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## Language Anxiety among English Learners: A Synthesis of Causes, Effects, and Mitigation Strategies from Existing Literature

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**DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20690713>**

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### ARTICLE DETAILS

**Research Paper**

**Accepted:** 14-05-2026

**Published:** 10-06-2026

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**Keywords:**

*language anxiety, English learners, foreign language classroom anxiety, ESL, EFL, speaking anxiety, mitigation strategies*

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### ABSTRACT

One of the frequent affective problems in L2 situation of English learning is language anxiety. The aim of this paper is to attempt to still synthesize the existing literature on ESL students' anxiety, its causes and its mitigating strategies. Language anxiety in the foreign language classroom is discussed, referencing both the theories on which it is founded, and recent empirical foreign language classification research. Language anxiety is the "apprehension felt in a specific situation that demands listening, speaking, reading, or writing in the same language; in which the foreign language learner is not comfortable. If this foreign language classification is understood in view of one of the basic theories of language anxiety and recent empirical studies pertinent to the occurrence of language anxiety in the foreign language classroom, the paper helps articulate what is the mechanism of this anxiety. These language issues, fear of negative evaluation, pressure of the test to do well, lack of confidence, perfectionism, teacher feedback practices, comparison with peers and socio cultural expectations all play a part in the development of anxiety as shown in the analysis. It affects them as they practice, cognitively, emotionally, behaviourally and academically:



anxious learners might have a lower working memory, struggle to recall words from their vocabulary, avoid speaking, refuse to engage and have less achievement. The review also reports a number of practical mitigation strategies such as supportive teacher/student relations, scaffolding of speaking tasks, collaborative learning activities, tolerance of error in feedback, pedagogy of autonomous learning, use of mindfulness as a tool for regulating language, building self-efficacy with speaking, and using technology to practice speaking. It is concluded that the reducing language anxiety is not an independent measure and is to be integral in the whole class. Anxiety management should be considered as one of the major points to be tackled by teachers, curriculum designers and the educational institutions in the field of teaching and learning English language.

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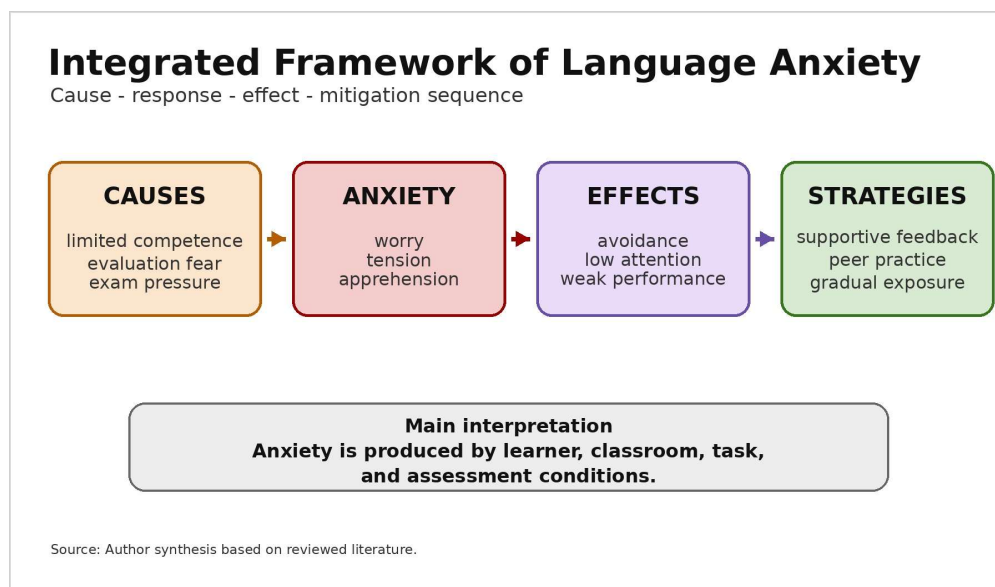
## Introduction

English is now a key language of academic transnational mobility, of communication and of participation in the digital world. Many learners, however, who have learned English for years are still shy, hesitant and nervous in using English to communicate. It is an emotional response and has been called language anxiety or foreign language classroom anxiety. Anxiety, however, is not just shyness; it is an anxiety that occurs in certain situations when students need to perform in a developing language (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 1999).

