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STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME FLA: TEACHERS' VIEWS

Abstract. This study aims to identify efficient strategies to overcome and reduce foreign language anxiety (FLA) among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. 9 EFL teachers from the university shared their views toward FLA and reported their strategies to reduce FLA. Using a qualitative method, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The findings showed that several effective strategies may help to overcome FLA among students. The strategies have included creating a supportive atmosphere and classroom environment, using engaging teaching methods, and helping students build confidence. This study contributes to the existing findings of FLA while comparing the teachers' effective strategies.

Keywords: foreign language anxiety, English as a foreign language, teachers' strategies, teaching methods.

Introduction

Nowadays, the English language is a lingua franca, meaning that it is extensively used as a means of communication all over the world. It has served from the past till nowadays, being classified as inner, outer, and expanding circles (Kachru, 1988). Kazakhstan is in an expanding circle, meaning that students are learning English as a foreign language(EFL), where they rely on the provided norms for the English language. In the process of acquiring a foreign language, students' attitudes and emotions play a crucial role. Occasionally or repeatedly, students may experience negative emotions, such as distress, uncertainty, and anxiety, thus leading to a negative impact on teaching and learning(MacIntyre, 2017; Morgan, 2020; Muller & Goldenberg, 2021). Language anxiety is an affective factor that impacts a student's ability to learn a language. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) defined foreign language anxiety (FLA) as "the worry and negative emotional reaction when learning or using the foreign language". It has been identified as the most powerful predictor of one's performance and achievement (Liu & Huang, 2011). In this case, the classroom environment and the teacher play one of the most crucial roles in the process of acquiring a foreign language. In particular, teacher-student interaction is important in the increase or decrease of the students' anxiety levels (Horwitz, 1988; Koch & Terrell, 1991 & Young, 1990). A language teacher is a person who guides, encourages, and supports the students and is a person who can mitigate the anxiety level of a student. If the teacher notices any signs of anxiety in the learning process, some adjustments can be made, and strategies can be implemented.

This study is essential to the teaching sphere, particularly providing some strategies to overcome FLA among students, because it is one of the vital and ongoing topics nowadays. It can be beneficial for teachers.

The goal of this study is to explore the strategies that teachers use to help students overcome FLA in the classroom. It aims to analyze teachers' perspectives on effective teaching methods that can reduce students' anxiety in foreign language learning.

Language anxiety has been investigated since 1970 and defined as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz et al., 1986). In order to measure the level of anxiety of students, Horwitz et al. introduced an instrument, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which consists of 33 items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree)

to 5 (strongly disagree) (1986). However, besides anxiety, there are other affective variables such as motivation, self-esteem, and attitudes and cognitive variables such as the ability to process and produce information that also have an effect on students' language learning process. Here, the cognitive psychologist MacIntyre highlighted the role of affective and cognitive variables to understand how individuals learn a foreign or second language (1995). Affective variables might have an effect on students positively (motivation is high and anxiety is low, learning process occurs) or negatively (high anxiety and low self-esteem, blocking the learning process) (MacIntyre, 1995). If students are experiencing anxiety, their cognitive skills are blocked as well, consequently leading to poor academic performance, forgetting words, and being under pressure. The interaction between affective and cognitive factors is significant, as the former influences the latter. For instance, anxious students may struggle to focus, limiting their ability to recall words or structure sentences. This idea is similar to Krashen's (1982) affective filter theory, which claims that the learning process occurs and students are open to learn and process new information only when they feel relaxed and have a low level of anxiety.

