

# FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY IN THE CLASSROOM: A COMPREHENSIVE EXPLORATION

By

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## ABSTRACT

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is a well-established phenomenon that significantly impacts language learners across various educational contexts. This paper offers a comprehensive exploration of FLA, examining its causes, manifestations, and consequences in the classroom. The study highlights the psychological and emotional dimensions of FLA, identifying the key components: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. It also discusses the influence of cultural and interpersonal differences and personality traits on the intensity of anxiety experienced by learners. The role of teachers in mitigating FLA through supportive and empathetic classroom environments is emphasized, along with strategies such as task-based learning and peer feedback. Furthermore, the paper critiques the limitations of existing tools, like the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), and proposes alternative approaches for assessing FLA. Finally, suggestions for future research are provided, focusing on longitudinal studies, the role of technology, and the refinement of assessment tools to enhance our understanding of FLA and improve language acquisition outcomes. By addressing FLA in a nuanced manner, educators can create a more conducive environment for language learning, fostering both linguistic and emotional growth.

**Keywords:** Foreign Language Anxiety, Communication Apprehension, Test Anxiety, Fear Evaluation, Classroom Environment.

## INTRODUCTION

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is a well-documented phenomenon that affects learners across different languages, cultures, and educational settings. It is characterized by feelings of unease, nervousness, and apprehension and is of particular relevance in foreign language classroom contexts. Facilitators have long identified its negative impact on language learning, hindering students' ability to communicate effectively and engage with new languages. This paper aims to provide an in-depth examination of FLA, exploring its

causes, consequences, and how it manifests in the classroom. By reviewing key studies and literature, this paper highlights both the psychological and emotional factors at play in foreign language learning and proposes strategies to mitigate anxiety. By doing so, this paper aims to offer suggestions that may help improve language acquisition outcomes.

### 1. Understanding Foreign Language Anxiety

Foreign language anxiety is a multidimensional construct that encompasses various types of anxiety (Horwitz, 2010). According to Horwitz et al. (1986), FLA manifests through three key components, namely, communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension refers to the discomfort felt when speaking with others, linked to shyness or the fear of conversing in a foreign language.



This paper has objectives related to SDGs



This anxiety affects both speaking and listening skills, and it is especially noticeable during conversations (Horwitz et al., 1986). Test anxiety is the fear of failing language exams. Students experiencing test anxiety may feel overwhelmed and stressed during language courses due to exams and assessments, with their fear of poor performance intensifying their anxiety. This type of anxiety can hinder students from showcasing their true language abilities (Horwitz et al., 1986). Fear of negative evaluation arises from concerns about being judged or criticized negatively (Horwitz et al., 1986). This anxiety is linked to how learners worry about others' perceptions, whether in formal evaluations or casual interactions. It is particularly prominent in speaking situations where the fear of receiving criticism or unfavorable judgment is strong.

## 2. Cultural and Interpersonal Differences in FLA

Cultural and interpersonal differences play a significant role in the intensity and nature of foreign language anxiety. Arnaiz and Guillen (2012) conducted it and found that individual differences, such as personality traits and cultural backgrounds, influenced students' experiences with FLA. For instance, students from collectivist cultures may feel heightened pressure to conform to group expectations, exacerbating their anxiety, while those from individualistic cultures may struggle with self-esteem issues when their language proficiency is evaluated. These cultural factors demonstrate the importance of considering diverse student backgrounds when addressing FLA in language classrooms.

## 3. Psychological Underpinnings of FLA

Psychological factors such as personality traits also contribute significantly to FLA. Dewaele (2013) explored the link between FLA and certain personality traits, such as neuroticism and extraversion. The study revealed that students with higher levels of neuroticism were more likely to experience anxiety in language learning environments, while extroverted individuals tended to manage anxiety more effectively. Understanding the role of personality can help educators tailor their teaching approaches to the emotional needs of their students, fostering a supportive learning environment that minimizes anxiety.

## 4. Positive Side of Anxiety: Enjoyment in the Classroom

Interestingly, not all forms of anxiety have purely negative effects on language learning. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) highlighted the dual nature of anxiety, suggesting that while it may hinder learning in some instances, it can also enhance motivation and engagement. The authors found that learners who experienced moderate levels of anxiety were more motivated to learn. This is because the discomfort of anxiety spurred them to study harder and engage more actively in classroom activities. This concept of "productive anxiety" presents a nuanced view of FLA, suggesting that anxiety may have both positive and negative outcomes depending on its intensity and the learner's coping mechanisms.

## 5. Assessment of Foreign Language Anxiety: The FLCAS

Horwitz et al. (1986) developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which remains one of the most widely used tools for measuring Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). The FLCAS consists of a 33-item questionnaire that evaluates various aspects of anxiety related to foreign language learning, such as communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Since its introduction, the scale has been adapted for different languages and cultural contexts, making it a valuable instrument in comparative studies. However, recent criticisms have raised concerns about the scale's validity, especially regarding its factor structure and cultural biases (Horwitz, 2016).

## 6. Challenges in Measuring FLA

Despite its popularity, the FLCAS is not without its limitations. Aida (1994) argued that the FLCAS fails to capture the complexity of FLA, as it overlooks some key psychological factors, such as individual learner differences and the influence of contextual factors. Furthermore, the scale is often criticized for its reliance on self-reported data, which may not accurately reflect students' true experiences. The subjective nature of self-reports poses challenges for researchers seeking to obtain a comprehensive understanding of FLA.

