Speaking-related foreign language anxiety in adolescent EFL learners: Contributing factors and pedagogical implications

Ivana Juríková [a]

[a] Comenius University, Slovakia

Abstract. Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is a situation-specific form of anxiety that impairs communicative competence and hinders language learning, especially among adolescent learners. This study examined the prevalence and speaking-related causes of FLA among adolescent learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Using a mixed-methods design, data were collected from 95 students aged 16–18 via the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), a 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire, alongside open-ended and semi-structured interviews. The average FLA score was 96.14 (SD = 29.06), indicating moderate anxiety. Distribution analysis showed 20 % of participants experienced low, 63.2 % moderate, and 16.8 % high anxiety–meaning 80 % of learners fell within the moderate-to-high range, highlighting the widespread nature of FLA. Female students (M = 101.25) reported significantly higher anxiety levels than males (M = 83.26), confirmed by both parametric and non-parametric tests. A central aim was to identify speaking-related causes of FLA through thematic analysis, which revealed seven key contributing factors: fear of negative peer evaluation, teacher-related influences, learners' psychological predispositions, limited language proficiency, fear of oral communication, test-related anxiety, and perceived disparities in classroom competence. These findings deepen understanding of FLA's multifaceted nature and underscore both the need for targeted pedagogical measures and the importance of further interdisciplinary research into adaptive teaching approaches.

Keywords: affective factors, foreign language anxiety, speaking anxiety, adolescent learners, communication barriers, English as a foreign language.

Юрікова Івана. Тривожність, пов'язана з говорінням іноземною мовою, у підлітків, які вивчають англійську як іноземну: чинники та педагогічні наслідки

Анотація. Тривожність під час вивченні іноземної мови – це ситуаційно-специфічна форма тривожності, що погіршує комунікативну компетентність і заважає вивченню мови, особливо серед підлітків. У цьому дослідженні розглядається поширеність та мовленнєві причини тривожності серед підлітків, які вивчають англійську як іноземну. Використовуючи змішаний методологічний підхід, було зібрано дані від

Ivana Juríková, [ID] 0009-0008-6875-0525 , [✉] ivana.jurikova@uniba.sk

95 студентів віком 16–18 років за допомогою Шкали Тривожності на заняттях з іноземної мови (FLCAS) – опитувальника з 5-бальною шкалою Лайкерта, а також відкритих та напівструктурованих інтерв'ю. Середній бал тривожності становив 96,14 (SD = 29,06), що свідчить про помірний рівень тривожності. Аналіз розподілу показав, що 20 % учасників мали низький, 63,2 % – помірний, а 16,8 % – високий рівень тривожності, що свідчить про поширеність тривожності серед 80 % учнів із помірним та високим рівнем тривоги. Дівчата (М = 101,25) повідомили про значно вищий рівень тривожності, ніж хлопці (М = 83,26), що підтверджено параметричними та непараметричними тестами. Одним із центральних завдань було виявлення мовленнєвих причин тривожності за допомогою тематичного аналізу, який виявив сім провідних чинників: страх негативної оцінки однолітками; вплив учителя; психологічні схильності учнів; обмежена мовна компетенція; страх перед усним мовлення; тривожність, пов'язана з тестуванням; та сприйнята нерівність щодо знань у класі. Ожержані результати поглиблюють розуміння багатогранної природи тривожності під час вивчення іноземної мови і підкреслюють потребу у цільових педагогічних заходах та подальших міждисциплінарних дослідженнях адаптивних підходів до викладання.

Ключові слова: афективні чинники, тривожність під час вивчення іноземної мови, тривожність під час говоріння, студенти-підлітки, бар'єри у спілкуванні, англійська як іноземна мова.

Introduction

The English language plays a pivotal role in global communication, functioning as a common means of interaction across private, academic, and professional domains. In response to the growing demand for English proficiency, educational systems worldwide are increasingly emphasizing the need to equip adolescents with comprehensive language competencies, recognizing these as essential for future academic and professional success. However, learning a foreign language (FL) is often accompanied by *foreign language anxiety* (FLA), a prevalent psychological barrier that many experts regard as one of the most significant obstacles to effective language learning (Horwitz et al., 1986; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Dewaele et al., 2023).

