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# Barriers to Learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) for University Students: A Systematic Review

**Beata Ross**
Keele University International College, Keele University, United Kingdom, *b.ross@keele.ac.uk*

**David Stuckler**
Department of Social and Political Sciences and Dondena Research Centre on Population Dynamics, University of Bocconi, Italy, *david.stuckler@unibocconi.it*

Language barriers incorporate emotional, psychological, sociocultural, educational, and situational dimensions. We performed an interdisciplinary systematic review of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) barriers facing university students. A search across Web of Science, EBSCO, and ProQuest yielded 2,773 studies, with 21 meeting the inclusion criteria of studies to be in English, quantify EFL barriers, and focus on university students. Most studies were in the Middle East and Asia, with minimal representation in Europe. Our analysis identifies three main clusters of EFL barriers: 1) foreign language anxiety (FLA), which affects four language skills, including test anxiety; 2) inhibitory self-beliefs, which involve negative and unrealistic self-perceptions, as well as motivational and personality struggles; and 3) linguistic challenges, due to mother tongue influence (L1). The analysis suggests an overlap between FLA and negative self-beliefs, a phenomenon termed the FLA and Inhibitory Self-Beliefs Spectrum. However, it remains unclear whether these anxieties are codependent. While linguistic challenges are substantial obstacles to EFL improvement, nonlinguistic factors have emerged as significant in hindering linguistic development. Nonetheless, positive findings such as overcoming anxiety and self-regulation should be acknowledged. These insights could inform more adaptable teaching methods, potentially enhancing language skills, well-being, and self-image to in turn enhance self-intervention.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language (EFL), barriers, university students, interdisciplinary studies, empirical study, systematic review

## INTRODUCTION

The emergence of English as the most prominent international language (sometimes referred to as the “lingua franca”) has sparked demand for students to develop English language proficiency. Krassakopoulou and Georgountzou (2024) noted that nonnative English speakers outnumbered native speakers. However, many students and countries

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struggle to learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This issue affects students in non-English-speaking countries and those whose families speak other languages in English-speaking nations (English as a Second Language [ESL or L2]; Thornbury, 2017). The Education First Global Proficiency Report of 2024 revealed uneven proficiency rankings across 116 countries (Education First, 2024).

The importance of knowing English has led to a substantial body of research on barriers faced by teachers and EFL students. These fall broadly into linguistic and non-linguistic types (Mahdi, 2024), typically examined through the four essential language skills for proficiency: listening and reading (receptive skills) and writing and speaking (productive) skills. In this context, linguistic barriers commonly relate to various elements of language such as vocabulary (lexis), sentence construction (syntax), pronunciation, meaning systems (semantics and language functions), and the interplay between language and cognition (cognitive linguistics) (Richards & Schmidt, 2011). Additionally, non-linguistic factors frequently align with psychological, affective, or sociocultural influences (Nadesan & Shah, 2020; Malik et al., 2021; Osman et al., 2022), such as anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986), self-perceptions, L2 motivation, attitudes, beliefs, learning environments, and personality traits (Van Patten et al., 2020). However, to the best of our knowledge, no systematic literature review (SLR) considers EFL barriers collectively.

Linguistic barriers dominated this research. Early studies emphasized first language (L1) influence on target language performance, known as L1 interference, which is still being researched today (Anita et al., 2024). Selinker's (1972) fossilization hypothesis, one of the most prominent linguistic theories, may explain why language progress may stagnate. ES/FL learners create an interlanguage (IL) distinct from their L1 and target language, which can fossilize over time (Richards & Schmidt, 2011; Van Patten et al., 2020). Recent studies by Angoluan and Barretto (2024) examined the fossilized errors of English university students using Selinker's (1972) framework and a qualitative approach. Analyses of writing, grammar tests, and interviews revealed connections between individual learning strategies and persistent errors influenced by unawareness, inattention to detail, and anxiety, which can lead to fossilization.

A growing body of research is consistently highlighting the benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism over monolingualism. For example, Bialystok et al. (2012) highlighted the benefits of bilingualism on the "mind and brain" (p.10), that is, not only on cognitive but also neurological abilities reflected in neuroplasticity. Cummins' (1976, 2000) Common Underlying Proficiency model, also known as the Interdependence Hypothesis, indicates that proficiency in one language (L1) positively influences proficiency in another. Likewise, Ortega (2014) contests the traditional monolingual perspective that often regards native speakers as the ideal language users, urging for the recognition of multilingual competencies. Nevertheless, L1 inference, initially regarded as a source of error or 'negative transfer', often associated with Lado's (1957) Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), continues to cause controversy on the one hand and is increasingly seen as part of a dynamic and more complex system of language learning on the other (Ellis 2015; Odlin 2022). This matter remains inconclusive as to where the barriers lie.

Recent studies have highlighted the various linguistic barriers. In Alhendawi & Werfally (2024), 30 Libyan undergraduates showed that linguistic and cultural differences present substantial challenges to accurate English-Arabic translations, which in turn pointed to collocation discrepancies and their uniqueness. Additionally, Nicklin et al. (2023) studied the effect of proper nouns on reading fluency among Japanese university students in an EFL setting through two self-paced reading experiments. These findings suggest that proper nouns disrupt reading fluency like common nouns, challenging the notion that they are easy for low-proficiency learners to learn and informing extensive reading pedagogy. Tong (2024) examined the obstacles encountered by 135 second- and third-year English majors in Vietnam regarding vocabulary acquisition. These revealed challenges with pronunciation, spelling, translation (including synonyms), and word classification, which persisted in skilled students. These studies demonstrate not only a wide range of linguistic challenges, but an inconclusive debate regarding language barriers.

Interest in language development and barriers has increased, highlighting individual differences (Larsen-Freeman, 2018; Van Patten et al., 2020) and leading to interdisciplinary research on non-linguistic obstacles. Researchers argue that cognition and affect are closely linked (Swain, 2013; Lantolf & Swain, 2020). Some studies (Heidari-Shahreza, 2011, p. 25; Savignon, 1983) note that affective variables have a greater impact on learners' success in learning a second or foreign language than cognitive and educational factors, such as intelligence, aptitude, and teaching methods. Neuroscience research indicates that cognition and emotions are interconnected. Pessoa (2013, p. 3) asserts that "emotion and cognition cannot be dissociated in the brain because 'affective' brain regions participate in cognition, while 'cognitive' brain regions engage in emotion."

