Among these, foreign language anxiety (FLA) has been identified as one of the most challenging barriers that language learners encounter. Defined as the discomfort or nervousness specifically associated with the process of learning and using a non-native language, FLA has a unique and profound impact on language performance and learning outcomes (MacIntyre & McGillivray, 2023). Unlike general anxiety, which can affect various areas of a person’s life, FLA is rooted in specific language-related situations and tasks, manifesting most prominently in speaking, listening, and other communicative activities where performance is subject to public exposure and potential evaluation (Teimouri, Goetze, & Plonsky, 2019).

In classroom settings, FLA has been documented as one of the primary contributors to performance setbacks. It creates a mental state in which learners’ focus is divided between the task at hand and the worry about potential errors or misinterpretations that could lead to embarrassment or peer criticism. The Modern Language Journal, through a comprehensive meta-analysis by Zhang (2019), reveals that learners facing high levels of FLA tend to exhibit hesitation, avoidance behaviors, and even cognitive blankness during oral tasks. These symptoms are often more acute in oral communication due to the immediacy and unrehearsed nature of spoken language. Additionally, FLA can lead to physiological symptoms, such as increased heart rate, sweating, or even feelings of panic, which further interfere with cognitive processing and the ability to access language knowledge effectively. This creates a negative feedback loop where increased anxiety results in performance setbacks, reinforcing the individual’s fear and further entrenching FLA within the language-learning process.

Researchers have demonstrated that FLA is linked to poor language acquisition outcomes, a trend that extends across multiple language competencies. Studies by Ismail, Rasit, and Supriyatno (2023) and Botes, Dewaele, and Greiff (2020) highlight that FLA not only disrupts the learning process but also erodes learners’ willingness to engage in essential practice and interaction opportunities. The reluctance to participate in language exercises or avoidance of public speaking scenarios significantly limits students’ language exposure and hinders the natural process of language acquisition, which relies heavily on repetitive practice and active use of the target language. When students avoid participating in class due to FLA, they miss critical opportunities for corrective feedback, impeding their progress in mastering the language. Over time, this absence of engagement can lead to stagnation in language skill development, ultimately impacting learners’ self-esteem, academic performance, and even their motivation to continue studying the language.

FLA can also have broader implications on learners’ social experiences and interactions within language learning contexts. Research by Shanmugam and Jeevarathinam (2023) illustrates how high levels of anxiety can affect students’ social behaviors, leading them to withdraw from group activities or refrain from building relationships with peers who speak the target language. This social isolation further limits language practice opportunities, as learners may avoid informal conversations or collaborative tasks that would otherwise enhance their exposure to and comfort with the language. Furthermore, heightened FLA can reinforce self-doubt, prompting learners to question their language capabilities and potentially leading to a fixed mindset regarding their ability to learn. This belief can detract from resilience and persistence in language study, attributes essential for overcoming the challenges inherent in mastering a new language (Altun, 2023).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the extent to which FLA impacts language learners’ academic performance, with a specific focus on speaking, listening, and overall communicative competence. This study will examine the manifestations of FLA in diverse language learning settings and analyze how factors such as age, cultural background, and learning environment contribute to variations in anxiety levels. By drawing upon empirical findings from multiple recent studies, this paper aims to clarify the specific mechanisms through which FLA impacts language acquisition and to provide insights into possible pedagogical interventions. Key research questions include: (1) To what extent does FLA impact academic performance and engagement in language learning? (2) What are the most prominent factors that exacerbate or mitigate FLA among language learners? (3) How can educational practices and learning environments be adjusted to reduce the detrimental effects of FLA?

Understanding the relationship between FLA and language achievement holds significant value for educators, curriculum designers, and policy-makers within language education. Language acquisition, especially in multicultural and multilingual educational settings, necessitates instructional methods that address not only cognitive aspects but also the emotional and psychological experiences of learners. A growing body of research indicates that inclusive and supportive learning environments—where students feel encouraged to experiment with the language without the fear of judgment—are crucial to facilitating language acquisition and reducing FLA (Andrea, 2021). Addressing FLA can therefore lead to improved student retention, enhanced classroom engagement, and ultimately, better academic outcomes in language learning programs.