The study of language anxiety has been given a constant interest ever since it has been found to have significant effects on the quality of learners' engagement. A Learner learns the vocabulary and grammar in self-study, but does not remember them when talking to his classmates. An earlier correction may lead to embarrassment for another learner which results in lack of voluntary participation. The experiences show that learning a L2 is not just a cognitive process where the learner learns L2 structures and meanings, but also an emotional process where the learners' feelings of confidence, identity, social evaluation, and classroom climate come into play (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002).

The topic is especially relevant to those who are learning English in which English is a high stakes subject that is taught and measured. In the education system in many countries, grades are correlated with

English ability as are in the job market or society. These pressures can contribute to feelings of anxiety, especially if learners think that errors are indicative of lack of ability. Test anxiety and communication apprehension (Horwitz, 2001; Aida, 1994) and fear of negative evaluation have been consistently associated with language anxiety. The purpose of this paper is to do a literature review and synthesize the issues of language anxiety of English learners. It highlights three questions that were used as guides: What are the main sources of language anxiety as found in the literature? What are the implications for the development of English skills in terms of anxiety? What mitigation measures are the most common ones that are proposed? The aim is to organize existing pertinent research and to make it available to researchers, teachers and curriculum planners.



*Figure 1. Integrated conceptual framework of language anxiety among English learners.*

Figure 1 summarizes the central argument of the review: language anxiety develops through interacting learner, classroom, task, and assessment pressures, while mitigation requires emotional safety and repeated language-use opportunities.

### Conceptual and Theoretical Background

Horwitz et al., (1986) made the concept of foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) formal by suggesting that FLCA is a concept that is related to, but not synonymous with, general anxiety. They developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale which was more widely adopted as a measure for language-learning anxiety. There are three key components of the construct: Communication



apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety. The dimensions are used to inform the present research on English learners (ELs) (Botes et al, 2020; Horwitz, 2010).

Affective filter hypothesis is a useful explanation (Krashen, 1982). This view stipulates that negative emotions impede and/or weaken the language learner's cognitive/affective processes of language learning. Learners who are experiencing a great deal of anxiety may hear the teacher; they might read a text but not be listening or reading in ways that build meaning of the text because the anxiety is getting in the way. Additionally, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) also gave the reason why anxiety causes disruption in the three components of language learning processes namely input, processing and output.

Language anxiety intersects with motivation, self-efficacy and identity as well. The "self-efficacy" theory in Bandura (1997) mentions that learners who believe that they can perform the difficult tasks are more likely to persist. However, students who lack in self-efficacy may be perceiving string of errors as proof that they can't. Dörnyei (2005) and Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) emphasized how dynamic the nature of motivation and how it is closely connected with the self image of the learners is. Anxiety is, therefore not only the fear of failure, but of humiliation, fear of looking incompetent, not the "right" sort of English speaker.

### **Methodology of the Literature Synthesis**

Narrative synthesis method is used in this paper. When the objective is to give a synthesis of the results from a variety of different types of study, but not a combination of effect sizes, the narrative approach can be used in the synthesis. The literature chosen included basic texts and articles related to foreign language anxiety, as well as well-known empirical studies and more recent research on the anxiety reduction, English learning contexts and teacher strategies.

To include studies three criteria were used. Initially the source had to concern anxiety in L2 learning, FL learning, ESL learning and EFL learning. Second, there needed to be evidence or a theory offered by the source of causes, effects or mitigating the issue. Third, attention was paid, in particular, to peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books and edited academic volumes. Early sources have been included as seminal in establishing the conceptual vocabulary used later in research, and recent publications to show the current context of learning in classrooms and the internet.

The selected literature was analysed using a thematic approach. Results were categorized into three main areas: sources of anxiety, impact of anxiety and strategies to cope with anxiety. Within all domains there were common themes of fear of negative evaluation, speaking anxiety, writing anxiety, classroom

feedback, achievement effects, self-efficacy, teacher support, collaborative tasks and gradual exposure. In this way, the paper can contain a very large (but perhaps not necessarily comprehensive) synthesis without suggesting conclusive findings from a formal systematic review.