For instance, a qualitative study by Malik et al. (2021) on the linguistic, psychological, and sociocultural challenges faced by Chinese university EFL learners found that factors such as English exposure, parental and teacher support, geographical background, cultural alienation, and insufficient English interaction not only affect language achievement but also relate to linguistic and psychological aspects. A similar phenomenon was reflected in Osman et al.'s (2022) systematic review, which identified social factors, such as learning conditions, social influences, and teaching strategies, as well as personal and psychological factors, as influential in language attainment. While Hossain's (2024) review argues for a multifaceted approach that integrates culture, technology, and diverse backgrounds, it also emphasizes culturally responsive teaching practices and course materials. This multitude of interpretations and approaches concerning barriers in EFL certainly invites both further exploration and debate about what hinders learners' progress and the potential solutions that could be implemented.

Despite this wealth of research, few studies compare quantitative evidence of the strength and magnitude of different barriers across cultures. There is also a dearth of research that comprehensively examines the range and various aspects of EFL barriers, particularly those experienced by university students. SLRs in relation to EFL barriers experienced by university students are scarce. One of the most recent reviews in the field of English language barriers was conducted by Siripipatthanakul et al. (2023) and

Tahir et al. (2023). However, Siripipatthanakul et al. (2023) offered a broad overview of the challenges linked to learning English. By contrast, Tahir et al. (2023) examined the factors influencing second language comprehension in children. SLR is required to address these gaps and provide a comprehensive analysis.

The RQ guiding the study was as follows:

RQ. What types of barriers prevent university students from learning EFL?

The next section begins with a detailed description of the SLR methodology, including study selection criteria, data extraction methods, and analysis. This is followed by a summary of the key findings. Finally, we discuss the findings in relation to previous research and explore their significance in SLA research and educational practices.

## METHOD

This study employed a systematic review approach to adhere to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) best-practice guidelines for systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021).

### Search strategy

We searched the Web of Science, EBSCO, and ProQuest on 22 July 2024. These databases were used to achieve a high level of coverage for potentially relevant studies across disciplines. Our search involved three main keyword clusters: foreign languages, language acquisition, and barriers. To operationalize foreign language, we employed various permutations used in prior studies (Siripipatthanakul et al.,; Tahir et al., 2023), including "foreign," "second," or "additional." For language acquisition, we included learning, education, and acquisition terms. Various permutations were also used for "learning" and "barriers," based on the following search string (see Table 1 for verbatim search strings):

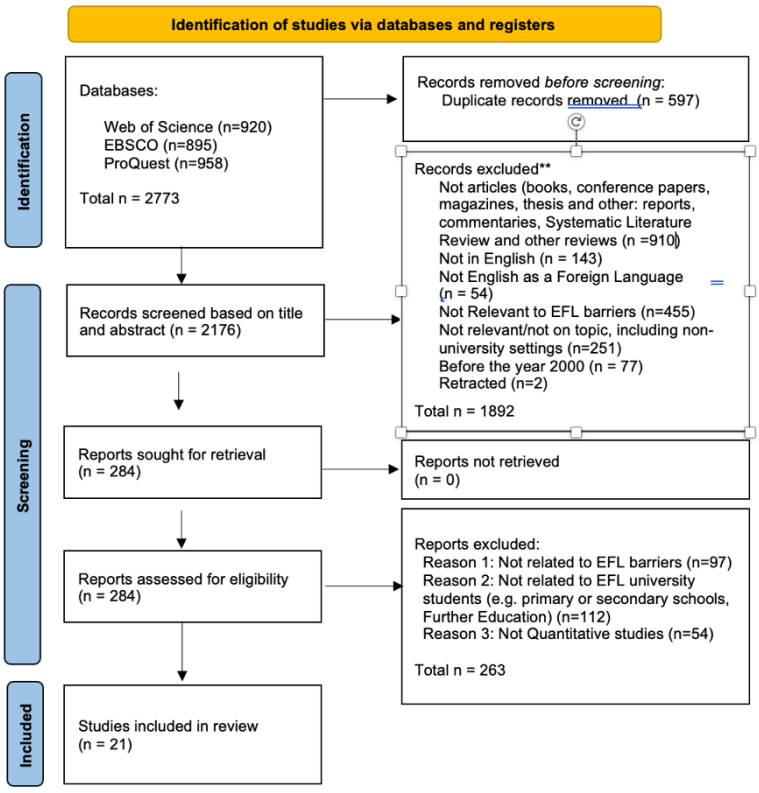
"Second language" OR "foreign language" OR "additional language" AND (learn* OR educ* OR acqui*) AND (barrier* OR obstacl* OR impedi* OR enabler)

Table 1
Keywords and searching information strategy

| Database | Keywords | Number of articles |
|---|---|---|
| Web of Science | TS=Title and abstract ("second language" OR "foreign language" OR "additional language") AND (learn* OR educ* OR acqui*) AND (barrier* OR obstacl* OR impedi* OR enabler) | 920 |
| ProQuest | ABSTRACT,TITLE("second language" OR "foreign language" OR "additional language") AND ABSTRACT,TITLE(learn* OR educ* OR acqui*) AND ABSTRACT,TITLE(barrier* OR obstacl* OR impedi* OR enabler) | 958 |
| EBSCO | TI ("second language" OR "foreign language" OR "additional language") OR AB ("second language" OR "foreign language" OR "additional language")) AND (TI (learn* OR educ* OR acqui*) OR AB (learn* OR educ* OR acqui*)) AND (TI (barrier* OR obstacl* OR impedi* OR enabler) OR AB (barrier* OR obstacl* OR impedi* OR enabler) | 895 |

Our initial search yielded 2,773 citations. These references were exported to Zotero

software for deduplication and further screening. After removing 597 duplicates, the initial screening stage proceeded with 2,176 non-duplicate abstracts. Figure 1 shows the PRISMA flow diagram.




*Consider, if feasible to do so, reporting the number of records identified from each database or register searched (rather than the total number across all databases/registers).

**If automation tools were used, indicate how many records were excluded by a human and how many were excluded by automation tools.

Figure 1
PRISMA study inclusion

**Inclusion and exclusion criteria**

We applied the following series of inclusion and exclusion criteria: Inclusions of (i) empirical studies, (ii) published in peer-reviewed journals, (iii) written in English, and (iv) focused on barriers to or enablers of effective EFL learning among university students. Exclusions were i) non-peer-reviewed studies, non-quantitative studies, meta-analysis/reviews; and ii) studies published before the year 2000 because since the 2000s, globalization has brought significant innovations in EFL practices, which stand

in contrast to traditional approaches such as grammar-translation or audio-lingual methods (Thornbury, 2017); iii) EFL practices outside formal educational settings or unrelated to a university context; and iv) studies among students with learning difficulties, special educational needs, and learning disabilities, or exceptionally gifted or talented students.