Anxiety is the most investigated affective emotion as it can have a detrimental effect on a student's academic performance. It has been described as a feeling of tension and nervousness that emerges as a response to a danger to a value that an individual finds important for the existence (May, 1977; Spielberg, 1983). Similarly, Young defined it as a complicated phenomenon peculiar to language learning (1992), and Zhang defined anxiety as the tension that the learner experiences in performing a learning task (1994). The more anxious students are, the less motivation they have to learn a foreign language. Moreover, FLA may have different causes such as lack of self-confidence, constant worry, and shyness, which are mostly recognized in increased heart rate, shaking hands, and dry mouth. Horwitz et al. identified three components of FLA that may happen in the classroom: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (1986). Communication apprehension is an inability to communicate effectively with others and a type of shyness with marked fear or nervousness. As the language learning process requires students to speak, many students feel nervous during speaking activities, and this condition is caused by uncontrollable anxiety characterized by body movements and the inability to speak clearly (Fauzi, 2022). Students avoid speaking and participating in discussions and group activities. Test anxiety is the fear of failing a test, accompanied by tension and stress. Horwitz et al. (1986) explained that test anxiety is linked to a student's fear of poor performance, leading to avoidance behaviors and decreased motivation to learn. Lastly, fear of negative evaluation is the fear of being judged and evaluated by others negatively. Students are prone to avoid doing any tasks, speaking, and participating in the lessons due to fear of making mistakes (Mitrevski et al., 2024). They prefer to remain silent and constantly worry about how others perceive their knowledge of English (Horwitz et al., 1986). Furthermore, the English language can be either a comfort place or seem as an obstacle for anxious students (Nicolson & Adams, 2010). Teachers and peers might also be direct causes of students' anxiety. The teacher's role is crucial in the learning process, as teacher-student interaction can increase or decrease the students' anxiety levels (Horwitz, 1988; Koch & Terrell, 1991 & Young, 1990). Moreover, Aida (1994) explored the impact of teachers' teaching styles on students' anxiety levels. It was concluded that the teaching style, for instance, a harsh manner can impact detrimentally and cause the students to feel anxious in the classroom. Instead, teachers' "facilitator" manner should emerge since teachers are responsible for creating and maximizing learning opportunities (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). To mitigate the students' anxiety level, strategies can be implemented by teachers.

Methods and materials

A semi-structured interview with EFL university teachers was a data collection to find out the most appropriate strategies and comprehensively describe them. The interview questions were designed to explore how EFL teachers perceive FLA in their students and what strategies they use to help learners overcome it. The aim was to determine whether teachers had effective methods to reduce FLA and understand their perspectives on the impact of anxiety on students' learning. The interview was conducted in English, Kazakh and Russian based on the participants' language preference to

ensure clarity and allow for more detailed responses. Nine EFL teachers from university-level institutions voluntarily participated in the interview. Their responses provided valuable insights into the various strategies and approaches used to manage FLA in the classroom. To protect participants' rights and confidentiality, all names remained anonymous in the study. The teachers were fully informed about the purpose of the research, data collection methods, and how the information would be handled. They were assured that their responses would remain confidential and be used solely for academic research purposes.

Accordingly, the research questions are as follows:

1. What are the main factors that contribute to students experiencing FLA in foreign language classrooms, and how are they recognized?

2. What are the most effective strategies that teachers use to reduce FLA in foreign language classrooms?

Demographic information about the EFL teachers is presented below (see Table 1). The participants vary in age and teaching experience, representing diverse backgrounds in language education. All participants are non-native English speakers, providing valuable perspectives on FLA and strategies to mitigate it in the classroom.

Table 1. Information about participants

	T 1	T 2	T 3	T 4	T 5	T 6	T 7	T 8	T 9
Ages	22	23	23	22	21	27	28	27	30
Gender	F	M	M	M	F	F	F	M	F
Teaching experience (years)	2	2	2	3	1	7	5	5	10
Workload (hours per week)	18	20	20	20	15	22	25	25	27

Findings

The data gathered from semi-structured interviews were categorized into three groups: main factors contributing to FLA, behavioural/physical and emotional signs of FLA, and teachers' strategies to overcome the FLA.