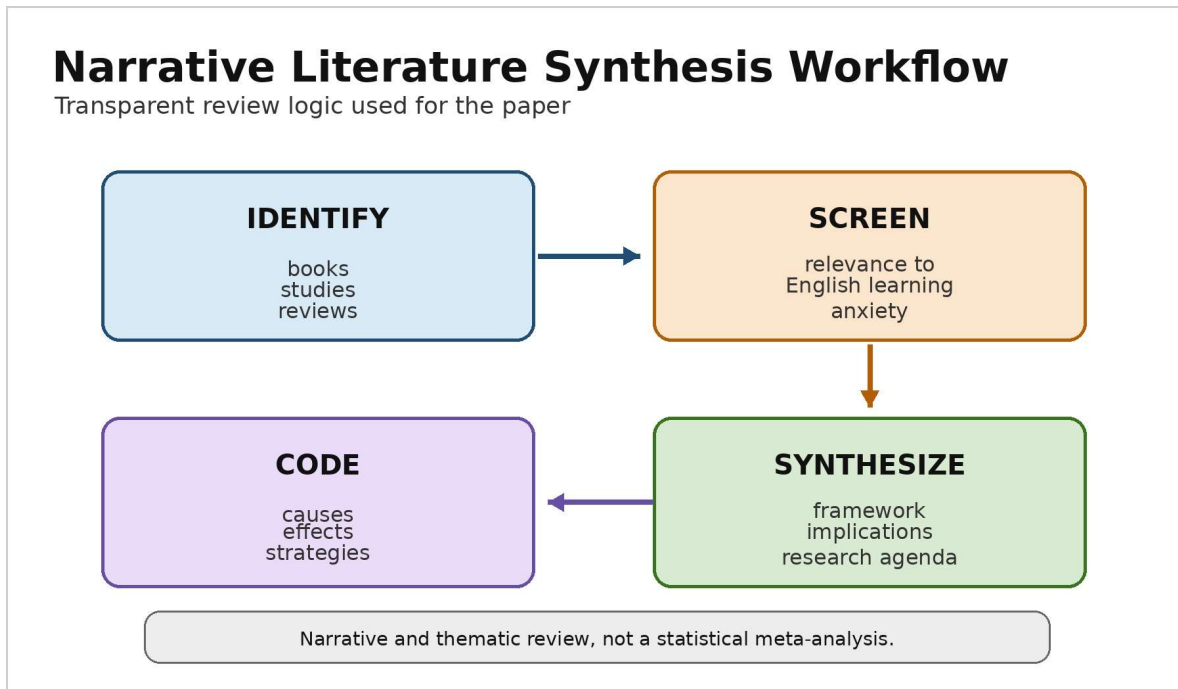


Figure 2. Narrative literature synthesis workflow used in the paper.

The workflow clarifies how the literature was organized into the three synthesis domains of causes, effects, and mitigation strategies. It also makes the review process more transparent for journal-style presentation.

### Causes of Language Anxiety Among English Learners

Inadequate language skills is the first main cause. A child who has the lack of words, the knowledge of the structure and the confidence to speak and/or comprehend will be concerned about being unable to effectively express herself. This is most prominent when a speaking task is given to the learners requiring him/her to speak in the real time situation. Although time-consuming activities like searching for words are seemingly necessary, limited amount of time allotted in the language class or another learning environment (Kitano 2001, Woodrow 2006), may easily cause anxiety to grow high.

The worry of unfavorable evaluation is actually one other big factor. The fear that the teacher and/or peers will laugh at, criticise, interrupt and judge EL students in fear of making mistakes. They may also be more extreme, where for example they are openly teased when they mistakenly or "where good pupils



are in charge of what happens in the classroom". Foreign language anxiety studies reveal that in addition to the fear of how difficult it is to learn L2, there is also anxiety that can be defined in terms of the social consequences of making a mistake in L2 learning process (Aida, 1994, Horwitz et al., 1986 and Phillips, 1992).