The last two exclusions were made because the study did not specifically focus on university settings. Furthermore, we excluded studies among university students with learning difficulties because they represent a separate area of research beyond the current study. Furthermore, this population has specific barriers and needs that fall beyond the scope of this study (see Table 2).

Table 2
Population, intervention, comparator and outcome

| | Included | Excluded |
|---|---|---|
| Population | EFL university students | Non-university students (e.g., children, teenagers, primary and secondary schools, further education colleges or EFL students with disabilities or learning difficulties). |
| Intervention | Both intervention and nonintervention studies | |
| Comparison | Studies with and without comparators | |
| Outcome | Barriers to or enablers of EFL proficiency and achievement | |
| Type | Quantitative empirical studies | Qualitative and mixed methods |

By applying these criteria, we excluded 910 non-articles, 143 for not being written in English, 77 for being published before the year 2000, 54 for focusing on languages other than EFL, and 2 retracted articles. We also considered 455 studies as not relevant to EFL barriers, and 251 abstracts not specifically related to EFL barriers in university settings. This resulted in 284 articles, for which we retrieved the full text to assess eligibility. Upon reviewing the complete text, we excluded a further 97 articles for being irrelevant to EFL barriers and 112 for not being related to EFL university student barriers. We also disqualified 54 non-quantitative studies. Ultimately, our final analytical sample included 21 quantitative articles.

**Data extraction and synthesis**

We extracted the following information from the studies into an Excel table: author, location of the study data, student population, sample size, study design, outcome, outcome measures, identified barriers, and findings. We conducted a qualitative analysis to identify and address the RQ. This broadly involved (i) becoming familiar with the dataset for data extraction, (ii) initial coding, (iii) searching for and defining themes, (iv) reviewing themes, and (v) defining and naming themes.

## FINDINGS

Our study enhances the understanding of students' self-perception, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-control, crucial for EFL learning. Further, our research supports Horwitz et al.'s (1986, p. 128) proposed definition of FLA as a "complex of self-

perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process." The 21 empirical quantitative studies met inclusion for analysis in this systematic review. Table 3 (see Appendix) describes the study population, design, and main findings. We reviewed the study characteristics before evaluating the identified main barriers.

**Descriptive characteristics**

The included studies on English language acquisition featured a broad geographical distribution. Most cases have been observed in the Middle East and Asia. These included Saudi Arabia (n=3), Iran (n=2), Jordan (n=1), and Asian countries such as Algeria (n=1), Japan (n=2), China (n=2), Turkey (n=2), Malaysia (n= 1), Taiwan (n=1), and Indonesia (n=1). Two studies were conducted in Europe: Hungary (n=1) and Italy (n=1). Three other studies were conducted in New Zealand (n=1), Argentina (n=1), and Russia (n=1).

Most of the studies (n=12) focused on undergraduate EFL students. However, one study design (n=1) included two private language schools apart from two universities, with participants aged between 17 and 46 (Kobeleva, 2012), while the comparative study (n=1) involved high school and undergraduate students (Sadeghi, 2009). Furthermore, one study focused on preparatory university students (Al-Khotaba et al., 2019), and two studies used broad terminology without specifying whether they were postgraduates or undergraduates (Al-Malki & Javid, 2018; Lavrova & Nikulina, 2020). In contrast, one study investigated both post and undergraduate students (Falout, 2012) and three postgraduates only (Abdullah et al., 2022; Ahangary & Sharifi, 2015; Pierini, 2020); however, only one involved PhD students (Abdullah et al., 2022).

The most common method of analysis employed was a survey (n= 15), followed by two experimental research designs: one comparative study, one pre-post test of an intervention, one Q methodology study, and one corpus-based research design. Next, we evaluated the main barriers identified in the included studies.

**Types of barriers**

The 21 studies identified three primary types of barriers: (i) FLA Spectrum, (ii) Inhibitory Self-Beliefs and Perceptions Spectrum, and (iii) linguistic challenges, including influences from the mother tongue as well as idiomatic and unfamiliar vocabulary. The first two categories were termed *FLA and Inhibiting Self-Beliefs Spectrum* because of the significant overlap in the themes of anxiety (n=11) and self-perception (n=10), which were predominant in the studies. Below, we present our findings on these three types of barriers.

**Barrier 1: FLA Spectrum**

Eleven of the 21 studies revealed barriers related to FLA. The included studies found that FLA specifically affects four major language skills: speaking, writing, reading, and listening. In addition, several articles have revealed that students exhibit generalized anxiety towards foreign language testing and general foreign language academic performance. Considering that each of these elements covers related yet distinct aspects

that exist along a continuum, the term "spectrum" was coined. Nevertheless, based on current data, it remains unclear whether these anxieties are independent or interconnected. We discuss these studies in terms of each type of language skill below.

*Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety*

Three out of 21 studies reported on Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety as a substantial and most frequently occurring barrier to effective speaking (Al-Khotaba et al., 2019; Manipuspika, 2018; Pierini, 2020). Al-Khotaba et al. (2019) investigated how FLA impacted the speaking performance of 100 preparatory-year students. Analysis of a Likert-scale questionnaire on students' attitudes towards English and anxiety, as well as a speaking achievement test, confirmed that FLA can negatively affect EFL learners' speaking achievement. Correspondingly, Manipuspika (2018) combined the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) Scale to examine the correlation between the two among 98 first-year students. It was concluded that the more anxious students were reluctant to communicate in English. However, Pierini (2020) revealed that although students reported that speaking skills were challenging due to feelings of anxiety, embarrassment, or inadequacy, they noted that positive emotions emerged after engaging in speaking performance.

Other studies found further distinctions regarding the three other FLA language skills.

*Written Communication Anxiety*

At the heart of Abdullah et al.'s (2022) research was written anxiety, which was further linked to gender differences (see Barrier 3). An analysis of the Writing Apprehension Test (WAT) questionnaire on attitudes and feelings towards writing tasks from 384 postgraduate students established that FLA affects written communication to a moderate extent, with no significant difference in the level of anxiety between males and females.

*Foreign Language Reading Anxiety*

Foreign Language Reading Anxiety was the focus of Gan's (2021) quantitative investigation into the experiences of 89 Chinese undergraduate students. The data were collected via a survey focusing on psychological, cultural, and textual effects on reading anxiety; however, they were not provided in detail. By considering anxiety as one of the emotional factors stemming from feelings of inadequacy or being unable to overcome a mental barrier, alongside cultural differences and the role of the text regarding its difficulty, type, and genre, the survey analysis demonstrated that the above factors could contribute to English reading anxiety and therefore text comprehension.

