EDUCATION

WAYS OF REDUCING ANXIETY IN UKRAINIAN SECONDARY LEARNERS WHEN SPEAKING ENGLISH

Olena Bevz

PhD in Education, Associate Professor,
Pavlo Tychyna Uman State Pedagogical University, Uman, Ukraine,
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9088-1571, e-mail: elenabevzp@gmail.com

The paper highlights the significance of addressing the issue of anxiety in language learning, especially when it comes to speaking English as a foreign language by Ukrainian secondary learners. The aim of this small-scale classroom research is to investigate the secondary learners' language anxiety levels when speaking English, and to suggest ways to reduce it. The levels of language anxiety were defined by means of a self-report questionnaire, 'The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale' (FLCAS), which uses a Likert scale to assess issues related to communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. The intervention rested on exploiting the following strategies: encouraging gradual exposure to speaking situations, providing interactive and creative speaking practices, using positive reinforcement and confidence building, and fostering a supportive learning environment. Throughout the intervention, specific strategies were used to develop fluency, confident body language, and active participation towards the group of learners with a high level of language anxiety. To trace the impact of the intervention on the participants, the focused observation on the behavioural changes, such as participation levels in speaking activities, changes in body language, fluency and willingness to speak.

The intervention helped reduce severe speaking anxiety and led to noticeable positive changes in fluency, body language, and participation. The findings suggest that the implemented strategies helped reduce anxiety and improve engagement. It also proves that understanding language anxiety levels serves as a premise for providing necessary help and support to anxious foreign language secondary learners.

Key words: language learning anxiety, Ukrainian secondary learners, speaking English, strategies to reduce anxiety.

У статті підкреслюється важливість вирішення проблеми

тривожності у вивченні мови, особливо коли йдеться про процес говоріння англійською мовою як іноземною українськими учнями базової середньої школи. Метою дослідження є визначення рівня мовної тривожності учнів під час говоріння на англійській мові та пошуку шляхів її зниження. Рівні мовної тривожності були визначені за допомогою анкети «Шкала тривожності у вивченні іноземних мов у класі» (FLCAS), яка використовує шкалу Лайкерта для оцінки проблем, пов'язаних із побоюваннями перед іншомовним спілкуванням, тестовою тривогою та страхом негативної оцінки. Запропонована методика подолання тривожності базувалася на використанні таких методів: поступового залучення учнів у розмовні ситуації, забезпечення інтерактивних та креативних практик говоріння, позитивної підтримки та зміцнення впевненості, а також створення сприятливого освітнього середовища. До групи учнів з високим рівнем мовної тривожності використовувалися специфічні методи для розвитку вільного мовлення (fluency), впевненої мови тіла та заохочення активної участі. Для відстеження впливу методів на учасників, проводилося спостереження за змінами в поведінці, такими як рівень участі в англомовній розмовній діяльності на уроці, зміни мови тіла, швидкість та плавність мовлення (fluency) й бажання говорити.

Результати дослідження свідчать про те, що впроваджені методи допомогли зменшити тривожність та покращити рівень участі учнів у виконанні завдань, спрямованих на розвиток говоріння англійською мовою. Розуміння рівня мовної тривожності слугує передумовою для надання необхідної допомоги та підтримки учнів з тривожністю під час вивчення іноземних мов у середній школі.

Ключові слова: тривожність при вивченні іноземних мов, українські учні середньої базової школи, говоріння англійською мовою, методи зниження тривожності.

Introduction. English education in Ukrainian schools has evolved significantly, especially with the introduction of the New Ukrainian School (NUS) reform. English is taught as a foreign language starting from primary school. In the secondary school, it is taught either as the first or the second foreign language. The curriculum emphasizes communicative approaches, aiming to develop students' speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. Although mastering each communication skill is necessary to become a well-rounded communicator, speaking fluently has several essential benefits. The speakers have many advantages when they can meaningfully combine words to convey their thoughts, attitudes, and feelings. (Huy, 2023). Speaking helps learners practice real-time language use, improving fluency and confidence. Despite its benefits, speaking is often accompanied by common challenges in language acquisition and learning, such as psychological factors, like shyness, fear of making mistakes, fear of being mocked by other students or criticised by the teacher and language anxiety. According to Elaine Horwitz (2001) anxiety does not affect just beginners or the newcomers of language learners, as it assures that nearly most language learners experience the effect of anxiety in their language learning period. Anxiety seems to be a significant challenge to language learners. Learners, teachers,

material developers, and researchers agree that anxiety is a critical turning point and an essential part of acquiring a foreign language (Aatif, 2022).