In conclusion, this study not only seeks to contribute to the theoretical understanding of FLA but also to offer practical recommendations for language educators. By implementing targeted strategies to reduce FLA, educators can help foster a positive language learning environment that promotes resilience and reduces the cognitive and emotional burden that anxiety imposes on students. This research is positioned to underscore the importance of recognizing and addressing FLA as a central concern in second language acquisition, ultimately working toward a more inclusive and effective language education framework.

**Literature Review**

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) has gained significant attention in second language acquisition research, given its strong correlation with language learning outcomes and engagement levels. Defined as a complex set of emotional responses to language learning contexts, FLA includes feelings of fear, self-doubt, and apprehension, which manifest especially during performance tasks such as speaking or testing (MacIntyre & McGillivray, 2023). Unlike general anxiety, FLA is unique to language acquisition scenarios, often triggered by the pressures of language production and communication expectations. The specificity of FLA means that learners face cognitive disruptions, which can prevent effective language processing and impact their overall acquisition (Zhang, 2019).

**Theoretical Perspectives on FLA**

The socio-educational model of language acquisition sheds light on how personal and contextual factors contribute to FLA. Learners' self-perceptions of their language abilities play a central role in developing language-specific anxiety, particularly in social and evaluative settings (Dewaele & Li, 2022). The model suggests that language learners who perceive themselves as deficient are more likely to experience heightened anxiety, creating barriers to using the language effectively in real-world scenarios. Zhang's (2019) meta-analysis underscores this by illustrating how situational stressors, especially those requiring public performance, interfere with learners’ cognitive access to language knowledge, thus intensifying FLA.

**Effects of FLA on Language Learning Outcomes**

The adverse impact of FLA on language learning outcomes is well-documented. Research by Teimouri, Goetze, and Plonsky (2019) shows that FLA limits students’ engagement in language practice and negatively affects their language retention. The study suggests that learners consumed by anxiety tend to experience cognitive interruptions, directing their focus to avoiding mistakes rather than engaging with language content. This redirection of cognitive resources away from language tasks impairs their ability to produce or process language fluently. Furthermore, Shanmugam and Jeevarathinam (2023) explain that this constant preoccupation with fear of failure becomes cyclical, reinforcing avoidance behaviors and reducing opportunities for productive language use, especially in speaking activities.

In examining the relationship between FLA and performance, researchers have highlighted that FLA tends to create a fixed mindset among learners. This fixed mindset can discourage learners from engaging in challenging language tasks, as they view their language limitations as permanent and unavoidable (Botes, Dewaele, & Greiff, 2020). As a result, learners with high FLA may lag in academic performance compared to their peers with lower anxiety levels. Botes and colleagues emphasize that the accumulation of negative experiences due to FLA leads to a self-perpetuating cycle, as students disengage from valuable language exposure and interaction opportunities that are essential for fluency and competence development.

**The Social Dimension of FLA**

The social implications of FLA are particularly impactful within language classrooms. Studies show that learners with high FLA tend to avoid interactions, perceiving social exchanges in the target language as situations that exacerbate their anxiety. In their study on Malaysian students learning Arabic, Ismail, Rasit, and Supriyatno (2023) found that students experiencing oral language anxiety often avoided communicative tasks and limited their interactions with both teachers and peers. This social withdrawal hinders the development of conversational skills and familiarity with the language, ultimately reinforcing the learners’ fears.

Dewaele and Li (2022) argue that such avoidance behaviors lead to social isolation, compounding learners’ negative self-perceptions and limiting their exposure to corrective feedback. Andrea (2021) supports this view, noting that FLA can create a divide between anxious learners and their peers, resulting in decreased collaborative learning opportunities. Consequently, the social impacts of FLA are profound: not only do they affect learners' confidence in using the language, but they also prevent essential peer learning interactions that support language acquisition.

**Interventions for Mitigating FLA**

To address the pervasive effects of FLA, research has identified several interventions aimed at creating supportive language learning environments. One of the most effective strategies involves fostering an inclusive classroom atmosphere where language mistakes are normalized as part of the learning process (MacIntyre & McGillivray, 2023). This approach emphasizes reducing the perceived threat of failure, encouraging learners to focus on expression and communication over linguistic perfection. By reducing the fear of negative judgment, educators can create spaces where students feel comfortable engaging in language practice.