*Foreign Language Listening Anxiety*

Foreign language listening anxiety emerged as a potential barrier to effective learning in a study by Chen and Chi-Chang (2009). To achieve this, correlations among anxiety levels, cognitive load, and actual listening comprehension task performance were examined. The three appeared to be correlated: listening test scores were affected by both anxiety and one's own perception of difficulties, which, in turn, resulted in a heavier cognitive load. Those who perceived English listening comprehension to be easy had lower anxiety and better scores.

*Foreign Language Test Anxiety*

Foreign Language Test Anxiety has recurred in several studies; however, only one study has focused exclusively on it. By adopting the Test Anxiety Scale and Persian version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Ahangary and Sharifi (2015) investigated how 120 senior college students' self-esteem and anxiety correlated with their ability to perform an EFL test. The correlation analysis suggested that the higher their self-esteem, the less anxious the students were during the EFL examination. This study calls for training students to deal with factors affecting anxiety.

Two other studies (Alsalooli & Al-Tale, 2022; Kök & Adem Kantar, 2024) focused on anxiety levels, gender, and foreign language academic performance. Alsalooli and Al-Tale (2022) presented a survey study using two instruments, the FLCAS and language achievement tests, with 69 randomly selected first-year students. A high FLA level is an important indicator of slower language achievement, while gender had no impact on FLA levels among EFL learners. In comparison, Kök and Kantar (2024) investigated masculine gender role stress and verbal and productive performance in EFL, focusing on the mitigating role of self-disclosure. From 227 male Turkish EFL learners, it was noted that excessive gender role stress could decrease their ability to self-disclose, which might trigger foreign language classroom anxiety.

Overall, most of these studies seem to reinforce the role of FLA as a barrier to effective EFL learning. However, it is worth noting that anxiety and self-belief significantly overlapped, with the theme of self-perception of EFL occurring in 10 out of the 21 studies, five of which coincided with the theme of FLA.

**Barrier 2: Inhibitory Self-Beliefs and Perceptions Spectrum**

Ten studies, five of which were linked to the theme of FLA, aligned with the theme of self-beliefs and subjective perceptions as key obstacles to EFL proficiency.

*Perceived obstacles*

Three out of 21 studies were more closely associated with the idea of not only students' perceptions of their own language abilities but also perceived difficulties associated with foreign language learning as potential barriers to EFL. Alruzzi et al. (2022) used a questionnaire to examine 147 undergraduate students' perceived difficulties regarding five factors that could potentially impact their English speaking scores. The perceived obstacles to Academic and Conversational English Skills (ACES) proved to have a significant impact on speaking scores, as opposed to Linguistic Obstacles (LO), Speaking Processing Difficulties (SPD), Speaking Confidence (SC), and Access to Speaking Opportunities (ASO).

Although Chen and Chi-Cheng (2009) primarily examined FLA, they utilized the Cognitive Load Subjective Rating Scale (CLSRS) to explore the interconnections among cognitive load, FLA, and task performance, focusing on the challenges of understanding foreign languages and auditory linguistic skills. Ultimately, the findings suggest that difficulty in perceiving English listening comprehension influences anxiety

levels, resulting in an increased cognitive load that adversely affects working memory and leads to lower test scores in listening.

In comparison, Carson (2019) employed a pre-posttest design along with a perceived difficulty of listening survey utilizing a six-point Likert scale to assess the effects of culturally familiar and unfamiliar materials on listening comprehension among 138 upper-intermediate first-year university students in an English course. At the end of each test, the surveys measured students' perceived difficulty in listening. This study indicates that culturally unfamiliar vocabulary can trigger filters related to affective, cognitive, or psychological processes, affecting students' listening comprehension. However, these challenges appear to diminish as students become more familiar with the target language. Therefore, educators should consider whether the test content is culturally relevant to learners.

*Negative and unrealistic self-perceptions*

Of the 21 studies, four examined the subjective perspectives of EFL, which can also be an obstacle to learning EFL. Solhi and Thumvichit (2024) explored the subjective perspectives of 40 EFL undergraduate students regarding the factors influencing their L2 WTC. It has been highlighted that different types of perceptions and attitudes could influence L2 WTC. For instance, "self-assured communicators" demonstrated high self-confidence, whereas "motivated communicators" exhibited consistent motivation to enhance their speaking abilities. In comparison, "nervous communicators" displayed signs of anxiety, hindering their WTC. This indicates that both internal and external factors interact synergistically to form EFL learners' desire to communicate.

Similarly, negative or unrealistic versus positive self-beliefs about language learning, as perceived by 118 EFL learners, became the foundation for an investigation by Al-Malki and Javid (2018). It was confirmed that either negative or positive perceptions could become a source of success or impediment to language learning. One of the important findings that contrasts with other studies is that the participants felt speaking proficiency was easier to achieve than reading or writing proficiency. The authors suggested that these perceptions are likely rooted in the strong oral traditions of Arab society (Malki & Javid, 2018, p. 194). No significant differences were observed between males and females regarding successful language learning. This study confirmed the importance of identifying these beliefs when informing teaching practices.

Furthermore, Al-Qadri et al. (2023) examined 471 multilingual first-year university students' language anxiety and self-perceptions of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) to assess their impact on language performance. Communicative anxiety was the most prominent (33%), followed by fear of failure (32%) and negative experiences. Nevertheless, the participants generally exhibited a moderate level of anxiety, with less anxiety experienced by those who were more advanced or spoke more than one language.

A similar thread of self-perception has also been found in studies investigating FLA. For instance, self-esteem and self-regulation were echoed in Ahangary & Sharifi

(2015), self-rated or perceived sources of learners' FLA in Andrea (2021), and feelings revealed through feedback about the experience of public speaking in Pierini (2020).

*Motivational struggles*

Motivational struggles faced with impediments to EFL learning are central to Falout's (2012) study. The analysis of an open-ended questionnaire submitted by 157 participants to establish the antecedent conditions of the learner (ACL) levels revealed various self-concept patterns, such as loss of motivation, recovery, and maintained motivation during EFL learning. This suggests that both "adaptive and maladaptive processes" can lead to either positive or self-defeating helplessness or destructive patterns when facing challenges or impediments to learning EFL as a compulsory subject. This study also highlighted the need for practical implications in teaching.

*Personality as a potential barrier to effective EFL learning*

One study examined non-linguistic factors, such as personality type, that could hinder language learning. Using a personality questionnaire and test of oral communicative ability in English with 117 freshmen, Chen et al. (2015) asked whether personality type such as introversion, extroversion, or ambiversion can be considered barriers to oral English learning. However, the study, although acknowledging personality as a potential barrier, did not confirm that the two correlate, and thus it does not act as a key factor contributing to the outcome of learners' spoken English.

