Understanding the Roots and Upshots of Anxiety in the Context of Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract

The main goal for most non-native English speakers, particularly Algerian English students, is to enhance their English proficiency and effectively communicate with others. However, this endeavor can be both pleasurable and daunting. Despite employing various techniques like dictionaries and watching English movies, these students often feel inadequate and uncertain about their language skills, lacking the necessary lexicon for effective communication. As a result, this sense of inadequacy is commonly referred to as "anxiety". In the realm of educational psychology, anxiety has gained significant attention and has become a prominent area of research in the context of second language acquisition. Its substantial impact on students' language acquisition renders it one of the most influential adverse factors in learning English as a Foreign Language. In this regard, the current study relies on quantitative methodology for its ability to provide precise numerical data, and enables replication of findings for validation and generalization. The results have indicated that anxiety in foreign language learning may stem from other concepts, such as self-perception and self-evaluation.

Introduction

The feeling of uneasiness, dread, and strain in different situations is commonly referred to as anxiety (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Arroll & Kendrick, 2018). It is a combination of negative emotions and restlessness, accompanied by heightened physical reactivity. Psychologists make a distinction between trait anxiety and state anxiety (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Barlow, 2002). The former represents an individual's inherent tendency to experience anxiety, while the latter is a temporary fear triggered by a specific circumstance. State anxiety can occur in various scenarios, such as before exams or public speaking engagements (Sarason, 1980; Gregersen &

Horwitz, 2015). Given that anxiety is considered a significant influencing factor (Spielberger, 1966; Ali & Anwar, 2021), concerns have emerged regarding its impact on second language learning. This specifically pertains to the nervousness experienced when attempting to perform tasks in the target language, particularly for individuals who lack proficiency (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a; Papi & Khajavy, 2021). Recent studies have identified language anxiety as a distinct form of anxiety when compared to other types (Horwitz *et al.,* 1986; Kang, 2006).

Learning a second language can be an enjoyable or intimidating experience (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). For many non-native English speakers, particularly Algerian English students, their main goal is to be able to communicate fluently and improve their English proficiency. This is a commendable objective, but it is quite challenging (Schunk, 1990; Worden, 2016). Despite student constant efforts in using dictionaries and watching English movies, they still feel inadequate and uncertain about their abilities, lacking the necessary vocabulary for effective communication (Zhang & Zhong, 2012). Essentially, this feeling of insecurity is commonly referred to as "anxiety". In other words, anxiety has had a significant impact on the field of educational psychology, particularly in the study of second language acquisition (Horwitz *et al.,* 1986; Ellis, 2008). Due to its profound influence on students' language learning, it has been identified as one of the most detrimental factors in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learning (Zhang & Rahimi, 2014). Thus, this paper tries to answer the following question: what are the prime causes of foreign language anxiety? Then, what upshots does it have on student learning?

Methods

In order to reach the pre-ordained objectives, the main method used is the quantitative (Cohen *et al.,* 2011). The prime tool utilized is a questionnaire that is divided into five main parts; each of which tackles a specific aspect that directly influeneces students' anxiety (Creswell, 2014). Regarding the research sample, it pertains to third-year students enrolled at Djilali Liabes University in Sidi Bel Abbes. This academic assembly comprised nine distinct groups, each actively participating in the investigation. In this respect, the cumulative number of students under examination stands at 160. Furthermore, since the majority of them are available and easy to contact, the simple random sampling method seems to be the appropriate sampling method (Shagofah & Tajik, 2022).

Results

Part One:

Question 1: For how many years have you been studying English Language?

Question 2: Do you like to be able to fluently speak English language?
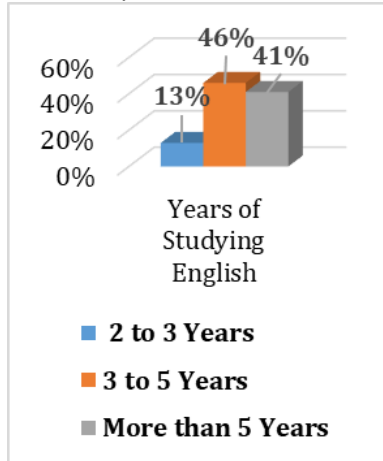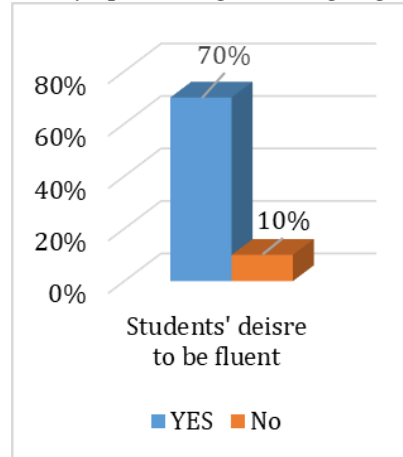