Apart from the institution, test anxiety is much applicable to it. In a number of cases, one's ability to perform in English examinations will be the key to promotion, graduation, scholarships and jobs. This can cause learners to develop the impression that the use of English is related to risk and not communication. Tests such as talking tests, timed writing tests and listening tests in particular can be extremely stressful due to the lack of control in how fast the students perform the test and what they do in the test and what they say during the test. This pressure changes learning from learning to watching learning, to performance – not learning (Horwitz, 2001; Cheng, 2004).

Personality and self-beliefs influences however. Clinical population are the students who are known to the teacher as an introvert, perfectionist and/or low self-esteem. One personality trait that Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) found to positively be related to increasing the likelihood of anxiety is that perfectionism trait. But, not any mistake on learning language. Errors are attributed as a 'lack of ability' in the learner and anxiety increases and is maintained.

One other source is classroom ecology. Emotional safety is afforded by teacher behaviour, peer relationships, activity design and class size. It can be embarrassing to have all the mistakes marked, although all mistakes could be marked aimed at making the students more accurate. Large classes can contribute to the feeling of being "outed" and small classes can also contribute to the feeling as "each child is always on the horizon. Thus, anxiety can be assumed to not only be a phenomenon of the learner alone but it is a product of the learning context the learner lives in (Altrabai, 2015, Young as cited in Horwitz & Young, 1991).

Add up to that, there are cultural beliefs and pressures of identity that influence the level of English anxiety. For some learners, English use involves them in interactions with the other norms of pronunciation, discourse or interaction. A minority of pupils are worried by the fear of sounding like one of the little ones' when speaking English, and they are worried about not being local anymore. Others are brought in – prestige of English, modernity; success in employment. The symbolic meanings that can be translated can cause English presentation to be emotionally charged (Dewaele et al., 2008; Jiang & Dewaele, 2019).

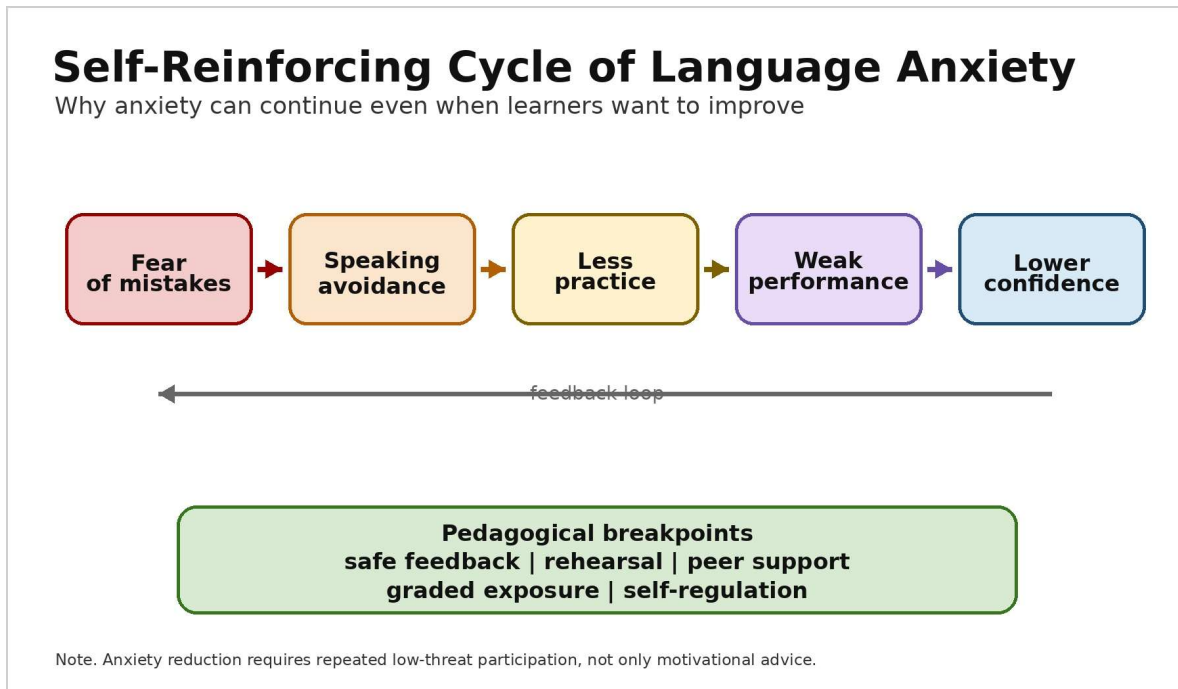


Figure 3. Self-reinforcing cycle through which anxiety can limit English learning.