Foreign language development is influenced by a complex interplay of both cognitive and affective factors, which together shape the overall learning experience. While earlier research focused primarily on cognitive aspects, it is now widely acknowledged that affective factors—including anxiety—play an equally important role, emphasizing the need to address both dimensions within FL education (Richards, 2020). Building on this, Buchatska (2015) emphasizes that the process of mastering a FL is emotionally charged and demanding, requiring learners to continuously confront challenges and regulate a range of negative emotions, which, over time, can give rise to FLA. From a psychological perspective, *foreign language anxiety* is classified as a situation-specific anxiety, triggered by particular contexts and prone to

recurrence (Horwitz, 2001; Woodrow, 2006). It has been defined 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" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 128), as well as "the feelings of worry and negative, fear-related emotions associated with learning or using a language that is not one's mother tongue" (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012, p. 103).

FLA manifests through a complex interplay of symptoms that often overlap with other types of anxiety. These manifestations fall into four distinct domains: physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral. It is essential to recognize that the boundaries between symptoms and consequences are often blurred, as many signs of FLA simultaneously serve as both expressions and outcomes of the anxiety. Frequently reported *physical symptoms* include blushing, excessive sweating, heart palpitations, rapid breathing, trembling, gastrointestinal discomfort, and sensations of chest tightness (Young, 1991; Hashemi & Abbasi, 2013). *Emotional symptoms* typically encompass feelings of fear, worry, internal pressure, restlessness, and a perceived loss of control or stability (Price, 1991; Kruk, 2019). On the *cognitive level*, FLA is associated with diminished concentration, distorted perception of social cues, and recurrent negative thoughts centered on anticipated failure or criticism (Paradowski et al., 2015; MacIntyre, 2017). Furthermore, anxiety impairs the ability to absorb, retain, and retrieve linguistic information. According to Young (1991), FLA activates the brain's threat-response mechanisms, which divert cognitive resources away from learning and toward managing emotional distress. *Behaviorally*, FLA often leads to avoidance strategies aimed at minimizing exposure to anxiety-provoking situations. As a result, students may choose to sit at the back of the classroom, avoid eye contact, and limit their participation (Horwitz et al., 1986; Elliot, 2008). In some cases, avoidance escalates to making excuses, feigning illness, or even skipping classes. These behaviors, which may be misinterpreted as disengagement, actually represent coping mechanisms intended to alleviate psychological discomfort associated with oral communication. Additionally, learners experiencing high anxiety frequently exhibit a compulsive need for reassurance and engage in excessive preparation. During oral presentations, for example, anxious students may repeatedly check their notes, memorize content verbatim, and invest disproportionate amounts of time in preparation. While such behaviors might be mistaken for diligence, they often stem from perfectionism driven by fear of negative evaluation (Pishghadam & Akhondpoor, 2011).

FLA has been shown to affect learning outcomes across all age groups negatively; however, adolescents appear to be particularly vulnerable. Due to the intense emotional, cognitive, social, and physical transitions characteristic of this developmental stage, their psychological resilience may be lower,

making them more susceptible to anxiety-related challenges (Salmivalli et al., 2021; Lojová & Sokolová, 2024).

FLA influences the learning and performance of all four language skills; however, several studies have consistently identified speaking as the skill most adversely affected (Cohen & Norst, 1989; Woodrow, 2006; Akkakoson, 2016). This is largely because, as Cohen and Norst (1989) note, "language and self are so closely bound, if not identical; an attack on one is an attack on the other" (p. 61).

Although research on the psychology of foreign language learning and teaching has progressed rapidly, the practical implementation of findings related to FLA still significantly trails behind theoretical advancements. While many teachers are aware that emotions influence the learning process, insufficient understanding of FLA may lead to the misinterpretation, trivialization, or neglect of its observable symptoms, potentially resulting in ineffective—or even counterproductive—interventions.