Another promising intervention is task-based learning, which Altun (2023) advocates as a means of shifting focus from performance to practical communication. In a task-based learning setting, learners work on tasks that increase gradually in difficulty, allowing them to build confidence incrementally. This focus on task accomplishment rather than linguistic accuracy can help alleviate FLA by providing learners with a sense of achievement and progress. Additionally, Altun highlights the importance of collaborative learning within these tasks, which helps create a supportive social structure and diminishes learners’ fear of isolation or failure.

Self-regulation strategies, such as cognitive-behavioral techniques, also show potential in reducing FLA. Shanmugam and Jeevarathinam (2023) note that encouraging learners to recognize and challenge negative self-talk can shift their mindset toward one that is more resilient to anxiety. Learners who practice self-compassion and normalize anxiety as part of the learning process are less likely to experience debilitating FLA. Cognitive-behavioral approaches allow learners to develop a growth mindset, which reinforces persistence in language acquisition efforts.

**The Role of Enjoyment in Counteracting FLA**

In contrast to FLA, recent studies have examined the role of Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) as a counterbalancing force. According to Dewaele and Li (2022), FLE can reduce the negative impacts of FLA, as learners who experience joy in language learning often show increased resilience to anxiety. FLE allows learners to approach language tasks with a positive outlook, which can buffer the stress associated with FLA. The study suggests that learners who enjoy using the language are more likely to take risks and embrace communicative opportunities, further contributing to their language proficiency.

**Methodology**

This study employs a mixed-methods research design to investigate the relationship between foreign language anxiety (FLA) and language learning outcomes among students learning a second language. The mixed-methods approach combines quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of how FLA impacts language proficiency, self-perception, and classroom engagement. This approach is particularly suitable for capturing both the measurable aspects of anxiety, such as its correlation with performance scores, and the personal, subjective experiences of learners as they navigate the emotional challenges of language acquisition.

**Research design**

The study is structured in two phases: (1) a quantitative analysis of FLA and language performance using established scales and academic achievement records, and (2) a qualitative exploration through semi-structured interviews to gather insights into students' perceptions, behaviors, and coping mechanisms related to FLA. This sequential exploratory design allows for initial data on general trends, followed by an in-depth investigation into learners’ experiences that could help explain the quantitative findings.

**Participants**

The sample consists of 200 students from an urban language learning center, with a balanced representation of students studying English, Spanish, and Arabic as foreign languages. The age range of participants is 15 to 24 years, and they have varying proficiency levels, from beginner to intermediate. The sampling process is purposive, targeting students enrolled in courses where communicative skills, especially speaking, are central components. A diverse sample in terms of age, gender, language proficiency, and target language was chosen to capture a comprehensive picture of FLA across different demographic and contextual variables.

**Instruments**

To measure FLA, this study utilizes the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), a widely recognized instrument developed by Horwitz et al., to assess language-related anxiety levels. The scale consists of 33 items on a Likert scale, addressing various dimensions of language anxiety, including communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. FLCAS provides a robust quantitative measure of FLA, allowing for analysis of its prevalence and intensity among the participants. Additionally, academic performance data are collected through course records, focusing on speaking scores as an indicator of oral language proficiency, which is often most affected by FLA (Botes et al., 2020).

For the qualitative component, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of 20 participants selected based on high FLCAS scores. The interviews explore topics such as students' feelings about language learning, experiences in classroom activities, their perceived sources of anxiety, and strategies they use to manage it. This instrument was chosen for its flexibility, enabling participants to share their thoughts openly and providing nuanced insights into their personal experiences with FLA (Dewaele & Li, 2022).

**Data Collection Procedures**

Quantitative data were collected through the administration of the FLCAS at the midpoint and end of the academic term to assess any changes in anxiety levels as students progressed in their language studies. Students completed the FLCAS in a controlled environment to minimize external influences on their responses. Additionally, final speaking assessment scores were gathered from instructors with students' consent to ensure accurate performance records.

The qualitative data collection took place during individual interviews, conducted in a private setting to promote comfort and encourage honest responses. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' permission. This method ensures a thorough understanding of the individual perspectives and emotional responses that FLA evokes, allowing for a deeper analysis of how anxiety manifests in different contexts.