Method

. The research was conducted at Uman Gymnasium No. 14 of the Uman City Council, Cherkasy region, with the learners of grade 9, aged from 14 to 15 years, in collaboration with Anastasiya Melnyk, a 4th Year Bachelor student of the Faculty of Foreign Languages, during her Observed Teaching in the last semester of her training at the university. The group of secondary learners under consideration was a monolingual class of 20 students, 12 females and 8 males, who had A2-B1 levels of English language proficiency and rather high motivation towards the English language learning. As teenagers, they have unique characteristics that influence how they learn English. Regarding their cognitive development, adolescents have a greater ability to think abstractly compared to younger children, allowing them to grasp complex grammar rules and nuanced meanings. Their interest in learning depends on how relevant and engaging the material is. They respond well to topics that connect with their personal experiences and interests. At this age, peer interactions play a significant role; that is why they eagerly participate in group activities, discussions, and collaborative learning, which boost their confidence and willingness to use English. They are highly engaged with digital content and enjoy learning English by using social media, videos, and interactive apps.

It is widely accepted that learning a language raises some anxiety, which is considered to be one of the most highly examined variables in psychological and educational research. As a psychological phenomenon, anxiety is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system (Spielberger, 1983). The nature of anxiety has been differentiated into trait anxiety, situational anxiety, and state anxiety. Zheng (2008) states that no clear delineation between these three categories can be claimed; the differences can roughly be identified on a continuum from stability to transience, with trait anxiety related to a generally stable predisposition to be nervous in a wide range of situations on one end, and a moment-to-moment experience of transient emotional state on the other. Trait anxiety is a stable individual difference in propensity to experience anxiety across situations and time (e.g., Spielberger & Vagg, 1995). Some individuals become anxious easily; others remain calm even in very intense situations. State anxiety is 'a relatively temporary feeling of worry experienced in relation to some particular event or act' (Brown, 2007, p. 390). Situation-specific anxiety is triggered by a specific set of conditions or stimuli. In the context of education, common anxiety-provoking situations include public speaking, completing examinations, and speaking in class (Ellis, 2008). Situational anxiety falls in the middle of the continuum, representing the probability of becoming anxious in a particular type of situation (Zheng, 2008).

One of the most influential papers on language anxiety belongs to Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986), who articulated it as 'a situation-specific anxiety construct, largely independent of the other types of anxiety'. Similarly, MacIntyre (1998) defines language anxiety as a form of situation-specific anxiety, 'the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language' (p. 27).

However, Scovel (1978) drew the distinction between facilitating and debilitating anxiety. According to the author, facilitating anxiety occurs when the difficulty level of the task triggers the proper amount of anxiety, i.e. a certain level of anxiety may be beneficial, but too much anxiety can lead to a debilitating effect, which may, in turn, lead to avoidance of work or inefficient work performance.

The complexity of anxiety is reflected in the means used in research to measure it. The three major ways of measuring anxiety are: behavioural observation or rating; physiological assessment (such as heart rates or blood pressure tests); and participants' self-reports (about internal feelings and reactions) (Casado & Dereshiwsky, 2001; Daly, 1991).

So, language anxiety is a type of situational-specific psychological phenomenon, which bears its own characteristics from language learning contexts, and is a relatively distinctive form of anxiety, intertwined with other individual differences such as personality traits, emotion, and motivation.