Figure 1

Figure 2

As depicted in the graph, 41% of the students acquired mastery in English language in more than 5 years, whereas 46% possess a learning background of 3 to 5 years. A mere 13% of the students have embarked on their English learning journey recently (within 2 years). Additionally, a significant 70% of the students display a genuine eagerness to become fluent in English language, whereas only 10% demonstrate less motivation in this regard.

Part Two: Anxiety and Language Learning

Question 1: How often do you feel anxious about your own English capacities?
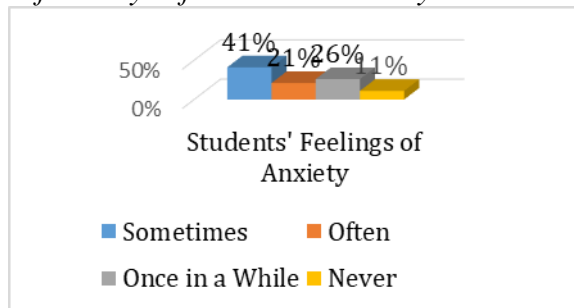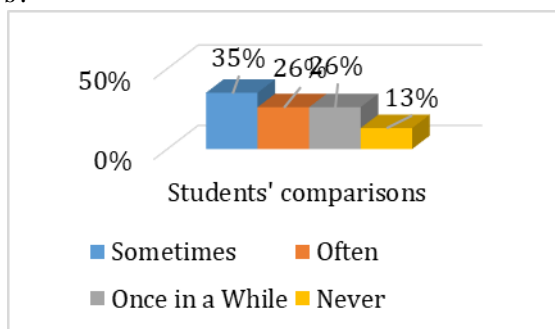

Figure 3

During the process of acquiring English as a second language, it is commonplace to encounter varying degrees of anxiety (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Barlow, 2002). As evidenced by the depicted chart, 41% of the students

report experiencing this phenomenon, while an additional 21% encounter such anxiety on an occasional basis. In contrast, 26% of the students find themselves frequently grappling with feelings of unease, while a mere 11% assert that they are entirely devoid of any such anxieties.

The variation in anxiety levels observed among students during the process of acquiring English as a second language can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the inherent complexity of language learning, involving the acquisition of vocabulary, grammar, and cultural nuances, naturally leads to anxiety (Sarason, 1980; Kianinezhad, 2024). Fear of making mistakes, performance pressure in academic or social contexts, and individual differences in attitude and coping mechanisms all contribute to varying anxiety levels. The frequency of exposure to English and cultural factors also play a role, with more exposure and cultural expectations influencing anxiety levels. These factors collectively reflect the multifaceted nature of language acquisition and the diverse experiences of language learners (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Question 2: How many times do you compare your English language level to that of your peers?

Figure 4

As depicted in the aforementioned graph, there is a discernible trend wherein a cumulative total of 35% of the students engage in the act of comparing their English proficiency with that of their peers, either on a frequent basis (constituting 26%) or intermittently. In contrast, a notable 26% of the students admit to occasionally indulging in such comparative assessments, while a mere 13% assert that they abstain entirely from this practice.

Question 3: How frequently do you feel that your English level is inferior to others?
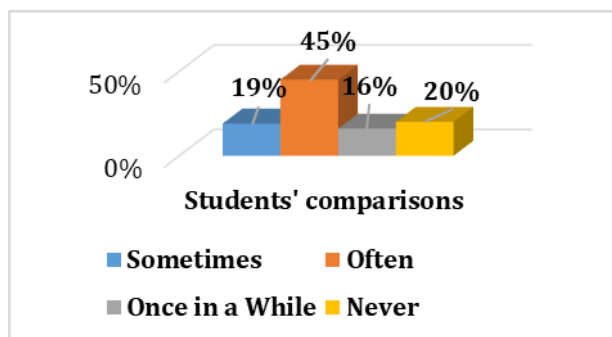
Figure 5

Based on the depicted chart, a significant 45% of the students frequently experience a sense of being undervalued, particularly when assessing their English proficiency in comparison to their peers. In a similar vein, 19% of them occasionally grapple with feelings of inadequacy. Likewise, 16% the students maintain a consistently low self-assessment of their English competence. However, it is noteworthy that merely 20% of the students have never encountered this sentiment.