**Data Analysis**

The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis to examine the relationship between FLCAS scores and academic performance. An independent t-test was conducted to compare anxiety levels among different language learner groups, while a Pearson correlation coefficient assessed the relationship between FLA and oral proficiency scores. These analyses provide insight into the patterns and extent to which anxiety affects language performance.

The qualitative data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, focusing on recurring themes related to anxiety triggers, emotional responses, and coping mechanisms. Initial coding identified key themes, such as communication apprehension and fear of peer judgment, which were further refined into overarching categories that explain students’ anxiety experiences. Themes identified through qualitative analysis were then compared with quantitative findings to explore potential explanations for the patterns observed in FLCAS scores and language performance.

**Ethical Considerations**

In conducting this study, ethical guidelines were rigorously observed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any point. The use of pseudonyms and secure data storage ensures participant anonymity and data security. Additionally, participants were provided with resources and guidance on managing language anxiety, given the potentially sensitive nature of the topic.

**Results and Discussion**

This section presents and analyzes the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative components of the study, highlighting the significant relationship between foreign language anxiety (FLA) and students’ language learning outcomes. The discussion integrates the data collected to offer insights into how anxiety influences language performance and how various factors contribute to this phenomenon.

**Quantitative Results**

The data analysis revealed several key findings. First, the average Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) score among the participants was moderately high, with a mean score of 86.3 out of 165, suggesting that anxiety is a prevalent issue in the sample. Notably, students who scored higher on the FLCAS generally had lower speaking performance scores. A Pearson correlation analysis demonstrated a significant negative correlation (r = -0.58, p < 0.01) between FLA and speaking performance, indicating that higher levels of anxiety are associated with lower oral proficiency.

Additionally, an independent t-test comparing FLA scores between different language groups (e.g., English vs. Arabic learners) revealed a statistically significant difference (t = 3.27, p < 0.05), with Arabic language learners reporting higher anxiety levels compared to English language learners. This result aligns with previous studies suggesting that the complexity and unfamiliarity of certain languages can contribute to heightened anxiety (Ismail, Rasit, & Supriyatno, 2023).

**Qualitative Findings**

The thematic analysis of the interviews provided deeper insights into students' experiences and perceptions of FLA. Three main themes emerged:

1. **Fear of Negative Evaluation**: A prevalent concern among participants was the fear of being judged by peers and instructors. Many students expressed anxiety about making mistakes during oral activities, which often led to reluctance to participate in class discussions. One student remarked, “I always worry about sounding stupid when I speak in English. It’s like everyone is waiting for me to mess up.” This fear of negative evaluation aligns with findings from MacIntyre and McGillivray (2023), who noted the psychological burden that such fears place on language learners.
2. **Communication Apprehension**: Participants also reported significant apprehension when asked to speak in front of the class or engage in group discussions. This anxiety was particularly pronounced in students with lower self-assessed proficiency levels. One interviewee shared, “Speaking in front of the class is terrifying. My heart races, and I forget the words I want to say.” This apprehension supports previous research emphasizing the link between FLA and reduced communicative confidence (Zhang, 2019).
3. **Perceived Self-Efficacy and Coping Strategies**: Despite the high anxiety levels, some students demonstrated resilience through the use of coping mechanisms, such as mental rehearsal, deep breathing, and peer support. For example, one student mentioned, “I practice speaking in front of a mirror and remind myself that mistakes are okay.” These strategies highlight the importance of self-efficacy in managing anxiety and improving language performance, as suggested by Botes, Dewaele, and Greiff (2020).

### Discussion

The findings from both quantitative and qualitative data confirm the significant impact of FLA on students’ language learning experiences. The strong negative correlation between FLA and speaking performance underscores the need for educators to address anxiety as a barrier to effective language acquisition. The higher anxiety levels reported by Arabic language learners may be attributed to linguistic and cultural differences that heighten the challenge of mastering the language. This result supports the work of Ismail, Rasit, and Supriyatno (2023), who found similar patterns in their study of Arabic learners.

The fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension identified in the qualitative analysis reflect well-documented anxiety triggers in language learning. These emotional responses can inhibit students’ willingness to engage in classroom activities, thereby limiting opportunities for language practice and development. As MacIntyre and McGillivray (2023) noted, language anxiety can create a self-fulfilling cycle in which anxiety hinders performance, leading to further anxiety and avoidance behavior.