Thus, the aim of this study is to investigate the secondary learners' language anxiety levels, the factors causing it when speaking English, and to suggest ways to reduce it. The *research questions* that this research aims to investigate are: 1) What is the secondary learner's language anxiety level? 2) What can a teacher do to reduce secondary learners' language anxiety when speaking English?

The hypothesis states that understanding language anxiety levels serves as a premise for providing necessary help and support to anxious foreign language secondary learners by means of the following strategies: encouraging gradual exposure to speaking situations, providing interactive and creative speaking practices, using positive reinforcement and confidence building, and fostering a supportive learning environment.

The study comprised two stages. In the first stage, the main data collection was carried out, including surveys with two questionnaires. The questionnaire 'The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale' (FLCAS), originally designed by Horwitz et al. (1986), was intended to measure Ukrainian secondary learners' English language speaking anxiety levels in the English classroom. The 33 items asked participants to respond in a 5-point Likert-scale format. Sparks and Ganschow (1991) found that 60% of the items (20/33) involved comfort level with expressive or receptive language, 15% of the items (5/33) involved verbal memory for language, 12% of the items (4/33) involved difficulty with reading and writing, and 12% of the items (4/33) involved speed of language processing. A learner responds to each item with a single answer: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree. For each participant, an anxiety score was derived by adding his or her ratings of the 33 items. The levels of anxiety based on this scale are categorized into three levels: high, moderate, and low. The total score ranged from 33 to 165 (one point for each item equals 33 points of the minimum score, whereas five points for each item equals 165 maximum score, based on the Likert scale grading). The high level of speaking anxiety is represented by a total score of more than 132, a total score ranging from 99 to 132 demonstrates a moderate level of speaking anxiety, and a total score of less than 99 indicates a low level of foreign language speaking anxiety. The FLCAS's construct comprises three dimensions: (1) fear of negative evaluation, (2)

communication apprehension, and (3) test anxiety.

The questionnaire 'My preferences in learning English' was purported to elucidate participants' attitudes to learning English by means of digital content: using social media, videos, and interactive apps, as well as to explore the facilities available to them. They were asked to answer questions about what gadgets/ technical devices were available to learners, what messaging apps they were knowledgeable about and used in everyday life, and whether they used and would like to use any of the above-mentioned things to learn English in the Yes/No format. To find out the topics the learners were interested in within the theme they were currently learning ("Health"). They answered the open-ended question, 'What things concerning your health and a healthy way of living would you like to speak about?' suggesting 3-5 topics and ranking them from the most interesting (the top position in the list) to the least interesting. The information was used to plan the intervention, in particular, speaking activities, to involve participants in the planning process and to ensure their engagement and eagerness to participate.

The next intervention stage consisted of a series of lessons carefully planned with the focus on speaking activities. Mainly, those were the skills integration lessons where speaking activities followed listening to recordings, or reading the texts on the topics studied.

Having analysed the learners' responses on the questionnaire 'My preferences in learning English', a decision was made to create a group on Telegram, a cloud-based mobile and desktop messaging app. Throughout the intervention, learners got several tasks to create and send short (30 seconds to 1 minute) videos expressing their opinions on the topics of their interest: 'How important is sleep hygiene for overall health?', 'What would you recommend to your classmates to reduce stress and maintain wellness?', 'Is fast food a necessary convenience or a harmful habit?'. The learners were also asked to comment on at least two videos posted by other learners, expressing agreement/ disagreement with the content of the videos. The introduction of such a technology-based speaking tool rests on the participants' willingness to use their smartphones to learn English.

The intervention was focused on starting with low-pressure speaking activities like creating individual video messages and video responses to other learners' videos, and pair work in the classroom before progressing to small group and group discussions. The scaffolded tasks were implemented, where learners practised speaking in structured formats before engaging in free conversation. The constructive feedback provided underlying learners' progress rather than mistakes with the intention to boost their self-assurance and emphasising that their mistakes were learning steps and not the source for punishment. The recognition and appreciation of improvements with small rewards or acknowledgement helped to reinforce a positive mindset. Short mindfulness exercises or breathing techniques were introduced to manage anxiety, sometimes at the beginning of the lessons, but mainly before speaking activities.

