

Language Anxiety among EFL Learners: A Review of Causes and Effects

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Abstract

This paper reviews various studies on students' fear of using the English language, commonly known as language anxiety. Many students, especially non-native speakers, experience anxiety when speaking English due to fear of making mistakes, being judged, or lacking confidence. This review analyzed 21 articles published between 2011 and 2024 that investigate students' anxiety in language learning and its effects, organized thematically and in chronological order. All the key influences such as psychological factors, emotional responses, environmental influences, and the cultural factors that affect students' fear of using the English language will be examined on how they are interconnected with each other. The findings show that language anxiety can seriously harm a student's academic performance and self-confidence. The review suggests that supportive, friendly, and less judgmental learning environments can help students become more comfortable and confident in using English. It is recommended that further research is needed to develop tailored interventions and include diverse learner populations and every factor that could potentially contribute to the student's English language anxiety, not only focusing on one factor.

Keywords: Language Anxiety, Effect of Language Anxiety, Academic Performance, Self-Confidence, Learning Environment

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Introduction

The study of students' fear of language has gained increasing attention in recent years due to its significant impact on English language learning. Speaking English is a challenging activity that almost every language user has difficulty coping with in different circumstances (Mustafa, 2021). As language anxiety continues to evolve, researchers seek to understand its implications, challenges, and potential effects on students' communication skills. Anxiety while speaking English can lead to a fear of delivering speeches fluently, making it difficult for students to express themselves confidently. Several key factors contribute to this anxiety, including low self-confidence, fear of negative evaluation, and limited exposure to authentic English (Ziauddin et al., 2024; Mari et al., 2024). Additionally, the rapid globalization and increasing demand for English proficiency in academic and professional contexts have heightened pressure on learners, intensifying their anxiety and fear of language use (Hakim, 2019). Externally, social, and relational factors, such as teacher expectations, peer perceptions, and the fear of negative evaluation or judgment from others, are significant contributors to speaking



anxiety (Akaraphattanawong, Hongsiwat, & Methakunavudhi, 2024; Dellah et al., 2020; Quvanch, Qasemi, & Si Na, 2024). English speaking anxiety can impede effective communication and hinder the language acquisition process. Its impact can be observed across various educational levels and among diverse groups, from junior high school students to graduate students, non-English major academics, and university students (Palomargareta & Astutik, 2024; Akaraphattanawong, Hongsiwat, & Methakunavudhi, 2024; Yildiz, 2021; Dellah et al., 2020; Nguyen, 2022).

Given the growing concern over language anxiety, it is crucial to analyze the struggles students face and explore strategies to help them overcome these challenges. Public speaking continues to be a significant challenge for students, especially within academic settings. Effective interventions include professional support and strategies such as gradual exposure to speaking tasks, positive self-talk, cognitive-behavioral techniques, and creating supportive, low-stress learning environments (Dwi et al., 2019). Effective coping strategies included engaging with authentic English, utilizing social media, seeking constructive feedback, and practicing regularly (Quvanch, Qasemi, & Si Na, 2024). Moreover, integrating technology like language learning apps and virtual reality simulations has shown promise in providing safe spaces for practice and reducing anxiety. Understanding these factors provides a foundation for addressing language anxiety and enhancing students' overall learning experience.

The importance of this topic lies in its widespread impact on students' academic success and emotional well-being. Research indicates that Foreign Language Anxiety negatively affects language performance, self-confidence, and classroom participation (Horwitz et al., 1986; Mohamad et al., 2009). For example, some studies have found that speaking activities provoke the highest levels of anxiety among students, leading to avoidance behaviors and reduced engagement. Addressing this issue is critical in fostering effective learning environments and improving students' linguistic outcomes.

We aim for this review to generally identify the effect of the student's fear of language and how it impacts their performances academically and professionally. Specifically, we are going to analyze the psychological factors contributing to English Language Anxiety, identify emotional responses that influence students' language learning, assess environmental influences on language-related anxiety and explore the cultural factors that affect students' fear of using the English language.

This review comprehensively examines all the key influences that significantly contribute to an individual's anxiety when using the English language and how this anxiety impacts a student's academic performance. The factors that will be explored in depth include psychological aspects, such as self-esteem, cognitive processing, and language apprehension; emotional factors, including fear of judgment, past experiences, and self-confidence; environmental influences, such as classroom dynamics, peer interactions, and access to language resources; and cultural aspects, including societal expectations, linguistic background, and the role of native language interference. By analyzing these interconnected elements, this review aims to provide a thorough understanding of the challenges students face and the extent to which language anxiety affects their long-term success and opportunities in various fields.

By analyzing these interconnected elements, this review seeks to provide a thorough understanding of the challenges students face and the extent to which language anxiety affects their long-term success and opportunities across various fields. It also aims to inform educators, policymakers, and curriculum designers about the importance of creating inclusive, empathetic, and adaptive language learning environments that can mitigate anxiety and foster confidence. Ultimately, addressing students' fear of language is essential not only for improving academic achievement but also for empowering learners to participate fully in an increasingly interconnected world (Hakim, 2019).

