



# The Effects of Foreign Language Anxiety and Countermeasures

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**Abstract.** In the process of foreign language learning, learners usually express foreign language anxiety which debilitates the process of learning a new language for the most part. Therefore, this kind of issue makes learning foreign languages extremely difficult. Nevertheless, anxiety can sometimes motivate students to learn the language. Hence, this article reviews the definition of language anxiety and distinguishes this specific one from general anxiety in terms of psychological area. Additionally, in this article, the detailed effects aroused by anxiety from negative and positive aspects are summarized to help instructors recognize the students who suffer from language anxiety so that they can enable them to adjust their teaching methods timely. This article contributes to the educational area that practical methods can not only correct learners' misconceptions but also be instrumented to alleviate learners' anxiety. In that way, students will be more likely to reduce their foreign language anxiety.

**Keywords:** Foreign language anxiety · Second language learners · Countermeasure

## 1 Introduction

Anxiety is regarded to be an important variable in foreign language learning nowadays. However, it has not been studied as a separate variable for a long time. Previous research has focused more generally on the role of affective variables in language learning. It was not until Chastain pointed out the correlation between anxiety and course final grade that indicated the direction in which language anxiety research should be oriented [1]. Additionally, in Kleinmann's research, two different types of foreign language anxiety are defined, and then discovered the relevance of these two different types to second language learning behavior [2]. According to Scovel, although there is a fact that identifying particular variables get more challenging when the more we learn about the process of language learning [3]. Even more difficult identification of particular variables arises but admittedly the affective variables are isolated in the research on the psychology of language acquisition. Kleinmann measured the impact of anxiety on language learning performance in a carefully defined experiment, which serves as an example of this [2]. With this correlation between anxiety and learning performance, the definition of language anxiety can be made more precisely and restrictively.

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## 2 Distinguishing Anxiety with Foreign Language Anxiety

Anxiety is a psychological construct, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object [3]. At the same time, anxiety is also the most common obstacle in human cognitive behavior. From the perspective of definition, anxiety is negative for foreign language learners. For example, an introverted student may get stage fright when asked to make a speech in front of the teacher and other students.

Anxiety is typically categorized in educational research as either a trait or a state [3]. An extremely consistent personality feature is trait anxiety. An anxious person is likely to experience anxiety in a range of circumstances. On the other hand, state anxiety is a transient condition felt at a specific time so situation specific anxiety is the third type of anxiety [4]. This is an instance of a trait that occurs frequently. According to research on language learning anxiety, language learning should be categorized as situation-specific. That is, it is a characteristic that frequently occurs in classroom settings when language is being learned. Therefore, the definition of foreign language anxiety (FLA) should be put under a specific restriction.

Three conceptual foundations should be mentioned as well. Horwitz is the pioneer in analyzing FLA [4]. Horwitz draws comparisons between FLA and three other performance anxieties, including communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation [4]. It is helpful since all four performance anxieties deal with performance evaluation in an academic and social context. It is difficult for many foreign language learners to speak in public to a certain degree, and they will most likely struggle to comprehend others and make themselves understood. Hence, the construct of communication apprehension is highly pertinent to the conceptualization of FLA since it places a strong emphasis on interpersonal interactions. Thus, it is necessary to consider communication apprehension as an aspect of describing the FLA.

After all, learning a new language requires interacting with others. Besides, there are quite a few learners who are afraid of exams because they consider poor academic performance as a failure which is a negative belief. Although the fear of negative evaluation is similar to text anxiety, it covers a larger situation such as the possibility of getting a bad result in a job interview. So far, FLA can be conceived 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 [4].

## 3 Effects of Foreign Language Anxiety

### 3.1 Negative Anxiety

When it comes to anxiety, people rightfully think of it as negative. It is true that in the context of language learning, research shows anxiety can negatively affect learning or performance. It can be easily recognized about the effects by observing learners' behavior. For example, some of the physical symptoms include "headaches"; "clammy hands, cold fingers"; "shaking, sweating"; "pounding heart" [5]. However, this is the only superficial effect of anxiety. When individuals talk about the effects on language learning and language learners, there are much more effects both physically and mentally.