Question 4: Do you usually feel frightened when you do not understand what your teacher is saying?
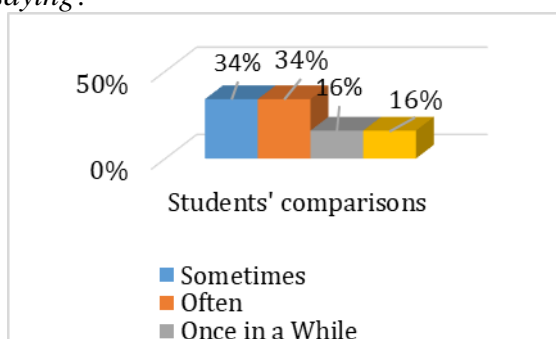
Figure 6

This query delves into students' self-assurance regarding their knowledge. Evidently, an equivalent percentage of students, constituting 34%, frequently or occasionally encounter moments of trepidation when they struggle to comprehend their teacher's directives. Concurrently, 16% of the students occasionally experience fear, while an additional 16% of them claim to never undergo such emotions.

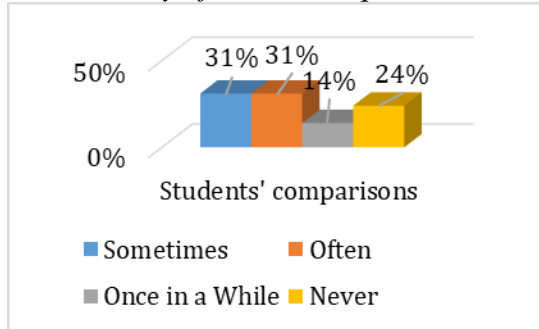*Question 5: Are you habitually afraid to ask questions in class?*

Figure 7

This question explores students' nervousness during class attendance (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908; Yaniafari & Rihardini, 2021). As illustrated in the chart above, about a third of the students (31%) experience anxiety, especially when they want to ask questions in class, whether it is often or sometimes. Additionally, 14% of the students admit to feeling occasional fear when seeking clarification from the teacher about something they did not understand, while a larger group of 24% claim they never experience such apprehension.

Part Three: Causes of Anxiety
Question 1: How frequently do you feel afraid of English exams?
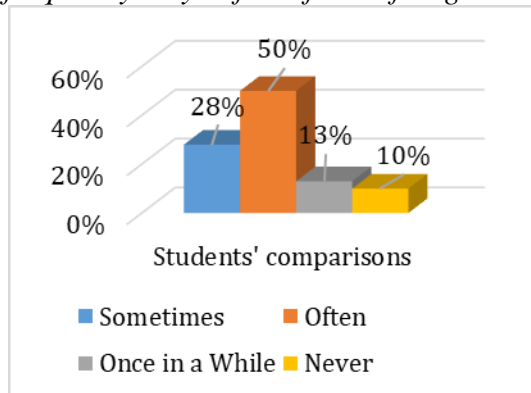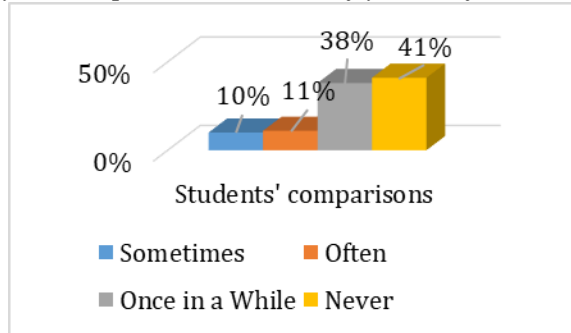

Figure 8

This inquiry seeks to ascertain the extent of students' anxiety, particularly in the lead-up to and during examinations. The findings reveal that a significant portion, constituting 50% of the student body, often grapples with exam-related apprehension. Furthermore, 28% consistently experience this fear on a regular basis. Similarly, 13% encounter exam-related distress

intermittently, leaving only 10% who claim to never experience such anxiety in the context of examinations.