Research Method

The paper reviewed 21 articles published between 2011 and 2024 that investigate students' anxiety in language learning and its effects. These studies identified causes such as fear of making mistakes, negative evaluation, and unsupportive teaching environments, which often result in reduced participation, low confidence, and poor performance. Using keywords like "language anxiety," "causes of language anxiety," "effects of language anxiety," and "fear of negative evaluation," the researchers searched databases including Google Scholar, ERIC, JSTOR, and ResearchGate. Each article was systematically reviewed in a thematic and chronological order based on its methodology and findings.

Result and Discussion

Psychological Factors Contributing to English Language Anxiety

Psychological factors specifically related to the perception of the self and self-esteem are contributing mostly to English language anxiety. Low self-confidence and self-esteem are psychological factors that contribute mostly to anxiety, non-English speakers particularly, exacerbating discomfort and uneasiness during public speaking which can potentially affect the academic standing.

According to Akaraphattanawong (2024), students' fear and anxiety stem from internal barriers such as confusion, trembling, rapid heartbeat, nervousness, shyness, introversion, and perfectionism. These factors lead to communication apprehension, mental blocks, and avoidance of participation, significantly impairing students' ability to perform in English-speaking tasks. Tiang-uan (2024) also highlighted that the main cause of the speaking anxiety, according to their study on Thai high school students, are the lack of confidence and the fear of committing grammatical mistakes. In the same way, Dang (2024) linked the issue on linguistic competence, such as the weak vocabulary and grammar skills, to have significant contribution in increasing the anxiety, which suggests that lack of competence in linguistics can hinder the students' self-confidence to use the English language without fear of negative evaluations.

Further, Quvanch et al., (2024) and Astutik (2024) address in their study that worry over grammar, pronunciation mistakes, and fear of negative evaluation—especially from peers and teachers—are dominant issues, with students often monitoring their speech for errors and fearing public

judgment, which further disrupts their communication flow. Soriano & Co (2022) also mentioned in their study on Filipino students that the lack of confidence and the inability to express ideas were major contributors to anxiety. To add, the study of Hakim (2019) also identifies self-consciousness and self-awareness regarding oral reproduction as key psychological factors contributing to language anxiety among English language learners in Saudi Arabia. The study emphasizes learners' perceptions of themselves in relation to others, such as peers and teachers, as a significant internal stimulus for anxiety.

Further, identifying the influence of English language anxiety to academic achievement, Halder (2018) stated that academic achievement is directly impacted by the student's self-doubt with regards to their English proficiency. While, Hashemi (2011) also identifies that a weak sense of self and the fear of losing self-identity contribute significantly to the language anxiety in the classrooms and social contexts.

Overall, these research studies imply that psychological weaknesses such as the fear of negative evaluation, low self-confidence, weak linguistic skills, and the fear of losing self-identity are barriers that has been deeply-rooted which is now hindering the learning of English language.

Emotional Responses That Influence Students' Language Use

Emotional reactions such as intense nervousness, fear of making mistakes, embarrassment, and memory loss during performances are widely recognized to hinder effective communication. Several studies recognize emotional responses; racing heartbeats, trembling, and mental blocks as a contributor to the students' fear of the English language which in result, could potentially affect their academic achievement negatively.

According to Chan et al. (2024) the study revealed that emotional anxiety is not limited to affecting the speaking ability, it affects both reading and speaking skills. Students who have difficulty in learning exhibit high emotional stress than others during reading tasks, which connects emotional responses to the challenges on learning basic comprehension skills. Soriano and Co (2022) provided a wider emotional lens, which shows how classroom performance decline, limited social interaction, and negative perception of self are often the result of English language anxiety.

Moreover, Dallah et al. (2020) draw attention to gender-related differences, the study's finding stated that female students tend to be more anxious when it comes to using the language in oral tasks because of emotional sensitivity and the fear of what their peers have to say about them. Additionally, Gatcho and Hajan (2019) emphasized in their study that the fear of communicating to other people, and the fear of negative evaluation are emotional reactions which stemmed from the students being worried about what their peers have to say about their language use and may judge them as incompetent.

In the year 2019, Gatcho and Hajan found that a massive number of Filipino students have experienced an intense fear that made them skipped the classes of English subjects when they are

scheduled to present. This fear does not stem from their lack of researched content, but it is rooted from their fear and anxiety by how they will be judged and ridiculed by their peers, teachers, or other people because of their ability to speak the language.

Also, Hakim (2019) notes that emotions like fear, stress, and nervousness are frequently reported by English language learners. The study also points out that self-conscious and fear of making mistake contributes mostly to student's classroom anxiety which often resulted to the student avoiding practicing and using the language completely.

Thus, emotional distress like fear and frustration do not merely exist alongside with language anxiety they can also impact future anxieties and can actively disable the ability to learn and use the language proficiently.