Main factors contributing to the FLA

In the interviews, school and university teachers responded to the question related to the main factors contributing to the FLA of students that they have noticed in students in English classrooms. As a result, most responses from EFL teachers were similar, and the most striking factors that the most of the students encountered are displayed in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Main factors:

Factors	Descriptions
Low-level of English	• Low proficiency in a foreign language can be an obstacle in learning language, leading to anxiety. • The wrong level class can detrimentally affect the achievement of a student.

Previous experience of learning English	● Negative experience in the journey of language learning is linked to anxiety.
Fear of judgment	● Being evaluated and judged by others makes students more anxious in the classroom.
Lack of communication	● Lack of communication with peers and teacher's support and encouragement increase anxiety.

Low-level of English

Students with a low level of English language might struggle with comprehension, which leads to the feeling of anxiety. One of the teachers pointed out that "Students' proficiency level can tell things about its anxiety level and if it is low, the student's anxiety is higher among others"(T2). Other teachers also mentioned that "Very low level of English accompanied with wrong class division can be detrimental to students' achievement leading to anxiety of students"(T1 and T8). It is suggested to place students in the groups of their actual level of English, since placing above the actual level can company students with high frustration and anxiety.

Previous experience of learning English

Previous negative experiences may increase students' anxiety. These negative experiences can be connected with failure, embarrassment, and teaching methods. Most of the participants highlighted this factor as one of the main saying "If a student often associates English with previous negative experience and stressful situations, he\she will develop avoidance behaviour in the classroom. This really increases anxiety" (T 1, 4, and 8). Teaching methods play a vital role in the learning process. "Strict, high-pressure, and implementing only traditional methods can lead to anxiety among students. Teachers should be approachable and patient" mentioned one participant highlighting the importance of up-to-date methods of teaching (T3).

Fear of judgement

This was the most mentioned factor by teachers where they noticed that students are afraid of being judged and laughed at by others. The fear of making mistakes, especially in front of others, significantly increases a student's anxiety. It was mentioned by teachers: "Sometimes I notice that some students are reluctant to speak just because they are afraid of being judged by their group mates. I realize that at that moment my students are very anxious" (T1). Another mentioned factor was "In my opinion, students sometimes feel anxious because of peer pressure and lack of confidence"(T9). Factors such as lack of confidence, which is an affective variable, can make a student not to be active in a classroom, preventing the student from participating in activities and discussions.

Lack of communication

This factor features from the previous factor when there is a lack of communication between students in a classroom. "In a classroom, there should be a good atmosphere and relationship between peers based on friendship and openness" noted by participants (P 2 and 5). Insufficient interaction between peers can increase anxiety, as students feel isolated in their learning process. Here, a teacher should encourage students to build and maintain positive relationships. It was suggested that teachers should encourage and foster communication in a classroom and provide support to help students build friendly bonds.

Behavioural/physical and emotional signs of FLA

In the interview questions, teachers were asked how they recognize when a student is experiencing FLA in a classroom. The responses were listed as signs that have been noticed by teachers and divided into behavioural and emotional ones. Participants believe that anxiety can influence students' behaviour and emotions negatively, leading to avoidance, stress, and lower academic achievement.

Table 3. Signs

Signs	Examples
Behavioural/physical	● Avoidance of speaking ● Avoidance of eye contact ● Sweating
Emotional	● Shyness ● Nervousness ● Lack of confidence

Behavioural signs such as avoidance of speaking and eye contact are constantly appearing in the classrooms of teachers. Most of the respondents shared that the most behavioural sign was avoidance of speaking. "Only 20-30% of the classroom can be active while others do not speak at all avoiding speaking activities and discussions" mentioned one participant (T 4). This "silence" display can reflect poorly on a student causing anxiety. Furthermore, it negatively affects the success of the interaction and in general students' willingness to communicate. Another participant noted "Most students avoid speaking because of their anxiety and fear that they will make a mistake and give a wrong answer" (T 6). Beside these signs, one teacher mentioned that in the classroom there were students who started sweating if the student's name was called and asked to answer a question (P 1). Speaking in front of peers can be stressful for anxious students making them feel tension and sweat, triggering shaky hands, long pauses, tone of voice with rapid breathing. Regarding emotional signs, shyness, nervousness, and lack of confidence were mentioned in almost all responses among teachers. These negative emotions can hinder students learning a foreign language, impeding their focus and memory retention.