Question 2: Do you escape class because of your self-level view?

Figure 9

Avoiding class due to diminished self-perception or low self-esteem is a prevalent occurrence amongst foreign language learners (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986; Hermaniar & Azkiya, 2021; Rubio, 2021). Consequently, as depicted in the diagram provided, a substantial proportion of the students, amounting to 41%, consistently attend their classes, reflecting their robust self-confidence. In contrast, 38% sporadically miss classes, indicating fluctuating self-perception. Simultaneously, 11% exhibit frequent absenteeism, and an additional 10% regularly evade their class commitments.

Question 3: How often do you avoid communication because of your lack of English vocabulary?
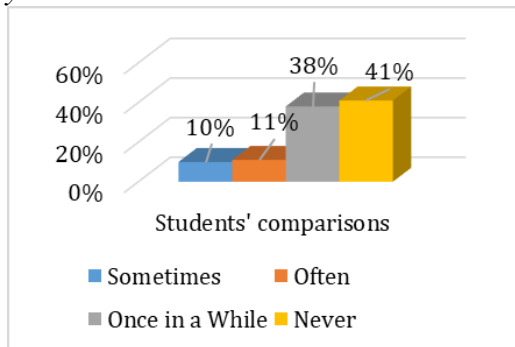
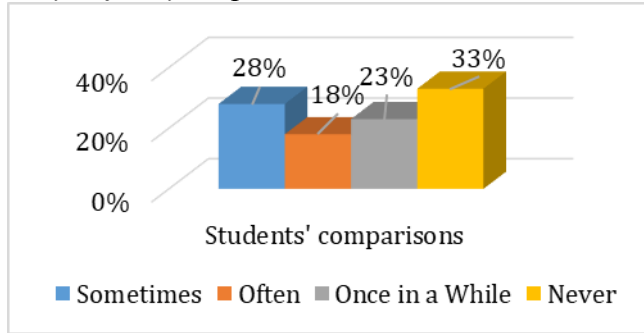

Figure 10

When students decide to skip classes, one of the prime factors often cited is their deficiency in vocabulary (Nation, 2013). As illustrated in the chart above, a notable 41% of the students, coupled with 38% of their peers, either rarely or occasionally refrain from engaging in class discussions due to their limited lexicon. Furthermore, 11% of the students consistently exhibit

reluctance to participate, while 10% intermittently shy away from communication.

Question 4: Do you fear your peers' criticism?

Figure 11

Students who frequently avoid attending class due to communication apprehension often exhibit a heightened sensitivity to peer criticism (Horwitz, *et al.*, 1986; Hermaniar & Azkiya, 2021). Consequently, the graph presented above illustrates that 28% of these students occasionally harbour concerns about their peers' comments, while 18% frequently experience a sense of uneasiness in response to criticism from their classmates. Meanwhile, 23% occasionally manifest mild anxiety in such situations, whereas a resolute 33% consistently remain impervious to peer evaluations.

Question 5: Do you feel troubled about your teacher's feedback and criticism?
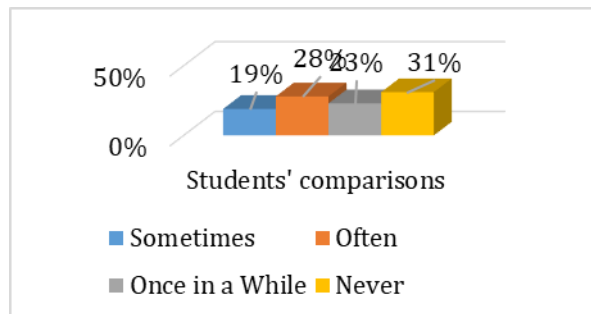
Figure 12

Students who harbor apprehension about their peers' comments are likely to extend that fear to receiving feedback from their teachers (Kitano, 2001). Consequently, as exemplified in the graph, 28% of the students, in addition to 19% of them, frequently or occasionally express apprehension when it comes to receiving feedback from their teachers. Meanwhile, 23% of the students only experience occasional trepidation regarding their teachers'

comments on their work, and a robust 31% consistently remain unafraid of their teachers' evaluations.