Effectively addressing foreign language anxiety requires not only an understanding of its core characteristics but also the teacher's ability to recognize its presence in students and uncover potential underlying causes. Without this awareness, designing meaningful interventions becomes particularly challenging. A well-rounded grasp of these aspects is essential for reducing FLA and supporting adolescent learners in their language development.

This study, therefore, examines the level of FLA among the adolescent students included in the research and, for those experiencing heightened anxiety, investigates its underlying factors with the aim of providing insights that can inform more targeted and effective pedagogical practices.

Methodology

Research Subject and Research Questions

This study investigates the phenomenon of foreign language anxiety among upper-secondary students learning English as a foreign language in Slovakia. It examines both the overall level of anxiety and the key factors that contribute to speaking-related FLA.

The following questions guide the research:
1. What is the overall level of FLA experienced by the studied sample of students?
2. What proportion of students experience low, moderate, and high levels of FLA?

3. How does the level of FLA vary among students in relation to gender?
4. What are the most commonly perceived causes of speaking-related FLA?

Research Sample

The participants in this study were second and third-year students from a secondary vocational school in Slovakia, all of whom were learning English as a foreign language. The students were aged 16–17 (second year) and 17–18 (third year).

In the first (quantitative) phase, 95 students (68 female, 27 male) were selected using convenience sampling. A subset of students demonstrating moderate to high levels of foreign language anxiety, as identified through FLCAS results, participated in the second (qualitative) phase, which involved open-ended and semi-structured interviews.

Research Design, Methods, Data Collection and Analysis

To answer the first three research questions, a quantitative research method with a descriptive design was employed, utilizing the *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale* (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The resulting data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics.

To address the fourth research question, a qualitative approach based on Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) was adopted to identify the most commonly perceived causes of speaking-related FLA. Data collection involved individual unstructured (open) interviews, followed by semi-structured in-depth interviews (Boyce & Neale, 2006). For data analysis, the Grounded Theory methodology included three coding phases—open, axial, and selective—along with the Constant Comparative Method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Kolb, 2012).

Ensuring the Validity and Reliability of Research Tools

The original English version of the FLCAS questionnaire is a well-established research instrument, widely recognized for its high validity and reliability (Aida, 1994; Horwitz, 2001; Yaikhong & Usaha, 2012). To assess the reliability of the newly developed Slovak version, Cronbach's alpha was calculated, yielding a value of $\alpha = .96$ across all items. This result is comparable to those reported by other studies, including the authors of the original questionnaire, who

obtained a value of α = .93, thereby confirming the strong reliability of the translated instrument.

The reliability of the qualitative component was ensured through: a) careful selection of participants based on moderate or high levels of FLA; b) conducting a pilot study to ensure question clarity and participant understanding; c) verbatim transcription and meticulous handling of interview data; and d) strict adherence to Grounded Theory principles with standardized coding procedures.

To enhance the validity of the study, triangulation was employed, which involved: a) appropriate participant selection; b) conducting a pilot study and implementing necessary adjustments to content and structure; c) rigorous application of Grounded Theory methodologies, including systematic coding, minimizing researcher bias, and using direct quotations in analysis; and d) consultation of preliminary findings with experts in foreign language didactics, psychology, and the psychology of foreign language teaching and learning.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, and students and their parents/guardians were informed of the study's purpose. Informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality and anonymity were ensured. The study adhered to the ethical standards for research involving minors, as outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

Results

Overall Level of Foreign Language Anxiety

To assess the overall level of foreign language anxiety among the student sample, the arithmetic mean of the total FLA scores obtained from the FLCAS questionnaire was calculated. As presented in *Table 1*, the study involved 95 students (n = 95), with a mean FLA score of M = 96.14 (SD = 29.06). Given that the FLCAS ranges from 33 to 165, this score reflects a moderate level of anxiety among the participants.