This review also identified four studies focusing on linguistic barriers. Notably, their publication occurred from 2008 to 2020, which can consequently be interpreted as suggesting that non-linguistic factors are becoming increasingly widespread in the field of EFL.

**Barrier 3: Linguistic challenges**

*Mother tongue influence (L1).*

The influence of L1 on EFL learning as a potential barrier surfaced in two other studies. Specifically, Zinkgräf (2008) analyzed the nonstandard collocations present in the written production of 102 Spanish-speaking university students taking English courses during the academic year 2003/04 in Teacher and Translator training programs. This article presents evidence of the significant influence of learners' mother tongues, which suggests that they tend to translate literally from L1 into L2. Similarly, Sadeghi's (2009) comparative study of collocational patterns in Farsi (Persian) and English, based on a test involving 76 undergraduate students, indicated that the differences between the first (L1) and second (L2) language collocational patterns significantly contributed to errors when using L2 collocations among both proficient and less proficient EFL learners.

*Idiomatic and unfamiliar vocabulary.*

Vocabulary challenges, particularly proper names and systemic relations, were identified as potential barriers in both studies. Lavrova and Nikulina (2020) evaluated 50 Russian university EFL learners regarding their understanding of idiomatic

synonymy, antonymy, and polysemy. The learners received three lists of 35 idioms and had 130 minutes to complete all tasks. They demonstrated a better understanding of synonyms and polysemes than of antonyms. Additionally, another study focused on vocabulary knowledge in 110 students, specifically, their familiarity with proper names, which may impact the listening comprehension of ESL learners (Kobeleva, 2012). The students came from twenty language backgrounds and ten classes across four institutions, which included two universities and two private schools in New Zealand. The findings indicated that unfamiliar proper names could hinder ESL learners' ability to grasp spoken English, and consequently their listening performance. Kobaleva's (2012) results align with Carson's (2019) observations of the difficulties posed by culturally unfamiliar texts in listening assessments for university students in Japan.

## DISCUSSION

Our analysis revealed three primary barriers: FLA and inhibitory self-beliefs—both referred to as a spectrum reflecting the range, diversity, and continuum of needs, together with possible overlaps—and the third barrier, namely, linguistic challenges. This suggests that barriers to foreign language learning are multidimensional and linked to various linguistic, psychological, social and emotional factors. It, in turn, emphasizes the need for targeted external as well as internal interventions for EFL learners.

This study supports the findings of Horwitz et al. (1986, p. 128), who defined FLA as a "complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process." Additionally, they echo MacIntyre's (1999) view of language anxiety as stress, anxiety, and emotional responses to language learning. However, questions arise regarding whether FLA in one language domain, such as speaking, can also affect other language areas, such as reading. This corresponds with Ran et al.'s (2022, p. 9) observation regarding the scarcity of research on "why self-evaluation correlates differently with four language skills."

Perhaps surprisingly, in our analysis, sex differences in relation to anxiety levels did not emerge as having an impact on language performance. This aligns with Wu (2012) and Ghonsooly (2012), who observed no major differences in language anxiety and performance levels between sexes. However, this finding contrasts with earlier studies, including those by Golchi (2012), Park and French (2013), and Razak et al. (2017). This may suggest that gender is not a barrier to EFL but rather to other underlying factors associated with the linguistic and nonlinguistic dimensions of language learning.

Second, we found varying results concerning the four language skills: two productive skills (speaking and writing) and two receptive skills (listening and reading). For example, speaking apprehension emerged as the most frequent barrier to foreign language acquisition, primarily due to FLA or inhibitory self-beliefs. This could be interpreted as a vicious cycle. Our findings regarding speaking anxiety appear to support earlier research, indicating that speaking skills are the most anxiety-inducing (Liu, 2012; Yahya, 2013). Kheryadi and Hilmiyati (2021) reported similar results, focusing on the challenges encountered by fifth-semester university students during oral presentations. Their study found that students' oral skills were notably affected by

factors such as lack of confidence, nervousness, and anxiety. These findings also align with the research by Charoensukmongkol (2019), who showed that FLA hinders effective oral communication among nonnative English speakers.

Speech was followed by listening (n=3) and writing (n=4); surprisingly, both emerged as equally challenging to acquire. Here, it is vital to observe that the former is usually associated with either anxiety, students' perceived difficulties in listening (Chen & Chi-Cheng, 2009), or cultural unfamiliarity, which, in turn, could trigger unwarranted anxiety (Carson, 2019), alongside linguistic aspects such as unfamiliar proper names (Kobeleva, 2012). The latter arose primarily from linguistic challenges, including variations in collocational patterns between the first and second languages (Sadeghi, 2009), direct translations from L1 to L2, and specific collocations (Zinkgräf, 2008). Additionally, a lack of awareness regarding semantic relationships (Lavrova & Nikulina, 2020) and a moderate degree of anxiety regarding written communication (Abdullah et al., 2022) have contributed to these issues. Only one study (Gan, 2021) focused solely on reading barriers associated with FLA. This might indicate a disparity in the focus on language skills research, a limitation of the current study, or the growing importance of nonlinguistic elements such as anxiety research. For example, while not specifically tied to FLA, recent studies by Singh and Kumar (2024) and Lui et al. (2022) recognized the mental health crisis faced by university students, thereby emphasizing the urgent need to address this issue.

Overall, our study confirms that EFL is primarily influenced by linguistic and nonlinguistic factors. Regarding the former, our research supports the findings of Anita et al. (2024) on L1 interference, Alhendawi and Werfally (2024) regarding difficulties in translating collocations, Nicklin et al. (2023) concerning students facing challenges with proper nouns, and Tong (2024) highlighting vocabulary issues related to synonyms. Regarding the latter, our research corresponds with Naghadeh et al. (2014) and Jebreil et al. (2015), both of which found a negative correlation between language anxiety and writing. Similarly, Fitrawati et al. (2023) reported moderate writing anxiety among Indonesian EFL students, which was attributed to text characteristics and personal factors. Furthermore, our results on Foreign Language Listening Anxiety align with the findings of Serraj and Noordain (2013) and Al-Malki et al. (2023). By contrast, Um et al. (2013) observed low English reading anxiety among EFL learners in Cambodia, which moderately affected their reading comprehension, correlating with our results.