Part Four : Positive Effect of Anxiety
Question 1: How often does your stress in second language learning push you to make extra efforts?
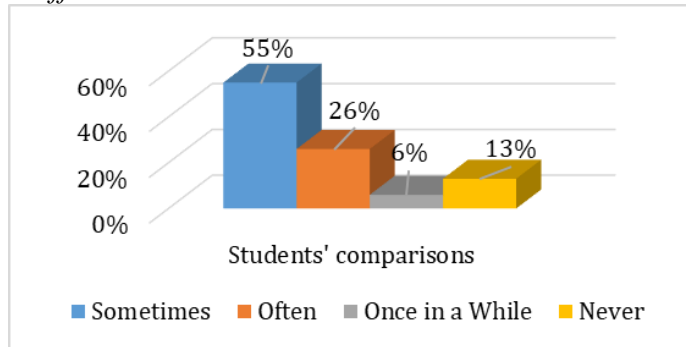
Figure 13

Experiencing anxiety while acquiring a second language is a customary phenomenon (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986; Dikmen, 2021). For certain students, it serves as their primary motivation to skip class, while for others, it acts as a catalyst for investing additional time and effort in self-improvement (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Zhou *et al.,* 2023). Indeed, as depicted in the figure above, a substantial 55% of the students recognize the value of anxiety in their language learning journey. Similarly, 26% of them often regard stress as beneficial, as it propels their learning endeavours. However, a small minority, constituting 6%, hold a different perspective, believing that occasional stress can be advantageous in preparing for their studies. Nonetheless, a notable 13% of the students are highly unlikely to perceive stress as a motivating factor for their academic pursuits.

Question 2: And does your stress push you to come to class well prepared and attentive?
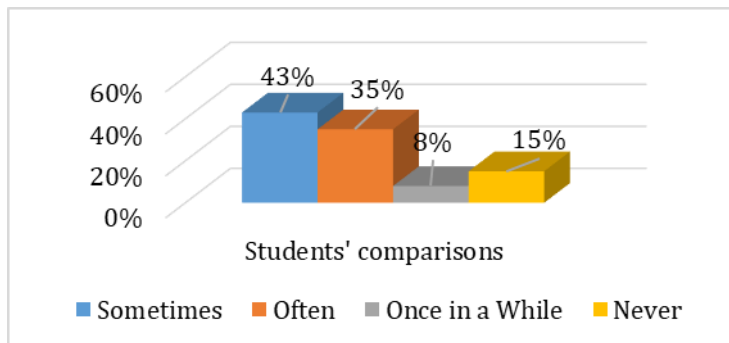
Figure 14

This question delves into the dual aspects of students' emotional states: anxiety and motivation (Spielberger, 1972; Richards, 2022). Specifically, it explores whether students' anxiety is a driving force behind their class attendance and their motivation to engage actively (Gardner, 1985; Mochklas *et al.,* 2023). To this end, it is noteworthy that 43% of the students occasionally identify stress as a significant factor motivating them to attend class and remain attentive. Moreover, 35% of the students frequently perceive stress as the impetus for their conscientious class preparation and active participation. In a similar vein, 8% acknowledge that anxiety compels them to stay vigilant and attentive during class sessions, while a noteworthy 15% do not consider anxiety to be the primary catalyst for either their motivation or attendance.

Part Five : Suggestion and Recommendation
Question 1: Do you agree that teachers' valuable feedback can decrease your anxiety?
Question 2: Where do you stand on having a supportive environment that helps you communicate effectively and diminish your stress?
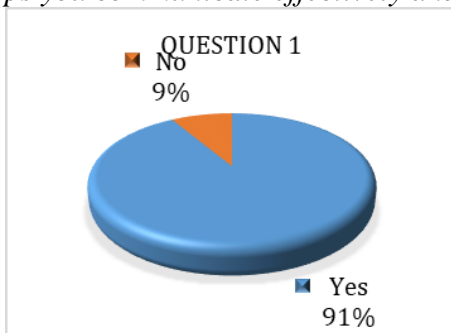
Figure 15   **Figure 16**

Teacher feedback plays a pivotal role in shaping students' motivation and alleviating anxiety, and it can significantly contribute to the creation of a positive learning environment that can effectively mitigate students' anxiety (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Evidently, both graphs illustrate a consensus among the students, with 91% and 90%, respectively, concurring that teacher feedback is of paramount importance in reducing their language-related anxiety. In addition, it contributes to the cultivation of a supportive learning atmosphere, which highlights their communication skills and active participation. Nevertheless, a minority, comprising 9% and 10% for each question, dissent from this perspective, asserting that teacher feedback is not essential for anxiety reduction and that the classroom environment may not necessarily be a means to alleviate their anxiety.