Another characteristic of the FLCAS that has received criticism is its one-way focus on negative emotions. It has

been noted that positive emotions can help in language acquisition by encouraging the learner to engage with the language (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Therefore, solely focusing on negative emotions may not be presenting the actual emotional experiences of the students.

### 7. Strategies to Mitigate FLA

Teachers play a crucial role in either exacerbating or alleviating Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). Horwitz (1990) emphasized the importance of creating a supportive, non-threatening classroom atmosphere, as this can significantly reduce anxiety levels in students. When teachers are aware of the signs and symptoms of FLA, they can design their teaching methods accordingly, offering encouragement, reassurance, and positive reinforcement to help ease students' fears. Furthermore, Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) suggested that teachers should incorporate strategies that foster self-confidence and a sense of competence among learners. These strategies might include using pair and group work to reduce individual pressure, de-emphasizing the fear of public speaking, and providing clear, constructive, and empathetic feedback that focuses on improvement rather than highlighting mistakes. Additionally, creating opportunities for students to engage in low-risk activities, where they can practice language skills without the fear of judgment, can also help build a more relaxed and confident learning environment. By recognizing and addressing the emotional needs of students, teachers can empower them to overcome language anxiety and develop more effective communication skills.

To address the challenges posed by FLA, teachers and facilitators have suggested various strategies for reducing anxiety in the classroom. MacIntyre (1999) recommends creating a low-anxiety learning environment, where students feel safe to make mistakes and learn from them. Additionally, the use of task-based learning, cooperative activities, and peer feedback can help reduce anxiety by promoting collaboration and minimizing the fear of individual judgment. Taniellan (2014) also emphasized the importance of teacher training in recognizing and responding to signs of anxiety, suggesting that teachers

should be equipped with the skills to manage students' emotional responses effectively.

In addressing FLA in the classroom, several strategies can be implemented to reduce its impact on students' language learning experiences. One primary suggestion is for educators to foster a supportive and empathetic classroom environment. Creating a space where students feel comfortable making mistakes without fear of judgment can significantly decrease anxiety levels. Teachers should encourage open communication and incorporate activities that promote interaction, such as group work or pair activities. This can alleviate the pressure of speaking in front of the entire class. Furthermore, it is essential for teachers to be trained to recognize the signs of FLA and develop strategies to provide individualized support to students. Encouraging positive reinforcement and helping students develop coping mechanisms for anxiety, such as relaxation techniques or reframing negative thoughts, can empower them to overcome their fears.

Future research on FLA could continue to explore the diverse range of factors influencing anxiety in language learning environments. More longitudinal studies are needed to examine how FLA fluctuates over time and its long-term effects on language proficiency and motivation. Additionally, investigating the role of technology in mitigating FLA may offer a promising avenue. The use of digital platforms and language learning apps may provide a less intimidating space for learners to practice. This may reduce their anxiety while still promoting language acquisition. Another key area for exploration is the relationship between FLA and academic performance, particularly in the context of high-stakes language testing, to understand whether anxiety directly affects achievement outcomes. Finally, future studies should work towards refining tools like the FLCAS to ensure they reflect the diverse experiences of learners from different cultural backgrounds and language learning contexts. By expanding on these areas, educators can develop more effective interventions to support language learners in overcoming anxiety and achieving success in their language acquisition journeys.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, FLA is a significant barrier that can impede effective language learning, influencing students' ability to engage with and master new languages. It is a multifaceted phenomenon, shaped by psychological, cultural, and interpersonal factors that contribute to students' unease in language classroom settings. Understanding the different components of FLA, such as communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation, can help educators develop more effective strategies to mitigate its effects. Teachers play a critical role in fostering a supportive and non-threatening environment where students feel safe to take risks and make mistakes, which is essential in reducing anxiety and promoting language acquisition.

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## Appendix

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)  
(Horwitz et al., 1986)

**1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )  
Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**2. I don't worry about making mistakes in language class.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )  
Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

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**3. I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )  
Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**4. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )  
Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**5. It wouldn't bother me at all to take more foreign language classes.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )

Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**6. During language class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )  
Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**7. I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )  
Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**8. I am usually at ease during tests in my language class.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )  
Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**9. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )  
Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**10. I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )  
Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**11. I don't understand why some people get so upset over foreign language classes.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )  
Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**12. In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )  
Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**13. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )  
Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**14. I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )  
Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**15. I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )

Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**16. Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )  
Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**17. I often feel like not going to my language class.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )  
Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**18. I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )  
Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**19. I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )  
Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**20. I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in language class.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )  
Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**21. The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )  
Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**22. I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for language class.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )  
Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**23. I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )  
Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**24. I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )  
Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**25. Language class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )

Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**26. I feel more tense and nervous in language class than in my other classes.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )

Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**27. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )

Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**28. When I'm on my way to language class, I feel very sure and relaxed.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )

Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**29. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )

Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**30. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak a foreign language.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )

Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**31. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )

Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**32. I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )

Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

**33. I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.**

Strongly Agree ( ) Agree ( ) Neither Agree nor Disagree ( )

Disagree ( ) Strongly Disagree ( )

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adam Crosby is an Associate Professor at Kobe City College of Nursing. He was awarded a Doctoral degree in Education from the University of New England in 2024 for his research on the silence of Japanese university students in English language classrooms. His research interests include the willingness to speak, silence in the classroom, and the effects of cultural norms in the classroom. He has published numerous articles in internationally recognized journals, including the *Journal on English Language Teaching (JELT)*.

