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Experiences of English-Language Anxiety in U.S. Academic Settings: A Phenomenological Study

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Research on language anxiety has largely focused on foreign and second-language classroom contexts. However, less is known about how anxiety affects multilingual students' use of English in broader academic and real-world environments, where learners must use the target language to interact with both native and non-native speakers. To address this gap, the present study employs a phenomenological approach to investigate the lived experiences of multilingual students who experience anxiety in academic settings beyond the language classroom. Four participants were interviewed to understand how anxiety shaped their confidence, language competence, and communication skills. The results illuminate the specific ways anxiety manifests in academic settings and highlight the coping mechanisms participants used to meet these challenges. This study advances understanding of language anxiety beyond the classroom and offers insights for supporting multilingual students in higher education.

Keywords: anxiety, English as a second language, international students, language learning, language skills

INTRODUCTION

Language anxiety is widely recognized as one of the most influential affective factors shaping language learning and use (Almotiary, 2022; Horwitz, 2010; Gannoun & Deris, 2023). Research has consistently shown its impact on learners' participation, confidence, and performance across diverse language-learning contexts. Although both quantitative and qualitative research have contributed to our understanding, most studies have focused on language anxiety in formal classroom settings. Despite extensive research on anxiety in language-learning classrooms, the predominance of classroom-based studies limits our understanding of how anxiety operates in other academic contexts.

University students often communicate in English beyond language courses, including seminars, advising meetings, presentations, and disciplinary interactions. These situations may produce forms of anxiety that differ from those in traditional language classrooms. However, relatively little research has examined how multilingual students experience and interpret anxiety in these settings. To address this gap, the present study

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employs a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of multilingual English users in academic contexts beyond the language classroom.

The following section reviews the literature on second- and foreign-language anxiety and its effects in classroom contexts. The subsequent methodology section outlines the use of interviews to explore the anxiety of multilingual students in academic settings. Data analysis identified three primary themes that structure the findings. The first theme explores how anxiety serves as an obstacle for multilingual students. The second theme focuses on participants' perceptions of their self-confidence. Lastly, the third theme examines the strategies participants use to reduce anxiety. Each theme is discussed in detail below.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Anxiety is a psychological state of apprehension—a vague fear indirectly linked to a specific object (Hilgard, Atkinson, & Atkinson, 1971; Scovel, 1978). Spielberger (1983) describes it as a feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, or worry associated with nervous system activation. MacIntyre (1995) points out that these feelings are caused by situational factors; for instance, some shy students feel unable to speak in front of the class. These feelings serve as warning signals of challenging situations.

In second language learning research, a major advance was the recognition that language anxiety is often context-specific rather than merely a general trait. Horwitz et al. (1986) were the first to propose that foreign-language anxiety is a distinct type of anxiety linked specifically to learning a foreign language. They define foreign-language anxiety as a state of apprehension experienced when using a second or foreign language. This feeling arises from the perception of an inability to communicate effectively in that language. They also highlight that it is "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors … arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 128). This raises an important question: Does language anxiety cause difficulties in language learning, or does it result from them? Horwitz (2001) argues that language anxiety can both cause and arise from poor language learning.

Contemporary syntheses demonstrate that L2 anxiety research has developed in three main areas: a) conceptualization and measurement, b) effects on learning and performance, and c) sources of anxiety in learning and language use contexts (Papi & Khajavy, 2023). This perspective on anxiety is important for this study because anxiety extends beyond the language classroom. It can also arise in high-stakes academic situations where learners' language skills are evaluated by institutional standards. Recent studies also suggest that anxieties related to specific skills, such as speaking or writing, can vary in how they are experienced and how they influence performance (Papi & Khajavy, 2023).

Sources and Effects of Anxiety

Research suggests that language anxiety arises from the interplay of personal, social, and instructional factors. At the learner level, beliefs about language learning, fear of

negative evaluation, perfectionism, and concerns about making mistakes have consistently been linked to heightened anxiety (Almotiary, 2022; Baran-Łucarz, 2014; Gkonou, 2013). However, anxiety is not solely an individual characteristic. Studies also highlight the role of teachers, classroom relationships, and pedagogical practices in either amplifying or reducing anxiety (Alrashidi, 2022; Merç, 2011; Suwantarathip & Wichadee, 2010). Together, these findings suggest that language anxiety is socially situated and shaped by both individual perceptions and contextual conditions.

The literature consistently shows that anxiety undermines learners' communication, confidence, and academic performance. Anxious learners often experience communication apprehension, avoidance behaviors, and difficulty expressing themselves effectively (Abdullah et al., 2022; Horwitz et al., 1986). These challenges can reduce willingness to communicate and lower self-confidence, especially when learners fear negative evaluation or perceive their language ability as inadequate (Baran-Łucarz, 2014; Gawi, 2020). Research further suggests that the cumulative effects of anxiety can hinder language development and academic achievement by limiting participation and engagement in learning activities (Chen & Chang, 2004; Shih, 2019; Zheng, 2008). Collectively, these studies indicate that anxiety affects not only linguistic performance but also students' broader educational experiences.