Question 3: Do you reckon that anxiety in second language learning is the one outcome of your own negative self-image?

Figure 17

This inquiry delves into the realm of students' self-perception and its influence on their language acquisition process, as portrayed in the graphical representation. A robust 70% of the students contend that their unfavourable self-image may play a pivotal role in inducing their language-related apprehension. Conversely, a more modest 30% hold an opposing view, suggesting that while their self-image might contribute to their heightened anxiety, it is not the primary factor driving it.

Discussion

The survey results expound upon the intricate psychological aspects inherent in the acquisition of English as a secondary language. A discernible pattern transpires, as 41% of the students divulge experiencing anxiety, and an additional 21% come across such phenomena sporadically. In opposition, 26% grapple with recurring disquietude, while a minority of 11% proclaim the absence of such trepidations.

According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1991b), the disparity in anxiety levels is attributable to myriad factors. The intrinsic intricacy of language acquisition, encompassing lexicon, syntax, and cultural subtleties, innately predisposes individuals to apprehension. Factors such as consternation of committing errors, performance pressure, and individual variances in adaptive strategies contribute to the observed heterogeneity in anxiety levels. Furthermore, the prevalence of English exposure and cultural considerations introduce an additional layer that sways anxiety levels among learners. These multifaceted factors collectively emphasize the sundry experiences encountered by language learners (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a; Papi & Khajavy, 2021).

This survey further demarcates that 35% of the students partake in comparative evaluations of their English competency, with 26% doing so habitually. Conversely, a significant 26% concede to sporadic comparisons, while 13% eschew from engaging in such practices entirely. Comparative

inclinations align with social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954; Darvin & Norton, 2023), where individuals gauge their attitudes *vis-à-vis* peers, potentially influencing self-worth and motivation (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991b; Rubio, 2021). Sentiments of undervaluation are pervasive, as corroborated by 45% of the students who frequently endure a sense of being undervalued and 19% who grapple with occasional sensations of inadequacy. Concurrently, 16% retain a consistently meager self-appraisal of their English competence. Notwithstanding, it merits recognition that a mere 20% assert having never encountered this sentiment. These findings are consonant with psychological postulations linking perceived competence to motivation and the subsequent influence of self-esteem on academic endeavors (Zhang, 2018).

Class attendance is impacted by self-perception, with 41% exhibiting consistent presence, epitomizing formidable self-assurance. Conversely, 38% intermittently forgo classes, signifying vacillating self-perception. Furthermore, 11% demonstrate recurrent absenteeism, while an additional 10% habitually circumvent class obligations. These fluctuations highlight the complex interrelation between self-perception and attendance patterns among language learners (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Lexical inadequacy surfaces as a consequential determinant influencing class engagement, as 41% of the students, concomitant with 38% of their counterparts, infrequently or sporadically abstain from participating in dialogues due to restricted vocabulary. This observation emphasizes the crucial function of linguistic dexterity in cultivating dynamic classroom participation (Nation, 2013). Additionally, students who habitually eschew class owing to communication trepidation exhibit augmented susceptibility to peer reproach, with 28% occasionally nurturing apprehensions regarding their colleagues' remarks. A further 18% routinely encounter disquietude in response to peer critiques. These insights correspond to social anxiety paradigms, accentuating the influence of peer assessments on students' emotional composure (Horwitz, 2001; Alden *et al.,* 2004).

Fear concerning peer observations extend to pedagogical feedback (Festinger, 1954; Darvin & Norton, 2023), as 28% of the students frequently or intermittently manifest uneasiness about procuring evaluations from their teachers. Concurrently, 23% of the students solely undergo episodic disquiet pertaining to their teachers' observations; 31% invariably remain impervious to their teachers' appraisals. These revelations emphasize the interconnectedness of students' perceptions of analyses from peers and educators alike, yielding potential repercussions for motivation and anxiety alleviation (Horwitz, 2001; Alden *et al.,* 2004).