The final lesson on learning the topic 'Health' was conducted in the form of a group discussion, a powerful way to enhance learners' speaking, listening, and critical thinking skills. The purpose of the discussion was to debate a topic, 'The Impact of

Social Media on Teen Mental Health', by sharing their opinions. Learners were assigned roles (e.g., moderator, note-taker) to ensure balanced participation. At the very beginning, ground rules for respectful and constructive conversation were established. The moderator used prompts and guiding questions (e.g. How does social media impact self-esteem and body image? What are the signs of social media addiction, and how can teens manage their screen time? How can social media be used in a positive way to support mental health and build connections? What role do influencers play in shaping teen behaviour and expectations? How can teens protect themselves from cyberbullying and negative online interactions? What are the ways to create healthy digital habits? How to balance online life with real-life relationships? etc.) to keep the conversation flowing, as well as images, videos, and real-life objects to stimulate discussion. The learners were supported by teaching functional language to them: how to politely agree, disagree, give reasons, give opinions and ask follow-up questions. At the end of the discussion, constructive feedback on language use and communication skills was offered with the aim of encouraging learners to reflect on their performance and suggest improvements.

Special attention was given to four participants, comprising the group of learners with a high level of language anxiety. Throughout the intervention, specific strategies with reference to them were used intended to develop fluency, confident body language, and active participation, such as using structured prompts to help learners articulate thoughts more smoothly, giving learners a few seconds to plan their responses, and reducing hesitation, simulating real-life situations to build speaking confidence in a safe environment, encouraging learners to stand tall and maintaining natural eye contact while speaking, using non-verbal cues to enhance communication, using mirror practice, that is having learners observe their own body language to identify areas for improvement, providing a supportive setting for learners to engage without pressure.

Finally, the participants filled in the FLCAS questionnaire for the second time to see and measure any changes in their levels of language anxiety.

Results. To answer the 1st research question, '*What is the secondary learner's language anxiety level?*', the participants responded to statements in the questionnaire FLCAS before and after the intervention. At the beginning of the small-scale classroom investigation, the results of the questionnaire reveal the following distribution of speaking anxiety levels among Ukrainian secondary learners before the intervention:

- High Anxiety: 20% of learners (4 students) experienced significant anxiety when speaking in a foreign language. This suggests that a portion of students felt highly uncomfortable or stressed during language use. They likely struggled with confidence when using the language, possibly avoiding speaking situations or feeling distressed in communication.

- Moderate Anxiety: 50% of learners (10 students), the largest group, had a balanced level of anxiety. They may have felt nervous about speaking, but could manage their discomfort enough to participate.

- Low Anxiety: 30% of learners (6 students) had minimal speaking anxiety, meaning learners felt relatively comfortable speaking. They likely had confidence in their language skills and experienced minimal anxiety in communication.

The distribution suggests that half of the learners had moderate anxiety, meaning they could benefit from targeted interventions to enhance their speaking confidence. The intervention's effectiveness would depend on reducing high anxiety levels and moving learners toward more comfortable speaking experiences.

The results on the language anxiety levels of Ukrainian secondary learners after the intervention demonstrate a positive shift in language-speaking anxiety among Ukrainian secondary learners. Here's what they indicate:

- High Anxiety: 10% of learners. The number of learners experiencing significant anxiety decreased from 4 to 2. This suggests that some highly anxious learners improved and moved toward lower anxiety levels, gaining more confidence.

- Moderate Anxiety: 50% of learners. The number of learners in this category remained the same at 10, indicating stability in this group. While their anxiety levels didn't significantly decrease, they also didn't worsen. While this may seem counterintuitive, it could mean that some previously highly anxious students have improved, moving into the moderate category.

- Low Anxiety: 40% of learners. The number of learners feeling comfortable while speaking increased from 6 to 8, showing improvement in confidence and reduced anxiety.

The overall trend suggests the intervention had a positive effect, particularly by reducing high-anxiety levels and increasing the number of learners with low anxiety. It would be insightful to analyze which aspects of the intervention contributed most to this improvement.