The cycle explains why anxiety may persist even when learners are motivated. Without carefully structured opportunities to speak, learners may avoid the very practice needed for confidence and fluency.

### Effects of Language Anxiety

Language anxiety affects learners cognitively by disrupting attention and memory. An anxious learner may focus more on possible failure than on the message being communicated. This worry consumes working memory, making it harder to understand input, organize grammar, retrieve vocabulary, or monitor pronunciation. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991, 1994) demonstrated that anxiety can interfere with several stages of language processing, which explains why learners sometimes perform below their actual competence.

The affective consequences are equally serious. Persistent anxiety can produce embarrassment, frustration, fear, shame, and reduced confidence. Learners may begin to believe that English is not for them. Such emotional patterns can reduce motivation and willingness to communicate. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) argued that language classrooms contain both negative and positive emotions; anxiety becomes harmful when it dominates the learning experience and prevents enjoyment, curiosity, and risk-taking.



Behaviorally, anxious learners often avoid participation. They may sit at the back of the classroom, avoid eye contact, refuse to volunteer, skip presentations, remain silent in group discussions, or choose written work to escape speaking. Liu and Jackson (2008) showed that unwillingness to communicate is strongly connected with anxiety among English learners. Avoidance gives temporary relief, but it reduces practice opportunities, which then delays improvement and reinforces the belief that English use is threatening.

Academic effects are also well documented. Anxiety is generally associated with lower achievement, weaker test performance, and negative attitudes toward language courses (Botes et al., 2020; Teimouri et al., 2019). The relationship is not always simple: some moderate anxiety may motivate preparation, but high and persistent anxiety tends to reduce performance. Phillips (1992), for example, showed that anxiety can affect oral test performance and student attitudes toward language learning.

Anxiety can also influence skill-specific development. Speaking anxiety may reduce fluency and oral participation; writing anxiety may cause avoidance, over-editing, and fear of evaluation; reading anxiety may emerge when unfamiliar scripts, vocabulary, or cultural references make texts feel threatening (Cheng, 2002; Cheng et al., 1999; Saito et al., 1999). Thus, language anxiety should not be treated as a single classroom mood. It can appear differently across skills and tasks.

**Table 1** *Summary of Main Anxiety Themes and Suggested Responses*

Theme	Common indicators	Pedagogical response
Fear of negative evaluation	Silence, avoidance of eye contact, reluctance to volunteer	Normalize mistakes, use supportive feedback, allow rehearsal
Speaking anxiety	Pauses, trembling voice, refusal to present	Use pair work, gradual exposure, short low-stakes speaking tasks
Test anxiety	Blanking out, overstudying, panic before exams	Use formative assessment, practice tests, clear rubrics
Low self-efficacy	Statements such as 'I cannot speak English'	Set small goals, track progress, celebrate mastery experiences
Classroom pressure	Fear of peers, embarrassment after correction	Build peer support, reduce public correction, create respectful norms



## Mitigation Strategies from Existing Literature

One of the common suggestions is that the school classroom environment ought to be one that is supportive, nondistributive, and nonthreatening. Teachers should remind students that mistakes are meant to happen and mistakes are "good"! Errors can be considered evidence of learning and not as failure. Corrective feedback need to be specific, respectful and well-timed. For example, in an activity for fluency skills, the teacher could make note of errors in a notebook without attracting any student's attention and discuss common patterns of errors with other teachers at the end of the day (Gregersen, 2003; Alrabi, 2015).