Learning Environmental Influences on Language-Related Anxiety

Environmental factors, including audience size, peer judgment, and fear of laughter, are significant contributors to students' anxiety. Several studies revealed the students' anxiety is not only personal, but it is significantly shaped by the status of surroundings and the people that surrounds them during the language use.

According to Rosayanti (2024) among the Indonesian high school students, they identified the peer pressure and teaching methods that are strict to be the major environmental factors that trigger and contributed significantly to the anxiety related to English language. In the same year, Tiang-uan (2024) stated that Thai teachers observed in their students that they will give up instantly and completely during oral assessments. This behavior was traced to a classroom culture where mistakes were penalized instantly instead of using it as a learning tool to develop and improve communication skills. This study further emphasized that a classroom environment that is highly evaluative most especially those classrooms that have a high emphasis on public speaking without any supportive structure can significantly worsen the students' language anxiety.

Moreover, Hanafi and Adwitiya (2022) emphasized that early childhood education teachers contributed significantly on building the student's anxiety on English language. However, one teacher reported feeling terrified and awful to teach English lessons due to the lack of preparation and proper training by their institution. The teacher admits to be avoiding the incorporation of English completely, which greatly impacted the students' early language acquisition and exposure.

In 2019, Gatcho and Hajan emphasized that questioning unexpectedly and comparing a student to another student heightened that fear of public embarrassment which significantly hinders language learning. Calling a student when they not ready yet is mainly the factors to trigger a students' anxiety and discomfort in using the language. One student even shared that she dreaded being picked because she was once been laughed and judged due to her non-fluent pronunciation and mispronunciation.

Therefore, the following studies confirmed that a classroom environment that is strict, highly evaluative, lacks supportive structure, and overemphasized being grammatically correct can raise the level of students' English language anxiety.

Cultural Factors That Affect Students' Fear of Using English

Cultural expectations and norms, such as the fear of losing face, being laughed at, or not meeting native-like proficiency standards, significantly increase students' anxiety in English-speaking contexts. Culture has been one of the most common influences to English language anxiety, it intersects with the identity, class, and self-worth.

In a recent study, Akaraphattanawongi (2024) discovered that institutional culture, specifically the high-end private universities often placed pressure on students to demonstrate a skill in English language to the point where it is a near-native proficiency, which resulted to the exacerbation of their fear of failure and committing mistakes. Yildiz (2021) supported this statement by stating that cultural expectations on English proficiency caused the academics to experience severe anxiety, fearing professional and social judgement.

Additionally, on another study, Quvanch et al., (2024) also identifies that cultural mismatch, misunderstandings, and societal pressures-such as the emphasis on competition or saving face-further intensify fear and insecurity. Soriano & Co (2022), supported this claim in his findings that cultural beliefs contributed to anxiety and shyness during oral English discussions and assessments. On another study, Nguyen (2022) stated that a supportive environment that focus on content rather than peer judgment can help alleviate these culturally rooted anxieties and encourage greater willingness to communicate in English language.

Moreover, a personal and valid account by student to prove the claims further, Hakim (2019) shared the statement of an Arab student who is capable of speaking English but refuse to use it in public because it made her feel "less Arab". This proves that cultural preservation and fear of assimilation can impact proficient users. It is also stated in this study that the fear of losing identity in a society wherein English is viewed as foreign, severed the anxiety felt with the use of English language.

Thus, researches shows that English language anxiety or the students' fear of English language is not all psychological and educational issue, rather it is already deeply embedded in the culture of different people.

Conclusion

The reviewed papers show that students' fear of using English stems from a combination of psychological, emotional, environmental, and cultural factors. Low self-confidence, fear of negative judgment, and limited language skills increase anxiety, which harms communication and academic success. Emotional reactions like nervousness and embarrassment often cause students to avoid speaking or skip classes. Strict classroom environments and unsupportive teaching methods worsen

anxiety, while cultural pressures related to identity and societal expectations further heighten fear. This anxiety can have lasting negative effects on learning and future opportunities. However, improving language proficiency and providing authentic English exposure can reduce anxiety and build confidence.

To address this, educators should enhance language instruction with comprehensive grammar and vocabulary teaching and offer real-life communication opportunities. Creating supportive, low-pressure classrooms where mistakes are seen as learning opportunities is crucial. Teachers should avoid public shaming and harsh comparisons and encourage small group work and peer support. Psychological and emotional support, including confidence-building activities and counseling, is also important. Culturally sensitive teaching that respects diverse identities and focuses on content over native-like proficiency can reduce stigma. Professional development for teachers to recognize and support anxious students is essential.

Further research is needed to develop tailored interventions and include diverse learner populations. Implementing these recommendations will help create empathetic, supportive, and culturally aware learning environments that reduce language anxiety, improve academic outcomes, and empower students for global success. Likewise, future research should include every factor that could potentially contribute to the student's English language anxiety and should not focus only on one. Student's language anxiety does not stem only from one aspect it may come from their emotional responses, psychological factors, environmental influences, cultural understanding, or it may come from all the mentioned possibilities.

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