Physically, evidence of negative anxiety manifests itself most clearly in the classroom in the form of distortion of voice, inability to utter intonation and rhythm of language, “freezing” when asked to answer questions, forgetting the words or phrases they just learned, or simply refusing to speak and remain silent. They may suffer from worries, fear, and difficulty concentrating, which will make them forgetful, sweaty, and palpitated. To make matters worse, it may lead to negative effects called avoidance behavior. Avoidance was another fairly common manifestation of anxiety; people will begin to not show up to class, put off or even not hand in homework [5]. Such a vicious circle has a huge effect on foreign language learning. In addition, there still exists some mental effects. As mentioned in Hussein, language learning is a very disturbing psychological proposition and anxiety’s effects may extend beyond the classroom, FLA may play a role in students’ choice of classes, majors, and ultimately careers [6].

The two main tasks of language learning are listening and speaking, and anxiety is also undoubtedly a problem in these two tasks for some pupils, as suggested in Hussein and Lindy [6, 7]. The effects of debilitating anxiety are devastating and anxious students cannot handle language learning tasks. The results of one study revealed significant negative correlations between listening and foreign language learning anxiety, students’ listening comprehension scores, and final grades as a measure of overall achievement [6].

Students mentioned that they projected their nervousness days in advance of the class, thus affecting class performance [5]. Language anxiety affects the ability of students to express language, that is, the coherence of language expression and the ability of language organization. From the perspective of the coherence of language expression, the class of language learning is a process of communication and interaction and the formation of language expression ability is also a process of mutual communication of information. Students communicate with teachers through oral expression and correctly comprehend the connotation of language and language learning to improve the fluency of their oral expression. The clarity and coherence of oral expression are the foundation of oral language learning.

However, because there are too many peers in the class, in the tense laughter, students will avoid eye contact, repeat the teacher’s question, give a short answer to the teacher’s question, and even make grammatical errors and knotted speech. This will cause students to have a sense of inferiority in answering questions or oral expressions in oral communication, which affects the communication with teachers. If this goes on for a long time, the language classroom will lack vitality, and students will feel frustrated.

To protect their image, students will quickly answer questions to prevaricate or even choose not to answer, thus causing irreversible damage to the coherence of language expression. The second part is the ability of language organization. Oral expression of language is an ability to improvise language, requiring students to have the ability to respond flexibly to language. Among them, the input of language learning is like the foundation of language expression ability. Comprehensible input is an important factor related to the success or failure of language learning. Only by fully understanding other people’s information can we better express our views. Students who struggle with language anxiety find it difficult to arrange their own language systems, reply flexibly to teachers’ questions, or recall words and phrases when needed.

Due to the lack of students' awareness of language, psychological anxiety and inhibition occur. They would think that they cannot learn the language, and they dare not express themselves. Students are unable to recognize the connotation and charm of language. Instead, they use a more silent way to learn and write a language by dictation.

### 3.2 Positive Anxiety

According to a detailed model provided by Spielberger, increased anxiety encourages learning while the activity is relatively simple [8]. Therefore, it is not assumed that language anxiety has no beneficial effects. Facilitating anxiety can motivate students to face up to the difficulties encountered in language learning from the positive side and actively communicate with their classmates and teachers.

Indeed, anxiety can promote learning to some extent, but anxiety hinders the learning process more often. Language anxiety has a very important and far-reaching effect on language learning. If students can use the effect of anxiety flexibly to deal with it and master the demarcation line between the positive and negative influences caused by anxiety, the influence of language anxiety can be transformed into beneficial.

## 4 Countermeasures

Considering the mostly negative role foreign language anxiety plays in the learning process, a growing number of researchers begin to explore the causes and resources of learners' anxiety. To investigate the ways to inhibit it. Through empirical investigations, scholars have identified the key reasons for anxiety among foreign language learners [9–11]. In light of these findings, researchers have proposed several suggestions.

### 4.1 Causes of Anxiety

In general, there are four primary causes of FLA [12].

From the perspective of the learner, low self-esteem, false perceptions, and peer pressure are the most typical sources of personal and interpersonal anxiety. Krashen's research has demonstrated that the degree of self-esteem is closely associated with language anxiety since students with poor self-esteem tend to be preoccupied with their classmates' thoughts [13]. According to Gynan, learners' erroneous expectations regarding language learning are also a significant factor, as anxiety tends to emerge when beliefs and reality collide [14].

Instructors play a significant role in the issue of students' anxiety, given that they direct the entire learning process. Brandl discovered that teachers with inappropriate views on language education, such as no-error/no-pair-work classes or teachers' central status in class, are more likely to have anxious students [15].

In addition, the stressful context that the instructor establishes in the classroom can have profound effects on the students. Anxieties linked with classroom procedures, for instance, center primarily on the requirement to speak the target language in front of the audience. Presentations, oral skits, oral quizzes, and being asked to answer questions

in the target language are considered the most anxiety-provoking activities in foreign language classes [12, 16, 17].