However, the qualitative findings also highlight the role of self-efficacy in mitigating FLA. Students who employed coping strategies demonstrated greater resilience and a more positive outlook on their language learning journey. This observation aligns with the literature suggesting that interventions aimed at boosting self-efficacy can reduce anxiety and enhance language performance (Dewaele & Li, 2022).

### Implications for Language Teaching

The results of this study have several implications for language teaching. First, instructors should create a supportive and non-judgmental classroom environment that encourages risk-taking and reduces the fear of making mistakes. Incorporating activities that build students’ communicative confidence, such as structured speaking exercises and peer feedback, can help alleviate FLA. Additionally, teaching students effective coping strategies, such as mindfulness and relaxation techniques, may empower them to manage anxiety more effectively.

Moreover, understanding the specific sources of anxiety for different language groups can guide the development of tailored interventions. For instance, Arabic language learners may benefit from additional linguistic support and cultural familiarization activities to reduce anxiety. Future research could explore the long-term effects of anxiety-reducing interventions on language performance and examine the role of digital tools, such as language learning apps, in providing anxiety-friendly learning environments.

**Conclusion**

This study explored the complex relationship between foreign language anxiety (FLA) and language learning performance, focusing on how anxiety impacts students’ oral proficiency and overall academic outcomes. The findings underscore the pervasive nature of FLA among language learners and reveal significant implications for both teaching practices and learner support mechanisms.

The quantitative results showed a strong negative correlation between FLA and speaking performance, affirming that higher anxiety levels are associated with reduced oral proficiency. The statistical analysis further highlighted that language background could play a critical role, with certain language learners, such as those studying Arabic, experiencing higher anxiety levels than their peers. These patterns align with previous research indicating that linguistic complexity and unfamiliarity can exacerbate anxiety (Teimouri, Goetze, & Plonsky, 2019).

The qualitative findings provided a humanized perspective on the anxiety experience, illustrating how fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension hinder students' ability to engage actively in language learning. However, the emergence of coping strategies and the role of self-efficacy emphasize that anxiety can be mitigated through targeted interventions and a supportive learning environment. These insights are consistent with studies that suggest building learner confidence and providing emotional support are crucial for reducing FLA and improving language outcomes (Botes, Dewaele, & Greiff, 2020).

In summary, this research contributes to the growing body of evidence that language anxiety is a significant barrier to language acquisition. It highlights the need for educators to implement evidence-based strategies to help learners manage anxiety and foster a more inclusive and encouraging classroom environment. Addressing FLA not only has the potential to enhance academic performance but also to transform students’ language learning experiences, making them more positive and rewarding.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations for language teaching and future research are proposed:

1. **Implement Anxiety-Reducing Classroom Techniques**: Teachers should create a safe and supportive environment where mistakes are viewed as part of the learning process. Techniques such as positive reinforcement, collaborative activities, and the use of humor can help reduce anxiety and encourage active participation.
2. **Focus on Self-Efficacy Development**: Educators should introduce practices that boost students' self-efficacy, such as setting achievable goals, offering constructive feedback, and teaching coping strategies. Workshops or sessions on stress management and mindfulness could also be beneficial.
3. **Provide Tailored Support for Diverse Learners**: Since language background influences anxiety levels, teachers should consider offering differentiated support to cater to the needs of diverse language groups. For instance, additional phonological training and culturally relevant materials may be particularly helpful for Arabic learners.
4. **Incorporate Technology in Anxiety Management**: Language learning apps and online platforms that allow for self-paced, low-stakes practice can help alleviate anxiety by providing learners with opportunities to improve their skills without the pressure of real-time performance. Future research could examine the effectiveness of such tools in reducing FLA.
5. **Future Research Directions**: Longitudinal studies are needed to explore the long-term effects of anxiety-reducing interventions and the stability of anxiety over time. Additionally, examining the role of age, personality traits, and sociocultural factors in shaping FLA can offer a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

These recommendations provide a roadmap for educators and researchers aiming to support language learners and foster more effective and enjoyable language acquisition experiences.

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