The inquiry delves into the intricate interplay between stress, ambition, and language acquisition. A remarkable 55% acknowledge the merit of

anxiety within their linguistic education odyssey; simultaneously, 26% often perceive tension as a propitious catalyst for learning pursuits. This recognition aligns with the Yerkes-Dodson axiom (Brown, 1965), positing that moderate stress can bolster performance, underscoring individual disparities in discerning stress as a motivational impetus (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Barlow, 2002).

Furthermore, the dual aspects of students' emotional dispositions are scrutinized, with 43% occasionally ascertaining stress as a salient factor inciting them to attend instruction and maintain attentiveness. Complementarily, 35% frequently discern tension as the stimulus for fastidious class groundwork and proactive involvement. This elaborate interconnection among stress, aspiration, and active engrossment in the educational process reflects well-established psychological precepts (Dörnyei, 2001).

Teacher feedback plays a pivotal role in shaping students' motivation and alleviating anxiety, according to a survey (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). The results indicate that 91% and 90% of the students, respectively, recognize the paramount importance of teacher feedback in reducing language-related anxiety. These findings align with psychological principles that emphasize the significance of positive feedback in fostering a supportive learning environment (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). However, a minority of the students (9% and 10% for each question) hold differing opinions, suggesting potential variations in the perceived effectiveness of teacher feedback in anxiety reduction (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Dewaele, *et al.,* 2022).

Furthermore, students' self-perception emerges as a critical factor influencing language-related apprehension, with 70% acknowledging that their unfavorable self-image may play a pivotal role in inducing anxiety. This finding aligns with self-concept theory, which emphasizes the impact of individuals' perceptions of themselves on their emotional states and behaviors (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a; Papi & Khajavy, 2021).

The survey results provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the psychological factors affecting students' experiences in acquiring English as a second language. These findings resonate with well-established theories in psychology, highlighting the intricate interplay among anxiety, motivation, self-perception, and external factors such as feedback and peer interactions (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Rashov, 2024). The insights gained contribute to a deeper comprehension of the complex dynamics inherent in language learning, offering valuable considerations for educators, policymakers, and practitioners in the field (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985; Toyama & Yamazaki, 2021).

The following suggestions and recommendations should be considered:
Cognitive Restructuring:
- Promote the identification and questioning of negative cognitive patterns.
- Facilitate the development of realistic and optimistic perspectives.
- Equip individuals with techniques for reframing anxious thoughts to foster a more constructive mindset.

Mindfulness and Relaxation Techniques:
- Introduce practices of mindfulness to enhance present-moment awareness.
- Instruct individuals in relaxation methods, such as deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation (Hofmann *et al.,* 2010).
- Emphasize the significance of regular mindfulness exercises for overall stress reduction. (Zeidan *et al.*, 2010).

Exposure Therapy:
- Gradually expose individuals to controlled anxiety-inducing situations.
- Support desensitization to feared stimuli, thereby promoting a reduction in anxiety over time.
- Ensure a nurturing environment and gradual progression to build resilience. (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005).

Coping Skills Training:
- Offer practical strategies for effectively managing stress and anxiety (Meichenbaum, 2007).
- Educate individuals on problem-solving techniques to address challenges.
- Nurture the development of adaptive coping mechanisms for long-term resilience (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000).

Social Support and Connection:
- Encourage individuals to seek support from friends, family, or support groups.
- Highlight the importance of interpersonal relationships in alleviating feelings of isolation.
- Foster a supportive environment that emphasizes emotional well-being through interpersonal connections (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Li *et al.,* 2021).

In conclusion, English language anxiety among non-native speakers is a pervasive issue that warrants careful consideration within the realm of language acquisition and education (Kang, 2006). This article has delved into the various causes and consequences associated with this form of anxiety, shedding light on its multifaceted nature. The present work shows how language anxiety can manifest differently in individuals, whether it be through communication apprehension, fear of evaluation, or self-perception issues (Foa & Kozak, 1986; Masuwd *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, its detrimental effects on academic performance, including reduced participation, diminished fluency, and hindered overall achievement, have been explored in depth (Kang, 2006).

However, as with any complex phenomenon, there is much more to uncover and understand. The perspective for further research is promising. Future investigations could delve into the efficacy of various interventions and pedagogical strategies aimed at mitigating language anxiety. Additionally, exploring the intersection of language anxiety with other psychological factors and the impact of cultural differences on its manifestation would be valuable avenues for future inquiry.

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