The comparison of the findings of the FLCAS questionnaire before and after the intervention reveals the following. Before the intervention, 4 learners reported high anxiety, 10 learners reported moderate anxiety, and 6 learners reported low anxiety. The highest proportion of learners (50%) experienced moderate anxiety, while 20% had high anxiety. After the intervention, high anxiety decreased from 4 to 2 learners, moderate anxiety remained the same at 10 learners, and low anxiety increased from 6 to 8 learners. The percentage of learners experiencing high anxiety dropped from 20% to 10%, indicating improvement. More learners shifted The diagram visually confirms that the intervention had a positive impact, reducing the number of learners with high anxiety and increasing the number with low anxiety. However, moderate anxiety remained unchanged, suggesting that further strategies may be needed to help these learners transition to lower anxiety levels.

To answer the 2nd research question, '*What can a teacher do to reduce secondary learners' language anxiety when speaking English?*', a set of carefully planned lessons with the focus on speaking activities was designed. To trace the impact of the intervention on the participants, the focused observation tool was used. The sample of the learners' population included 4 participants who reported a high level of language anxiety when speaking English in the FLCAS questionnaire before the intervention, and therefore needed help and support to overcome or at least reduce tension. The focus was laid on the following behavioural changes, which can be measured via observation: participation levels (number of times a learner takes part) in speaking activities, changes in body language (eye contact, posture, and overall confidence), fluency and willingness to speak (both structured and spontaneous situations).

Participant 1 had the lowest scores across all metrics, with fluency and willingness (3), body language (1), and participation level (2). This suggests they may struggle with confidence and engagement. Participant 2 showed stronger fluency (6) but moderate body language (5) and participation (4), indicating a mix of confidence and hesitation. Participant 3 has relatively balanced scores (fluency: 2, body language: 3, participation: 3), suggesting moderate engagement but room for improvement. Participant 4 demonstrates the participation level (5), fluency (4), and body language (3), indicating a certain involvement but potential non-verbal communication challenges. The results highlight variability in behavioural patterns, with some participants showing stronger fluency but weaker body language, while others struggle across all metrics.

Findings of the focused observation on participants' behavioural patterns during the intervention were the following. Participant 1 had relatively balanced results: fluency and willingness (7), body language (6), and participation level (8). This suggests better engagement and improvement in body language. Participant 2 showed fluency and willingness (10), body language (9), and participation level (8). Participant 3 demonstrates fluency and willingness (3), body language (6), and participation level (7). Participant 4 demonstrates fluency and willingness (8), body language (10), and participation level (8).

The comparison of findings of the focused observation before and during the intervention stage indicates the positive changes and dynamics in the behavioural patterns of participants with a high level of language anxiety.

Discussion and Conclusion. This study focused on defining the levels of language anxiety of Ukrainian secondary learners when speaking English by means of a self-report questionnaire that uses a Likert scale to assess issues related to communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. It also proves that understanding language anxiety levels serves as a premise for providing necessary help and support to anxious foreign language secondary learners.

At the beginning of the investigation, Ukrainian secondary learners' English language speaking anxiety levels were measured via the questionnaire '*The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale*' (FLCAS), which presented the findings from the participants' perspective, their attitudes and perceptions across three dimensions: fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and test anxiety.

The intervention was guided by the set of strategies incorporated in the lesson plans, such as encouraging gradual exposure to speaking situations, using positive reinforcement and confidence building, interactive and creative speaking practices, addressing psychological barriers, and fostering a supportive learning environment.

To give additional support and help to participants who reported having a high level of language anxiety, more strategies intended to develop fluency, confident body language, and active participation were used. These are: using structured prompts to help learners articulate thoughts more smoothly, giving learners a few seconds to plan their responses and reducing hesitation, simulating real-life situations to build speaking confidence in a safe environment, encouraging learners to stand tall and maintaining natural eye contact while speaking, using non-verbal cues to enhance communication, using mirror practice, that is having learners observe their own body language to identify areas for improvement, providing a supportive setting for

learners to engage without pressure.