Statistical Distribution of the Data

To assess whether the obtained data followed a normal statistical distribution, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was conducted. As illustrated in *Graph 1*, the

distribution approximates a Gaussian curve, with the results indicating no significant deviation from normality (D = .066, p = .78).
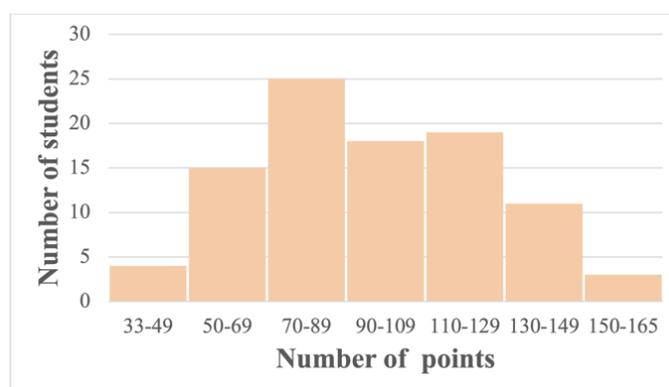
Table 1

Overall foreign language anxiety levels among students based on FLCAS results

Number of students (n)	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (SD)	Median Med	Mode Mod	Min	Max
95	96.14	29.06	96	125	39	162

Figure 1

Distribution of Foreign Language Anxiety Scores Among Students

Distribution of Students by Levels of Foreign Language Anxiety

Table 2 presents the distribution of students across three levels of FLA. Of the participants, 19 students (20.0 %) were classified as having low anxiety, 60 students (63.2 %) as moderate anxiety, and 16 students (16.8 %) as high anxiety. Overall, the majority of students (80.0 %) reported elevated levels of FLA (moderate to high).

Foreign Language Anxiety Levels by Gender

27 male and 68 female participants completed the FLCAS questionnaire. As shown in *Table 3*, the mean FLA score for male students was M = 83.26, while for female students it was M = 101.25.

To examine gender-based differences in FLA, the following hypothesis was formulated and statistically tested:

Hypothesis: *Female students exhibit significantly higher levels of foreign language anxiety than male students.*

Table 2

Distribution of Students by Levels of Foreign Language Anxiety

Level of FLA	Score Range	Fre-quency (n)	Percen-tage (%)	Mean (M)	Stan-dard Devia-tion (SD)	Mode (Mod)	Median (Med)	Min/ Max
Low	< 67	19	20.0	56.16	7.42	61	58	39 / 66
Moder ate	67–125	60	63.2	97.30	16.67	125	96.5	71 / 125
High	> 125	16	16.8	139.25	10.93	130	135.5	128 / 162

Table 3

Foreign Language Anxiety Levels by Gender

Gender	Frequen-cy (n)	Percentage (%)	Mean FLA (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Mode (Mod)	Median (Med)	Min/Max
Male	27	28.42	83.26	28.39	84	80	39 / 148
Female	68	71.58	101.25	27.90	125	102.5	44 / 162

To determine the appropriate statistical test, the normality of the data was assessed using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test. Results indicated that neither distribution significantly deviated from normality: males, $D = .156$, $p = .48$; females, $D = .105$, $p = .67$.

An independent samples one-tailed t-test revealed a statistically significant difference in FLA scores between male and female students ($t = 2.82$, $p = .003$, $p < .01$), supporting the hypothesis. This result was further confirmed using a non-parametric one-tailed Mann–Whitney U-test, which also indicated a statistically significant difference ($z = 2.81$, $p = .005$, $p < .05$).

Based on the results of both tests, the hypothesis is confirmed: *female students exhibit significantly higher levels of foreign language anxiety than male students.*

Subjectively Perceived Causes of Foreign Language Anxiety

To address the fourth research question and identify the most commonly perceived causes of FLA, transcripts of unstructured and semi-structured in-depth interviews were analyzed using the principles of Grounded Theory. The analysis involved developing descriptive groupings, which were then examined in detail to identify patterns and relationships, culminating in the central category that connects to the core analytical narrative and informs the emerging theory.