Another strategy which is effective is to gradually expose. Students who are nervous of speaking in front of the class might start off by doing pair practice, small-group discussion, then off the cuff answers and subsequently into the presentation. This is an order through confidence- Building incremental victories and accomplishments. Therefore, Haroud et al. (2025) emphasized that exposure needed to be done step by step, there should be a collective learning process, and for students who experience anxiety in foreign language learning, steps must be taken to provide coping strategies.

Collaborative learning can help student's individual exposure to be reduced. Students are given opportunities to practise using English in less threatening settings, working in conjunction with pair work, peer rehearsal, role play and information-gap tasks, as well as small groups projects. The exercises these work concentrates also from and to near-perfection of one's runs on to shared communication. A respectful peer relationship is part of being more willing to take risks and experimenting with language (see Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004 and Woodrow, 2006).

It's important to develop self-efficacy. Small, realistic goals can be set with the teachers, that help the learners see their progress and improvement. One minute a week reflection or the teacher can set the target of getting them to ask 1 question in English in class rather than expecting a student to be fluent as soon as possible. Bandura (1997) proposed like master the skill, like the self-confidence. When Chinese students find small wins they may identify these 'wins' and reduce this feeling of uncontrollability around learning English.

By enabling student autonomy, the learner is given a sense of control and therefore decreases the anxiety. Helplessness may be decreased by giving students a choice of topic and giving students rehearsal time prior to the performance, a planning time, or the option of performing orally or writing the paper.



Autonomy does not mean that there is no structure, rather it is a decision making process that the learners can apply if they are emotionally ready for it or not (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Papi, 2010).

Emotion regulation and mindfulness-education techniques continue to be more and more important. Physiological arousal can be dealt with with the aid of brief breathing exercises prior to undertaking tasks, guided reflection, positive self-talk and cognitive reframing. They are not meant as a substitute for language instruction but as a means to better equip learners to take part in instruction. Allowing the learner to alter his/her thinking is particularly useful if the student with anxiety is observable to have a negative expectancy about the negative consequences of an error.

One of the key to mitigation is teacher professional development. Teachers should be aware of the fact that if it is quiet it doesn't mean it is not working, if it is wrong it does not mean that it is not learning. Teacher anxiety sensitivity is seen as reluctance, frequent absences from oral tasks, avoidance etc. of the teacher itself by observations. Liu and Wang (2023) conclude the highest number of coping strategies is adopted by EFL teachers who have experience of online teaching and have attained certification in online teaching from the authority. This means that teachers can utilize for anxiety improvement through teacher training!

Thoughtfully-provided technology can help to reduce anxiety. Online discussion boards, recorded speaking practice, voice notes and vocabulary apps, low stakes quizzes are ways of allowing repeated practice without immediate judgment. But, technology doesn't necessarily reduce anxiety. Video conferencing, exposure on a leader board and regular filming/screening can raise anxiety levels for some learners. Thy most helpful features of a tool are the choice, privacy, feedback and gradual progression (Hajiyeva, 2024; Liu & Wang, 2023).

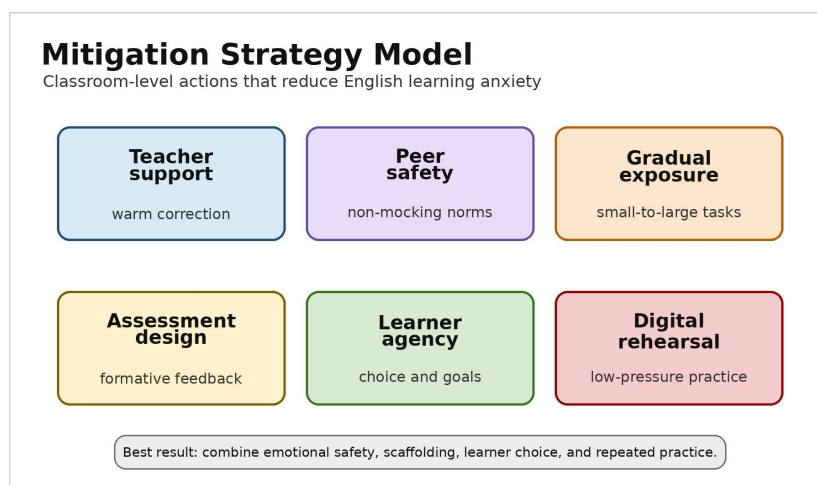


Figure 4. Classroom-level mitigation strategy model for reducing language anxiety.