Moreover, anxieties can stem from unfamiliar language testing. Madsen et al. discovered that certain exam formats induced significantly more anxiety than others [18]. Specifically, students experience anxiety when their assessments do not correspond to the curriculum or what they have previously learned. Daly confirmed that a testing environment that is novel, unknown, or highly evaluative may also increase students' anxiety [19]. When tasks and formats are novel, anxiety increases.

## 4.2 Suggestions for Anxiety Relief

To address the aforementioned issues, researchers strongly recommend that teachers support pupils in coping with the current anxiety-inducing situation and create a less stressful learning atmosphere [4, 6, 7].

But before either strategy is feasible, the instructor must first recognize the existence of FLA [4]. Self-report measures, such as the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which measures anxiety based on negative performance expectations, social comparisons, psycho-physiological symptoms, and avoidance behaviors, have therefore been established as a standard instrument [20].

To correct learners' misconceptions, researchers such as Horwitz and Price recommend that teachers provide students with more positive reinforcement and communicate with them about acceptable commitments for successful language acquisition and the usefulness of language skills other than oral fluency [4, 21]. Foss and Reitzel suggest that instructors should also assist students in understanding their erroneous beliefs or fears by interpreting anxiety-provoking circumstances more realistically and requiring students to verbalize and record their fears [22]. In addition, an anxiety graph might help pinpoint the situation that causes the most anxiety [23]. Other strategies may include calming exercises, instruction on effective language-learning techniques, behavioral contracting, and journal keeping [4].

When the situation becomes unmanageable, instructors may refer students to counselors or specialists for professional assistance. To further reduce personal and interpersonal anxieties, learners may need to participate in supplemental instruction in some support groups, join a language club, undertake relaxation exercises, or practice self-talk; it can be especially helpful for coping with "state anxiety," an individual's nervousness in response to a specific evaluative scenario, such as a test, a competition, a performance [24, 25].

Reducing stress by altering the setting of foreign language acquisition is a more crucial and challenging endeavor. According to Young, instructors who were humorous, kind, calm, and patient were more effective at reducing anxiety in foreign language classes by making students feel at ease and encouraging them to speak up [26]. Educators must also examine their approach to error correction and their attitudes toward students. The "Mistakes Panel" devised by Crookall and Oxford provides both students and teachers with a novel perspective on errors made in the second language, which may reduce error-related anxiety [27]. Also, teachers must be made aware of their role as language instructors in a learner-oriented language environment. In contrast to the Audiolingual Method, where the role of the instructor was dominant, some prevalent

communicative approaches view the instructor as more of a facilitator and guider, whose responsibility is to provide students with input and opportunities to communicate in the target language in authentic situations using authentic materials [12].

Proper classroom procedures can alleviate anxiety as well. Researchers indicate that teachers should nurture a positive and harmonious learning environment through teamwork, cooperation, and collaborative learning, which may assist students in better comprehending one another's strengths and weaknesses, thereby enhancing their mutual trust [28, 29]. Through this orientation, it is anticipated that students will be motivated to develop stronger relationships with their classmates and foster a positive classroom environment. In addition to planning more pair work and games in the classroom, instructors can adjust the activities to the affective requirements of the students. In their research article, Crookall and Oxford provide a variety of games, such as "Agony Column," "Ghost Avengers," and "Anxious Photos," that can be used to help language learners to analyze their anxieties and fears [27].

## 5 Conclusion

Based on prior research, this paper carefully examines and differentiates the notion of language anxiety from general anxiety, summarizes the main reasons and possible impacts of anxiety, and provides suggestions accordingly for instructors to help alleviate learners' FLA.

Researchers have undertaken a substantial amount of research on FLA and achieved noteworthy outcomes. Considered situation-specific, FLA is by definition negative to foreign language learners as in the majority of circumstances, it can lead to mental and physical trauma. Instructors must customize the countermeasures for each student based on the sources of FLA, including but not limited to boosting the learner's self-esteem, rectifying the instructor's dominance, and establishing a more relaxed environment in foreign language classes.

However, even though the majority of researchers have mentioned techniques and suggestions to mitigate students' anxiety, only a limited number of them have empirically confirmed the efficacy of these measures. In addition, most researchers mentioned in this paper tend to view FLA as a whole, ignoring the fact that it encompasses speaking, reading, listening, and writing anxiety. Therefore, exploring the connections between the various facets of anxiety may also be one of the promising research directions in the future.

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