Thirdly, it is also worth noting several positive outcomes in various studies. Overcoming the fear of public speaking leads to a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment (Pierini, 2020). Students have found that challenges related to culturally unfamiliar vocabulary diminish as they become more comfortable with the target language (Carson, 2019). Personality traits associated with introversion or extroversion do not necessarily hinder language achievement (Chen et al., 2015), whereas speaking skills are viewed as easier to develop than reading or writing skills (Al-Malki & Javid, 2018). Overcoming demotivation and creating more positive and adaptive responses to challenging learning situations can contribute to fewer

maladaptive responses in students, improve self-regulation, and lead to better learning outcomes (Falout, 2012).

Our findings align with those of Heidarzadi et al. (2022), which showed that low self-efficacy increases anxiety in foreign language contexts and hinders progress. This underscores the need to focus on the cognitive and emotional factors that are significant in second language writing anxiety. Additionally, our results align with King and Gaerlan's (2014) research on positive and negative emotions linked to self-control, indicating hope versus hopelessness, enjoyment versus anxiety, and boredom. Further, our findings also agree with MacIntyre's (1999) view of language anxiety as stress, anxiety, and emotional response to language learning. However, questions arise as to whether FLA in one language domain, such as speaking, can affect other language areas, such as reading. This corresponds with Ran et al.'s (2022, p. 9) observation regarding the scarcity of research on "why self-evaluation correlates differently with four language skills." On a more general level, our study echoes Dida and Gobena's (2020) findings that test anxiety's cognitive, behavioral, and emotional aspects can significantly impact academic performance. Specifically, fear of failure, peer competition, and pressure to keep up hinder performance both before and during exams.

Our study raises the question regarding correlations, rather than separate entities, between various internal and external variables, such as those related to affect, cognition, or sociocultural situational characteristics, and how these relate to FLA, self-perception, and language achievement. Figure 2 highlights these barriers and inhibitory self-beliefs.

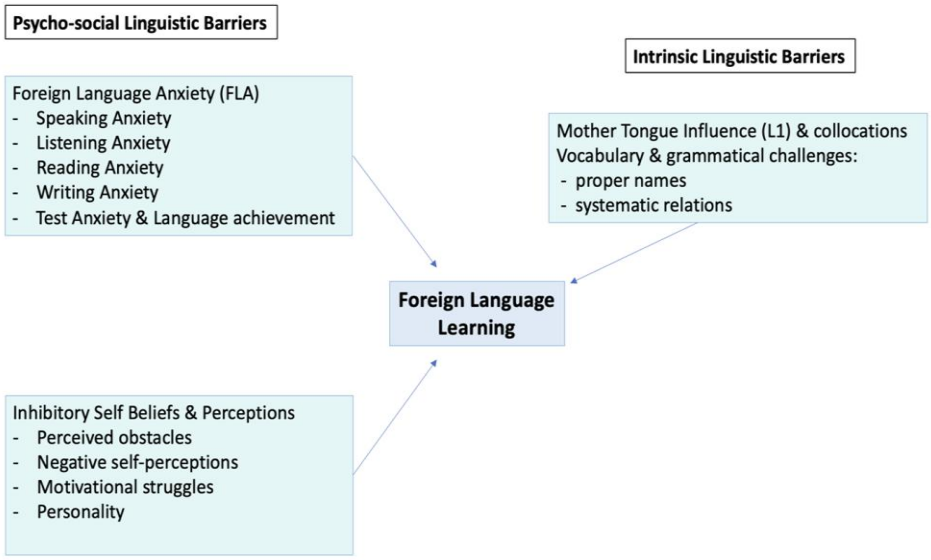



Figure 2
Foreign language anxiety and inhibiting self-beliefs spectrum and linguistic barriers

**Implications and Future Directions**

This study has several implications for future research. First, there is an urgent need for further exploration to understand the co-dependencies or correlations of barriers to language skills arising from FLA or negative self-perceptions, as well as the relationship between these two factors. Additionally, long-term studies are necessary to comprehend the effects of FLA and self-belief on language achievement and well-being or self-image, along with the implementation of linguistic components in research designs to clarify the connection between them. Further research could also examine the correlations between variables such as emotion, cognition, and the sociocultural and psychological aspects of language learning to gain a deeper understanding of how they are linked to FLA, self-belief, and language achievement. This understanding could guide the development of tailored interventions to enhance language programs and general language learning. Future research should delve into the roles of motivation and resilience, positive anxiety and explore how they could be integrated into language curricula and teachers' daily practices to foster greater resilience and motivation in students or design programs. More research is needed to develop clearer measurement approaches for FLA, self-perception, and linguistic components.

Future research could also consider some limitations that arose from the studies included in this review. Perhaps the most prominent is the potentially weak and inconsistent methodology used to identify barriers. For example, linguistic writing barriers have mainly been investigated using collocation or idiomatic tests as opposed to longer written or oral assignments. Only one study has investigated linguistic barriers based on grading students' written assignments. Similarly, various incomparable tests and measurements have been employed for anxiety and other self-perceptions. With a few exceptions (Alsalooli & Al-Tale, 2022; Andrea, 2021), most studies have investigated the impact of FLA on students' self-perceptions of learning without implementing objective language skill tasks or assignments. This makes it difficult to draw meaningful comparisons across studies, reflecting a need not only to standardize learning outcomes, as has been done with international classification scales such as CEFR, but also to measure and track barriers to EFL acquisition. In this regard, future research could expand the scope to include the perspectives of teachers, compare the barriers faced by EFL learners of different ages, or comparatively analyze quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method studies on barriers.

Our findings have also pedagogical implications for English teaching practices. Educators should acknowledge learners' prior experiences and beliefs about language learning to alleviate the issues stemming from FLA or self-perceptions and to make relevant academic decisions that enhance learning opportunities and develop strategies and programs. Additionally, recognizing different levels of FLA is vital, and educators can develop strategies to reduce anxiety related to language skills. There is also a need for further training to build resilience, motivation, and a positive self-image in students in relation to language learning. Cultural awareness of English teaching, assessments, and writing materials can be raised. Greater attention to collocations, proper names, and other details is necessary during program or lesson design. Likewise, academic institutions should enhance their programs and materials to address these challenges

effectively. This can assist in enhancing teaching and learning environments and help address learners' psychological, emotional, and linguistic barriers in EFL contexts.

Additionally, policymakers might explore policies that incorporate or suggest strategies to reduce FLA, implement positive reinforcement and cultural sensitivity, and provide opportunities for teacher training and professional development in FLA. There is also a need to emphasize and utilize more flexible assessment methods that account for linguistic and emotional barriers.