The model shows that anxiety reduction is strongest when teacher behavior, peer culture, assessment design, learner agency, gradual exposure, and digital practice are aligned.

## **Discussion**

There is no one specific cause of language anxiety in the light of literature reviewed. Presents examples of: Learner attributes, language, class and social functions of English. So here's why this varies between different students used to have different anxiety in the same class. The presentation can be a challenge for one student, resulting in tremendous fun; and for another the presentation can be an attack on his dignity.

The synthesis also suggests that an individual's anxiety itself may be a self-perpetuating process. Low Confidence Learner will not talk=avoidance=less practice[slower learning=more confirmation (for the LCL)]. This cycle must be doesn't by good teaching. The most important area to start is the classroom the teacher can remove the fear of being wrong, she can offer lots of chances to allow students to communicate without being “right,” and fulfill with an intent without an intent of being “right.”

A good balance and view should be taken in. The aim is not to take any risks out of the learning. Learning a language, correct mistakes and practicing in front of others. To ensure challenge is productive and not threatening. Learners are respected, prepared and supported; can become uncomfortable and leverage this as learning.

## **Implications for Teaching and Curriculum Design**

Firstly, teachers need to informally diagnose anxiety “as often as possible.” Investigate and discuss how to use anonymous feedback, quick checks and/or observation and/or learner journals to elicit which section/tasks of a task the learner is most anxious. The second implication is to plan for oral participation in a progressive way. Pupils should not be forced to take part in situations in which they are required to act without preparation and assistance. The third suggestion to consider is the feedback that is offered as encouragement and guidance, and lack of feedback as public punishment.

Effective outcomes as well as linguistic outcomes should be defined for all the textbooks and syllabuses by curriculum planners. It is not enough for a speaking course to state that the learners will make presentations, the course should also have stages for them to rehearse the presentation and for them to cope with this as well as giving them time to reflect on the presentation. When working with assessment, it's crucial to have formative activities occurring throughout, in addition to summative, high-stakes activities.



The need for the emotional control in the process of language learning in in-service at institution. For teachers, through training in aspects such as corrective feedback, classroom interaction, form of tests, psychology of learners, and the psychology of anxiety management for learners through the online perspective, can be guided. Further, English clubs, English peer mentoring, English conversation groups and counseling support should be offered to allow learners to practice, without being assessed.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This paper is a story synthesis, does not define effect size and does not do any statistical ranking of interventions. The literature discussed is also from other ESL/EFL contexts and so would have to be mindfully adapted to other local classrooms. What is effective in a small university class, may not be effective in a school that has large classes and Exam Heavy Teaching.

Long-term, classroom based interventions that pair teachers' training, peer support, and emotional regulation need to be explored in future research. Research into technology to reduce anxiety and the use of artificial intelligence tools, virtual speaking practice and online feedback systems are also required. There is a need to conduct further research on the impact of gender, socioeconomic status, multilingualism and attitudes of local people towards English on anxiety.

### **Conclusion**

While language anxiety (LA) is a multi-faceted and manageable phenomenon, it may pose a serious challenge for the successful educational outcomes of EL students. It is a result of the language problems, test anxiety, test pressure, self-confidence, perfectionism, classroom climate and society culture. It manifests itself in thinking, feelings, attitudes and performance. Anxiety affects attention, performance and hampers motivation to perform and reduces academic achievement.

In the meantime there are solutions in the literature. There are a variety of methods and strategies that can be used to reduce anxiety and increase engagement including supportive teaching, gradual exposure, collaborative tasks/tasks/responsibilities, respectful feedback, building SE, providing learner autonomy, and being mindful/mindful technology user. Most significantly, the researchers' findings were that language anxiety can never be assumed to be L2 learners' private affair. It should be considered, however, as a learning issue that the teachers and the school must address themselves to on a knowledgeable, humane and fact-finding basis.

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