Teachers' strategies to overcome the FLA

The objective of this study was to identify efficient strategies used by university teachers on reducing foreign language anxiety. Number of strategies are implemented by the teachers and they have shared with their efficient ones. All teachers emphasized the importance of their role in a classroom in working with students. There are the most highlighted and important strategies according to the teachers:

1.Establishing a supportive atmosphere.

All teachers highlighted the significance of a class atmosphere. The class atmosphere is the main indicator of the learning process. For anxious students especially, the supportive classroom environment can be beneficial to reduce anxiety. According to interviewees, a friendly and supportive atmosphere encouraged by a teacher mitigates the anxiety among students and the risk of feeling anxiety. One participant noted "Students should be free to make mistakes in a foreign language and feel safe. Teachers should try to create this safe environment and make students feel that they will not be judged by others" (T 7). Teachers as a facilitator and mentor by constantly supporting and encouraging students can minimize the anxiety of students. Comfortable and relaxed classroom atmosphere established by the teacher might possibly decrease students' anxiety towards the learning process. Supportive atmosphere can be built by providing support whenever a student faces challenges in the process of acquiring a foreign language. Moreover, stressful and unhealthy competition based learning can cause anxiety. Instead of creating a supportive classroom environment, excessive competition based learning has a potential to discourage students from learning a language. Consequently, instructors should establish a safe and supportive environment for students, where they feel comfortable and safe making mistakes, a non-judgmental atmosphere, where students can engage in the activities and discussions and collaborate with each other. This is a common strategy for teachers who work with anxious students, listening to them, constantly providing students with encouragement, and being free of competition by letting students make mistakes and not be judged.

2. Positive psychology

This strategy is based on students' confidence building. Teachers seek for the best of the students and are concerned with their strengths, at the same time, fostering students' well-being. It is a strategy that focuses on students' development, confidence, and fulfillment, including education. In contrast to negative emotions such as anxiety and stress, it emphasizes positive emotions such as joy and interest among students. For instance, some teachers noted one strategy that helped them to reduce students' anxiety which is positive teacher-student talk, where teachers help and encourage students. One teacher mentioned "Before starting a lesson I have a small positive talk with students, it can be about anything, about their life, life at school, pets and so on" (T 3 and 9). These kinds of small talks can soften the tension in a classroom and harmonize students' attitude. In addition, giving appraisal for correct answers is another way of this strategy. In this respect, teacher variables such as friendliness, emotional support, tone of voice, and positive mood influence students positively reducing their anxiety. These positive emotions may undo negative ones, as when students have positive emotions and attitudes, they better absorb information and become more aware of language input.