The multi-stage analysis resulted in seven primary categories of FLA causes. *Table 4* presents these categories along with their associated subcategories, highlighting how factors such as peer interactions, teacher behavior, student attitudes, language proficiency, communication challenges, testing practices, and classroom dynamics interrelate to influence students' anxiety.

Table 4
Subjectively Perceived Causes of FLA Identified in Student Interviews

Category	Subcategories
1. Fear of Negative Evaluation by Peers	• Mocking and insensitive comments from classmates toward lower-performing individuals • Undesired attention from peers during oral communication practice

2. The Teacher as a Source of FLA	•**Direct influences:**
	  - Improper behavior from the teacher
	  - Insensitive reactions to mistakes or overall student abilities
	  - Comparison of individual students' abilities
	  - Lack of patience
	  - Mood swings and unpredictability
	  - Absence of a positive approach toward students
	• **Indirect influences:**
	  - Excessive focus on grammar and lack of communication in the FL
	  - Use of ineffective and insufficiently stimulating learning activities, disregard for students' suggestions
	  - Inability of the teacher to address instances of mocking in the classroom

	• Potential unrecognized indirect influences: - Encouraging students' avoidance behavior - Denying students the opportunity to improve the target language skills by accepting inactivity - Teacher resignation and unjustified reduction of expectations
3. Learners' Psychological Predispositions	• Lack of interest or aversion to the target language and/or its instruction • Beliefs about a lack of talent or ability to learn the target language • Reluctance to put in the effort required to improve in the language, adopting a passive attitude • Lack of self-discipline • Insufficient ambition among students
4. Insufficient Proficiency in the FL	—
5. Fear of Communication in the Target Language	• Inability to construct a response (form-related difficulties) • Lack of information about the discussed topic (content-related difficulties) • Insufficient understanding of the spoken text
6. Certain Aspects of Student Testing	• Testing format not aligning with the primary goal of instruction — learning to communicate orally • Memorization as a requirement for success in testing • Overemphasis on grades • Oral exams in front of the entire class and the related fear of negative evaluation • Use of unplanned tests and oral exams by the teacher
7. Significant Differences in Student Competencies in the Classroom	• Unpleasant reactions from higher-performing students toward their lower-performing peers • Comparisons made by lower-achieving students with more successful classmates • Teacher's comparison of students' abilities

Following the principles of Grounded Theory, the emerging theory can be formulated as follows: *If the language teaching system does not adequately address the needs of contemporary adolescents, it may become a source of various negative emotions and contribute to the development of foreign language anxiety.*

Discussion

The quantitative analysis, using the FLCAS questionnaire (Horwitz et al., 1986), was complemented by qualitative data from open and semi-structured interviews, addressing all formulated research questions.

Regarding the first research question, *"What is the overall level of foreign language anxiety experienced by the studied sample of students?"*, the results indicate that, for a sample of 95 students (n = 95), the mean FLA score was M = 96.14 (SD = 29.06), reflecting a moderate level of foreign language anxiety (*Table 1*). This result aligns with previous research on FLA (Horwitz et al., 1986; Woodrow, 2006; Elaldi, 2016).

For the second research question, *"What proportions of students experience low, moderate, and high levels of foreign language anxiety?"*, nineteen students (20.0%) exhibited low anxiety, 60 students (63.2%) moderate anxiety, and 16 students (16.8%) high anxiety (*Table 2*). Consequently, 80% of participants displayed elevated FLA levels, indicating that foreign language anxiety is a prevalent phenomenon requiring focused research and pedagogical attention. These findings align with prior studies, which report that a substantial proportion of foreign language learners experience moderate to high FLA (Horwitz, 2001; Le, 2004).