## CONCLUSION

Taken together, our research identified several barriers to effective EFL learning, both linguistic and non-linguistic. We specifically identified three key barriers: Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), inhibitory self-beliefs, and linguistic challenges. The first two were proposed to be viewed as a spectrum, indicating not only potential overlaps but also the variety and continuity of needs. In this regard, FLA seems to affect four language skills, while inhibitory self-beliefs consist of perceived challenges, negative self-views, and motivational and personality struggles. Linguistic challenges appear primarily linked to the influence of the mother tongue (L1), such as literal translation. Another barrier to EFL is related to unfamiliar vocabulary, which may also connect to culturally unfamiliar texts. There is a need for further research and focused interventions to address the concerns raised in this study. Notably, the intricate roles of self-efficacy, self-image, resilience, and positive forms of anxiety should be examined to overcome barriers to Foreign Language Learning. This could provide a foundation for developing external and, more importantly, intrinsic (internal) interventions and pedagogies that equally prioritize emotional well-being alongside linguistic needs, as both are crucial in overcoming EFL barriers.

### Strengths and Limitations

It is crucial to note several important limitations of this review. First, our research focused on university students; thus, it may not be generalizable to other didactic settings, such as primary EFL classrooms. Some aspects may still provide valuable insights into other educational contexts, particularly for further education in colleges or secondary schools. Second, we restricted our studies to quantitative research that primarily offered students' perspectives, which may not have captured the "thick" insights found in qualitative studies of students' EFL acquisition or teachers' perceptions. Third, we restricted our research to studies published in English in peer-reviewed journals and excluded those published in other languages, books or book chapters, conference presentations, and graduate theses. This approach may mean that only a limited number of relevant studies were analyzed, potentially constraining the generalizability of the findings to different cultural contexts. Fourth, we did not exclude studies based on quality, allowing for the incorporation of studies with weaker methodologies and a higher risk of bias.

Despite these limitations, this study has several strengths. SLR offers a unique opportunity to combine and synthesize data from multiple studies and explore the current topic under investigation. In this study, we conducted a meticulous analysis that

included both quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore the factors affecting EFL achievement. We believe that our study provides a valuable starting point that not only contributes to the existing body of knowledge regarding EFL barriers, but also informs practice and policy in this area. This review embraced a broad and comprehensive search strategy, clear application of PRISMA guidelines, and systematically extracted data to capture a diverse range of study characteristics. It contributes not only to the current body of research on EFL barriers but can also impact practice and policy in the relevant area through a comprehensive review of EFL university students. In terms of the three barriers identified in this review, our analysis further demonstrated that FLA affects the effectiveness of all language skills, test performance, and language achievement abilities. Notably, negative self-belief, even if not directly linked to FLA, appears to impact language performance in a manner similar to anxiety. This not only suggests substantial connections and overlaps between the two but may also indicate some level of correlation among variables in changeable degrees, such as affective, cognitive, social, or psychological. This calls for additional research to explore the relationships between the varying linguistic aspects of EFL, FLA, self-perception, and internal and external factors.

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## APPENDIX

Table 3
Study characteristics and brief summary

| Study | Country | Student Population | Sample size | Study Design | Outcome | Outcome Measure | Barriers Identified | Brief Summary of Main Findings & Conclusion |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Abdullah et al. (2022) | Malaysia | Postgraduates | 384 | Survey | Writing proficiency | Writing Apprehension Test (WAT) questionnaire | Written Communication Anxiety | (1) Moderate level of writing anxiety<br>(2) None experienced a low anxiety level<br>(3) No significant differences exist between males and females<br>(4) A strong connection to the learning context |
| Ahangary & Sharifi (2015) | Iran | Postgraduates | 120 | Survey | Performance in EFL tests | Questionnaires: (1) The Persian version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (2) Sarason's (1975) Test Anxiety Scale | Foreign Language Test Anxiety in relation to self-esteem and language learning | Higher self-esteem reduces anxiety in EFL exams. Self-esteem influences learner anxiety, but appropriate training can improve test handling. |
| Al-Khotaba et al. (2019) | Saudi Arabia | Preparatory year students | 100 | Survey (correlational research design) | Speaking achievement of EFL learners | (1) Questionnaire on students' attitude towards English language learning and anxiety<br>(2) Speaking achievement test | Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety & EFL learners' achievement in speaking test (psycholinguistic barriers) | EFL learners experiencing high language anxiety tend to achieve lower scores in speaking, whereas those with low anxiety perform better in speaking tests. |
| Al-Malki & Javid (2018) | Saudi Arabia | Volunteer university students (not given if | 118 | Survey | Understanding EFL learners' beliefs to | Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) questionnaire | Negative or unrealistic self-beliefs of EFL learners | (1) English is viewed as a challenging language to master, yet learners display a positive aptitude for it.<br>(2) Easier to attain speaking proficiency |

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| | | under/postgraduate) | | | assist teachers in sustaining motivation, while effectively addressing any negative beliefs over time. | | about language learning | in English than reading and writing skills.<br>(3) Little difference between males and females regarding successful language learners.<br>(4) Learners' past experiences and beliefs about language learning affect their EFL achievements; EFL teachers should identify these to inform their practice. |
| Al-Qadri et al. (2023) | Algeria | Undergraduates | 471 | Survey | Reducing students' language anxiety, which could potentially improve their language achievements | (1) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (2) Self-assessment scale for language skills: listening (L), speaking (S), reading (R), and writing (W). | Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and self-perceptions of L, S, R, and W. | (1) Communicative anxiety (33%) was the most common, followed by fear of failure (32%) and negative experiences (2%).<br>(2) Students with lower anxiety levels tended to have more advanced English skills.<br>(3) Being multilingual might decrease anxiety.<br>(4) High anxiety hinders students' performance and limits their potential. |
| Alruzzi et al. (2022) | Jordan | Undergraduates | 147 | Survey | Speaking proficiency | Perceived Obstacles questionnaire | Perceived obstacles of EFL that may impact speaking achievements | The student's perceptions have an impact on speaking level.<br>The perceived Linguistic Obstacles (LO), Speaking Processing Difficulties (SPD), Speaking Confidence (SC), and Access to Speaking Opportunities (ASO) do not significantly affect speaking. In contrast, the Academic and Conversational English Skills (ACES) obstacles do have a significant impact on speaking. |
| Alsalooli & Al-Tale (2022) | Saudi Arabia | Undergraduates | 69 | Survey | Language achievements | (1) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)<br>(2) Language tests | FLA in relation to EFL language achievement | (1) Most students experience moderate FLA. (2) Gender does not influence FLA levels in EFL learners. (3) The major source of anxiety is communication apprehension, followed by fear of evaluation. (4) High FLA levels hinder EFL learners' performance, obstructing their language learning potential. |
| Andrea (2021) | Hungary | Undergraduates | 17 | Survey | Foreign language academic achievement | (1) The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI)<br>(2) Placement Test<br>(3) The Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (FLAS)<br>(4) End-term marks | FLA levels in relation to EFL performance | Students with significant anxiety did not always perform poorly. These findings contradict earlier studies that linked high anxiety to low academic success. |
| Carson (2019) | Japan | Undergraduates | 138 | Pre-post test design | Listening comprehension | 1) A series of crossover listening pre- and post-tests.<br>2) Surveys at the end of each test to gauge the students' perceived difficulty when listening. | cultural unfamiliarity & EFL learners' listening comprehension | (1) Participants found comprehension harder with culturally unfamiliar proper nouns.<br>2) Listening passages with unfamiliar proper nouns initially hindered learners, causing, for example, unnecessary anxiety. However, as learners became more comfortable with the target language, barriers lessened, leading to similar gains across all groups. |
| Chen & Chi-Cheng (2009) | Taiwan | Undergraduates | 88 | Survey | Listening comprehension | (1) FLCAS.<br>(2) Cognitive Load Subjective Rating Scale (CLSRS) - in English listening comprehension. (3) Listening comprehension test. | The relationship between FLA and cognitive load, and its impact on listening comprehension. Also, perceived difficulties of foreign language comprehension & linguistics abilities in listening. | 1) A statistically significant negative correlation exists between FL anxiety and performance. (2) Cognitive load is also negatively correlated with performance. More anxious students tend to achieve lower scores in listening; a higher cognitive load results in decreased scores in the listening test. (3) Students perceiving English listening comprehension as medium or difficult reported significantly higher anxiety levels than those who found it easy. This also applied to cognitive load: higher anxiety correlated with a higher cognitive load. |
| Chen et al. (2015) | China | Undergraduates | 117 | Survey | Spoken English | (1) Personality questionnaire<br>(2) Spoken English Test. | Introverts or extroverts: personality as a barrier to spoken English. | Personality types (introverts, extroverts, ambiverts) are not a key factor contributing to the success of learning spoken English. |