The comparative analysis of the findings of the FLCAS questionnaire revealed a change in anxiety levels of the participants before and after the Intervention (see Table 1).

Table 1. Shift in Anxiety Levels Before vs. After the Intervention

Anxiety Level	Before Intervention (%)	After Intervention (%)	Change
High Anxiety	20% (4 learners)	10% (2 learners)	↓ Decreased by 10% (2 learners)
Moderate Anxiety	50% (10 learners)	50% (10 learners)	No change
Low Anxiety	30% (6 learners)	40% (8 learners)	↑ Increased by 10% (2 learners)

There has been a decrease in the high anxiety level. The number of highly anxious learners dropped by half, suggesting that the intervention was effective in reducing extreme anxiety levels. The Moderate Anxiety level appears to be stable. This category remained unchanged, indicating that while the intervention helped some learners move out of high anxiety, it didn't significantly reduce moderate anxiety levels. An increase in Low Anxiety levels is observed. More learners gained confidence, with an additional 2 learners shifting to lower anxiety levels. This positive outcome highlights improved speaking comfort.

The intervention helped reduce severe speaking anxiety, which is a positive outcome. More students may now be aware of their challenges, leading to a shift toward moderate anxiety rather than extreme fear. Continued support can help learners transition further into lower anxiety levels.

The comparison of findings based on behavioural patterns observed before and during the intervention reveals positive dynamics and changes in behavioural patterns of participants with a high level of language anxiety regarding all four learners constituting this group. The intervention led to noticeable positive changes in fluency, body language, and participation. The findings suggest that the strategies implemented helped reduce anxiety and improve engagement. However, it is important to acknowledge that two participants still exhibited a high level of language anxiety when speaking English. This may indicate that while the approach was beneficial overall, additional measures or extended support might be necessary to address individual differences in language anxiety more effectively. On the other hand, this may reflect participants' personality traits, their self-perception and self-esteem, or the influence of their general achievements in other subjects, or general anxiety without reference to language learning, which are beyond the present study and may become the focus of further research.

References

Aatif, M. (2022). The Impact of Anxiety in Learning English as a Foreign Language. *International Journal of Academic Pedagogical Research (IJAPR)*. ISSN: 2643-9123, 6(2), 67-71.

Brown, H. D. (2007). *Principles of language learning and teaching* (5th ed.). White Plains, NY: Pearson Education, Inc.

Casado, M. A., & Dereshiwsky, M. I. (2001). Foreign language anxiety of university students. *College Student Journal*, 35(4), 539-551.

Daly, J. (1991). Understanding communication apprehension: An introduction for language educators. In E. K. Horwitz & D. J. Young (Eds.), *Language anxiety: From theory and research to classroom implications* (pp. 3-14). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Ellis, R. (2008). *The study of second language acquisition* (2nd ed.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Horwitz, E. (2001). Language anxiety and achievement. *Annual review of applied linguistics*, 21, 112-126.

Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70, 125-132.

Huy, H. M. (2023). The Importance of Speaking English in Today's World. https://www.teflcourse.net/blog/the-importance-of-speaking-english-in-todays-world-ittt-tefl-blog/#nameh0

MacIntyre, P. D. (1998). Language anxiety: A review of the research for language teachers. In D. J. Young (Ed.), *Affect in foreign language and second language learning* (pp. 24-45). Boston: McGraw-Hill.

Sparks, R., Ganschow, L. (1991). Foreign language learning difficulties: Affective or native language aptitude differences? *Modern Language Journal*, 75, 3-16.

Spielberger C. D. (1983). *Manual for the State-Trait-Anxiety Inventory: STAI (form Y)*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.

Spielberger, C. D, & Vagg, P. (Eds.). (1995). *Test anxiety: theory, assessment, and treatment*. Washington, D.C.: Taylor and Francis.

Zheng, Y. (2008). Anxiety and second/foreign language learning revisited. *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education/Revue canadienne des jeunes chercheures et chercheurs en éducation*, 1(1) https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED506736.pdf