L2 Anxiety Beyond the Traditional Language Classroom

Although early research often focused on language classroom learning, more recent studies emphasize the importance of considering anxiety in academic settings and other language-use situations outside the classroom. Wilang (2023) found that students enrolled in English-medium academic programs experienced anxiety both inside and outside the classroom. Chong et al. (2025) state that studies comparing language anxiety across academic environments show that anxiety can still exist even among relatively skilled users. This may be closely linked to self-perceived competence and the social expectations surrounding language use in a specific context (Chong et al., 2025). For multilingual students, academic environments impose additional pressures, such as meeting institutional expectations, participating in seminars and advising sessions, presenting research, and producing disciplinary writing. These challenges can raise anxiety, especially when learners feel their academic identity and communication skills are judged by native-speaker norms and institutional standards (Chong et al., 2025).

Academic anxiety among multilingual students is often linked to cross-cultural academic adaptation. Students navigating different languages and cultures may encounter unfamiliar academic norms, assessment practices, and social interactions, which can cause stress if they feel unprepared. Research on international students shows that academic expectations can negatively affect well-being. This is because cultural adaptation and social integration serve as mechanisms through which academic pressures influence psychological outcomes (Xu & Chai, 2025). Broader research on psychological adaptation in international higher education emphasizes the importance of acculturation, adjustment, identity, and mental health (Soheili & Lanz, 2025). These findings suggest that L2 anxiety in academic settings is not merely an individual deficit but a response to broader institutional and cultural demands of academic life.

Qualitative Approaches to L2 Anxiety

Although quantitative studies have established important relationships between anxiety and language learning outcomes, they offer limited insight into how anxiety is experienced in everyday academic life. Qualitative and phenomenological approaches complement this work by focusing on learners' interpretations of events, emotions, and social interactions. Existing phenomenological research suggests that anxiety is closely tied to concerns about competence, identity, and evaluation, and that coping strategies often emerge through social support, preparation, and experience (Aporbo, 2024; Lambert, 2023). However, phenomenological investigations of anxiety in academic contexts beyond the language classroom remain limited. The present study addresses this gap by examining how multilingual students experience, interpret, and navigate English-language anxiety in U.S. academic settings.

Research Questions

The study asks the following central research question: How do multilingual students experience anxiety when using English with native and non-native speakers in academic settings?

To answer this question, the following sub-questions must be considered:

- How do multilingual students think anxiety affects their language ability and skills?
- What strategies do multilingual students use when they feel anxious in academic settings?

METHOD

This study employed descriptive phenomenology to explore multilingual students' lived experiences of anxiety in academic settings and to articulate the meanings participants assign to those experiences. Phenomenology is concerned with how individuals perceive and make sense of a phenomenon as it is lived, with attention to both description and interpretation of experience (Creswell, 2012; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). In phenomenological inquiry, careful engagement with each individual account precedes any thematic abstraction, and the analytic task is to move from concrete descriptions to essential meanings while retaining fidelity to the participants' perspectives (van Manen, 1997). Accordingly, this study sought to describe the essential structure of academic anxiety as experienced by L2 speakers, grounded in participants' first-person narratives.

Procedures

Consistent with phenomenological research, semi-structured interviews were used as the primary method of data collection because they enable participants to describe the phenomenon in their own words and allow the researcher to probe for experiential detail (Merriam, 2002; Schram, 2003). Semi-structured interviews were selected to balance consistency across participants with flexibility to follow emergent meanings (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In line with this approach, three general questions were developed before conducting the actual interviews to initiate the conversation and delve deeply into

understanding the phenomenon. During the interviews, the conversation remained flexible, allowing exploration of topics and leads that emerged throughout the process.

Comprehensive preparation for formal interviews is critical to maintaining the integrity and reliability of the data collection process (Turner III, 2010). McNamara (n.d.) highlights that careful planning reduces ambiguity and maximizes the study's benefits. To enhance instrument validity and address potential biases, eight principles for interview preparation were considered. Accordingly, interviews were conducted in distraction-free environments. Participants received detailed emails outlining the interview's purpose, confidentiality terms, format, and duration. Contact information was supplied to enable participants to address any inquiries concerning the interview or the research study.

The interviews were conducted by a single researcher. Each session began with general questions regarding the participant's background and experiences with learning English. These questions included: name, country of origin, the onset of English language learning, duration of English study, arrival in the United States, length of stay in the United States, frequency of English use, and self-assessment of English proficiency. This approach facilitated rapport-building and ensured the collection of relevant background information.

Subsequently, participants were asked pre-specified, open-ended questions regarding their experiences of anxiety when using English in academic settings, the perceived effects of anxiety on their language abilities, and their coping strategies. In accordance with Creswell's (2012) recommendations, these questions were designed to maintain focus on the phenomenon under investigation. Additional follow-up questions were posed as needed to elicit comprehensive responses.