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| Falout (2012) | Japan | Undergraduates & postgraduates | 157 | Survey | Copying and motivational processes when facing impediments to EFL learning. | Questionnaire to establish participants' ACL (antecedent conditions of the learner) levels. | Positive & negative self-concepts regarding EFL learning (adaptive & maladaptive processes). | (1) Positive ACLs tackle demotivation through negotiation and problem-solving, fostering self-reliance and drawing on their social networks. In contrast, Negative ACLs exhibit maladaptive responses like helplessness and avoidance; some remain helpless, while others build self-reliance without utilizing social support. (2) Positive ACLs use various adaptive strategies to stay motivated to learn, whereas negative ACLs develop these processes slowly and may never overcome learned helplessness. |
| Kobeleva (2012) | New Zealand | Unclear: university students and private language school students. | 110 | Experimental design | Listening comprehension | Ten 1.5-hour experiment sessions: (1) Experimental text: a news story as listening input and tasks (2) Proper names test. (3) Task difficulty ratings (4) Listening Proficiency Measure: IELTS listening module assessed participants' proficiency. | Unfamiliar proper names | Unfamiliar names inhibit EFL learners' listening comprehension. |
| Kök & Kantar (2024) | Turkey | Undergraduates | 227 | Survey | Self-disclosure's impact on male Turkish EFL learners' gender role stress and language anxiety. | (1) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCAS). (2) Masculine Gender Role Stress Scale). (3) Self-Disclosure Scale. | The impact of masculine gender role stress on FLA and EFL performance in communicative activities (p. 172). | Excessive masculine gender role stress in language classrooms likely decreases self-disclosure skills, increasing FLA. Male EFL learners often speak less in L2 when experiencing this stress, suppressing feelings and avoiding interaction. Thus, they tend to experience higher L2 anxiety. |
| Gan (2021) | China | Undergraduates | 89 | Survey | Reading performance | Survey (vague description) to understand factors influencing Chinese students' English reading anxiety: psychological, cultural, and textual. | English Reading Anxiety | Chinese English learners experience anxiety in reading comprehension due to psychological, cultural, and text factors. Language knowledge and cultural awareness can help address this. |
| Lavrova & Nikulina (2020) | Russia | EFL university students aged 20 to 22. It is unclear whether they are undergraduates or postgraduates | 50 | Experimental research | Idiomatic awareness | Participants received three lists of 35 idioms, with 30 minutes to complete three tasks. A post-hoc interview explored any difficulties faced during completion | Insufficient understanding of idiomatic synonyms, antonyms, and polysemy in English | Three types of learner awareness: learners showed least awareness of idiomatic antonymy, followed by polysemy. Awareness of idiomatic synonymy was highest. |
| Manipuspika (2018) | Indonesia | Undergraduates | 98 | Survey | Speaking fluency | FLCAS & Willingness to Communicate (WTC) Scale. | Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety | The results showed a strong positive link between learners' anxiety in foreign language classrooms and their WTC. Anxious learners were more apprehensive about communicating in English. |
| Pierini (2020) | Italy | Postgraduates | 22 | Survey | Speaking fluency / public speaking | The 15-minute presentations followed by self-assessment, peer-assessment, teacher assessment, and an anonymous questionnaire for feedback. | Anxiety and embarrassment when speaking English in public. | Many students find public speaking in English challenging. However, it still proves beneficial, leaving students feeling successful and satisfied after presentations, often overcoming their anxiety. |
| Sadeghi (2009) | Iran | Undergraduates & high school students | 76 | Comparative study | Understanding collocation patterns in writing | Written test of collocations | Differences in collocational patterns between L1 (Persian) and L2 (English) create challenges for L2 learners; the impact of L1. | Differences in L1 and L2 collocations significantly contribute to errors in L2 production for all EFL learners. Most issues arise from negative L1 transfer. Even advanced university EFL students may exhibit inadequate proficiency in this area. |

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| Solhi & Thumvichit (2024) | Turkey | Undergraduates | 40 | Q methodology study | Speaking Proficiency | Hybrid-type Q sampling | Subjective perspectives of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners affecting their L2 WTC | Three types of communicators: self-assured communicators are confident; motivated communicators strive to improve; nervous communicators exhibit anxiety that hinders WTC. This study shows that internal and external factors shape EFL learners' WTC in the classroom. Beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes towards language learning significantly influence it. |
| Zinkgräf (2008) | Argentina | EFL university students. It is unclear whether they are undergraduates or postgraduates. | 102 | Corpus-based research | Writing proficiency | 13 Practical assignments: reading comprehension, essays, reviews. | Collocations and their literal translation | The learners' mother tongue significantly influences students to translate literally from L1 to L2 in given collocations. |