3. Adaptive teaching methods

The final strategy that all teachers mentioned in their responses was implementation of adaptive teaching methods. As a classroom includes a variety of students, it might be impossible to implement an individual approach to each student. However, some teaching methods can be beneficial for most of the students. "When I see a shy and anxious student, I try to divide students into groups and make them work together in groups. Then they start sharing their ideas and in general speaking" mentioned T 4, 6, 7 and 8. So group work and pair work can mitigate students' anxiety and foster better communication between peers. Another teacher (T 9) mentioned that she has a student who has anxiety when it comes to public performance, so she allowed her student to record a video of her speaking. She adopted this teaching method to student's needs and "By letting the student perform her task as he\she wants, we depict our care and support which actually can reduce their anxiety". Furthermore, role-play methods can be beneficial for anxious students. Some teachers implemented this method and said "As they do not use English for the sake of answering, rather try to use it and do something with it, related to real-life situations" (T 2 and 5). Role-plays might be an effective strategy to mitigate students' anxiety, simultaneously, engaging students in the learning process.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to identify the factors that contribute to FLA, their signs and strategies to overcome FLA that are implemented by EFL university teachers. The findings obtained by the semi-structured interviews include main factors for anxiety and their behavioural/physical/emotional signs that help teachers recognize that their students have foreign language anxiety. Students' low level of proficiency, fear of judgement, negative experience in learning English, and a lack of communication with peers and teachers were the main factors for their anxiety. Their anxiety was shown in behaviours by avoiding speaking, avoiding eye contact as well as sweating. According to their emotional signs, being shy, nervous and lack of confidence interfered with students' participation and being active during a lesson. The teachers' observation regarding their students' anxiety was analyzed as these given factors and signs. The strategies that were implemented by the teachers found to be effective and efficient. It involved creating a supportive atmosphere in a classroom, providing positive psychology, and adapting teaching methods to students' needs.

This study can be beneficial for EFL teachers. By understanding and addressing the FLA, teachers can establish a more positive and supportive environment and relationships with students. These strategies can reduce students' anxiety and make them feel safe in the journey of a foreign language learning and can be helpful tools for teachers to amplify students' language learning experiences.

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ШЕТЕЛ ТІЛІН МЕҢГЕРУДЕГІ ҮРЕЙДІ ЖЕҢУ СТРАТЕГИЯЛАРЫ: МҰҒАЛІМДЕРДІҢ КӨЗҚАРАСЫ

Аңдатпа. Бұл зерттеу шетел тілі ретінде ағылшын тілін оқитын (EFL) студенттер арасындағы шетел тілін меңгерудегі үрейді (FLA) төмендетудің тиімді стратегияларын анықтауды мақсат етеді. Зерттеуге университеттен 9 EFL мұғалімі қатысып, FLA-ға қатысты пікірлерімен бөлісті және оны азайтуға бағытталған стратегияларын баяндады. Сапалық зерттеу әдісі қолданылып, жартылай құрылымдалған сұхбаттар жүргізілді. Зерттеу нәтижелері студенттер арасында FLA-ны төмендетуге көмектесетін бірқатар тиімді стратегияларды анықтады. Бұл стратегияларға қолдау көрсететін атмосфера қалыптастыру, жағымды сынып ортасын құру, қызықты оқыту әдістерін қолдану және студенттердің эмоционалды интеллектісін дамыту кіреді. Бұл зерттеу FLA-ға қатысты бұрынғы ғылыми нәтижелерді толықтырып, мұғалімдердің тиімді стратегияларын салыстыруға мүмкіндік береді.

Түйінді сөздер: шетел тілін меңгерудегі үрей, ағылшын тілі шет тілі ретінде, мұғалімдердің стратегиялары, оқыту әдістері.

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СТРАТЕГИИ ПРЕОДОЛЕНИЯ ИНОЗЫКОВОЙ ТРЕВОЖНОСТИ ПРИ ИЗУЧЕНИИ ИНОСТРАННОГО ЯЗЫКА: ВЗГЛЯД УЧИТЕЛЕЙ

Аннотация. Данное исследование направлено на выявление эффективных стратегий по преодолению иноязыковой тревожности (FLA) при изучении иностранного языка среди студентов, изучающих английский как иностранный (EFL). В исследовании приняли участие

9 преподавателей EFL из университета, которые поделились своими взглядами на FLA и представили стратегии по его снижению. В рамках качественного исследования были проведены полуструктурированные интервью. Результаты показали, что существует ряд эффективных стратегий, способствующих снижению тревожности среди студентов. Среди них: создание поддерживающей атмосферы, формирование благоприятной учебной среды, использование увлекательных методов обучения и развитие эмоционального интеллекта у студентов. Данное исследование вносит вклад в существующие научные данные о FLA и сравнивает эффективные стратегии преподавателей.