Regarding gender differences, the sample included 27 male and 68 female students. To address the third research question, *"How does the level of foreign language anxiety vary among students in relation to gender?"*, males had a mean FLA of M = 83.26, and females had a mean FLA of M = 101.25 (*Table 3*). Statistical analyses confirmed significant differences: an independent samples one-tailed t-test (t = 2.82; p = .003, p < .01) and a Mann–Whitney U-test (z = 2.81; p = .005, p < .05) demonstrated that female students experienced significantly higher FLA than male students. These findings align with most studies investigating gender and FLA (Elkhafifi, 2005; Park & French, 2013; Rababah & Almwajeh, 2024), although some studies report conflicting results (Aida, 1994; MacIntyre et al., 2003). This pattern is consistent with broader anxiety research, which shows a higher prevalence of anxiety disorders among females (Bruce et al., 2005). Biological factors, including neural chemistry and hormonal influences, may partly explain these gender differences.

The qualitative analysis addressed the fourth research question, *"What are the most commonly perceived causes of speaking-related FLA?"* Seven main categories were identified (*Table 4*): 1. Fear of negative evaluation by peers; 2. The teacher as a source of FLA; 3. Learners' Psychological Predispositions; 4. Insufficient proficiency in the foreign language; 5. Fear of communication in

the target language; 6. Certain aspects of student testing; 7. Significant differences in student competencies within the classroom

Consistent with Grounded Theory principles, the emerging theory can be summarized as follows: *If the language teaching system does not adequately address the needs of contemporary adolescents, it may become a source of various negative emotions and contribute to the development of foreign language anxiety.*

Building on the seven categories, the following arguments substantiate the emerging theory: Socially and emotionally, the teaching system inadequately fosters peer acceptance and respect from teachers, creating conditions that promote for dominance, humiliation, and inadequate guidance. Students' autonomy, critical thinking, and active participation are limited, while instruction often lacks stimulating, creative, and technologically relevant activities. The system does not adequately promote meaningful engagement with the target language or intrinsic motivation, and it insufficiently addresses adolescents' stress, anxiety, and self-criticism, sometimes exacerbating these through inappropriate teacher behavior. Cognitively, oral communication is under-supported. Errors are stigmatized rather than being treated as a natural part of learning, and testing practices often exacerbate students' discomfort. Overall, learners receive limited guidance in goal-setting, self-monitoring, and resilience-building. The system does not effectively cultivate confident, self-directed learners or sufficiently support their overall well-being. These findings highlight the complex interplay between student attitudes, teacher behavior, peer dynamics, proficiency, and testing practices, demonstrating that both individual and systemic factors influence FLA.

Although this study identifies the key contributors to speaking-related foreign language anxiety, developing targeted pedagogical strategies requires careful consideration of interdisciplinary factors—including pedagogy, developmental psychology, foreign language didactics, the psychology of language learning and teaching, neuroscience, and related fields. While detailed pedagogical recommendations extend beyond the scope of this article, they will be addressed in future research to allow for a more comprehensive and evidence-based approach.

At the same time, certain limitations should be acknowledged: the relatively small sample size (n = 95) may affect generalizability, and future research should involve larger, more diverse samples across multiple schools and age ranges to confirm these findings and identify additional causes of foreign language anxiety. Incorporating longitudinal designs could further clarify causal relationships between teaching practices and the development of FLA.

Conclusion

Foreign language anxiety is a natural defensive response to unpleasant experiences during language learning, such as being mocked by classmates, insensitive teacher reactions to mistakes, unplanned testing, or a lack of interest in the target language. When such situations occur repeatedly, learners develop FLA as a protective mechanism to anticipate and avoid anxiety-provoking scenarios. However, excessive or frequent FLA can negatively affect mental well-being and reduce the effectiveness of language learning.

Teachers play a pivotal role in creating a safe, supportive, and stimulating classroom environment, helping students progress without unnecessary obstacles. Understanding the nature, causes, and manifestations of FLA is essential for interpreting student behavior and supporting their language development.

This study contributes by integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence to highlight the multifaceted causes of speaking-related FLA among adolescents. It provides a foundation for future research and underscores the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to understand better and address FLA, ultimately informing strategies for promoting confident and effective communication in the foreign language classroom.

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Disclosure Statement

The author reported no potential conflicts of interest.

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