Each participant was interviewed once, with sessions lasting between 50 and 60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and securely stored on a password-protected external drive. Following each interview, the researcher documented reflections on the session and maintained a research journal to monitor the progress and any procedural changes throughout the study.

Sampling

A sample of four participants was selected to align with the goals of phenomenological research, which prioritizes depth of understanding over broad representation. Phenomenological studies commonly employ small sample sizes, typically three to ten participants, to allow for detailed examination of lived experiences (Creswell, 2012). Although the small sample size limits generalizability and may constrain the transferability of findings to other contexts, it enabled the in-depth examination of participants' lived experiences central to phenomenological inquiry. Interviewing four participants enabled close engagement with each participant's account and facilitated the identification of shared and unique meanings across cases. Although the concept of saturation remains debated in qualitative research, data adequacy was evaluated by the recurrence of themes and the likelihood that additional interviews would yield

substantively new insights (Malterud et al., 2016). After several rounds of analysis, the themes were sufficiently developed to address the study's research aims.

Participants

For this study, participants were selected using purposeful sampling methods. Patton (1990) states, "[The] logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposeful sampling" (p. 169). In line with that, this sampling procedure was used to ensure the most credible information was obtained.

Participants were selected in alignment with the study's objectives. Four international graduate students from a large Midwestern public university in the United States, all of whom reported experiencing anxiety, were invited to participate. All participants were non-native English speakers and represented diverse linguistic, cultural, gender, and age backgrounds. The sample included two females and two males, with ages ranging from the late twenties to the late forties. To acknowledge each participant's individual experiences, brief biographical sketches are provided. All names are pseudonyms.

Fatima

The first participant, Fatima, grew up in Kazakhstan, so her first language is Russian. She moved to the US ten years ago. She started learning English as a second language after arriving there. She completed her formal education from elementary school through college back in her home country. In the US, she earned two master's degrees in different fields. Now, she is a Ph.D. student and a graduate assistant at a large midwestern public university.

Melissa

The second participant, Melissa, is from the Philippines. Her first language is Filipino. She moved to the US three years ago. She began learning English in her home country during elementary school. After completing her undergraduate studies, she taught at an English-medium middle school for over ten years. Currently, she is a Ph.D. student and a graduate assistant at a large midwestern public university in the US.

John

John, the third participant, grew up in Saudi Arabia. His first language is Arabic. He has been in the U.S. for five years. He started learning English during high school. After earning his undergraduate degree in teaching English as a foreign language, he taught English for one semester. Following that, he moved to the U.S. to pursue his master's degree. Now, he is a Ph.D. student at a large midwestern public university.

Sergio

The fourth participant, Sergio, is from Senegal. He speaks Wolof, his native language, and French, Senegal's official language. He moved to the US two years ago. He began learning English as a third language in high school. He earned his undergraduate degree in teaching English as a foreign language and taught English for ten years in public

schools in his home country. Currently, he is a master's student and teaching assistant at a large public university in the Midwest.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using Sanders' (2003) application of Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method. To ensure transparency in transitioning from idiographic analysis to thematic synthesis, analysis was conducted in two phases: (a) within-case (participant-specific) analysis and (b) cross-case (thematic) synthesis, following Colaizzi's stages. First, each transcript was read multiple times to grasp the overall sense and to stay close to the participant's narrative voice (Sanders, 2003). Significant statements related to anxiety in academic settings were extracted and treated as horizons of experience. For each participant, these statements were organized into meaning units and then formulated into participant-specific meanings that remained rooted in the participant's language and context. All coding and analysis were conducted manually by the researcher without the use of qualitative data analysis software. A brief idiographic summary was written for each participant to preserve the coherence of individual accounts before any cross-participant comparison.

Second, formulated meanings were grouped within each case and then compared across cases to identify similarities and differences in experience. Theme clusters were developed iteratively, with ongoing reference to original transcripts to ensure that emerging themes did not overlook participant-specific details. This process led to comprehensive descriptions of the phenomenon and an explanation of its core structure (Sanders, 2003). To improve credibility, analytic decisions, memoing, and revisions to theme labels were recorded as an audit trail. Consistent with Colaizzi's final step, interpretive summaries were shared with participants for feedback on whether the descriptions matched their experiences (Sanders, 2003).

FINDINGS

This section organizes the findings into three experiential themes based on an idiographic-first phenomenological analysis. Following descriptive phenomenology, each participant's transcript was first analyzed as a complete account to maintain the participant's lived meanings before making cross-participant comparisons. The themes listed below, therefore, reflect shared structures of experience that emerged from comparing individual meanings; quotations are included to highlight both commonalities and nuances across accounts and to maintain an insider's perspective.

Themes One: "Anxiety as an obstacle."

All four participants identified anxiety as a significant obstacle encountered in their daily academic experiences. They reported that anxiety limited their ability to use English proficiently. Notably, all participants indicated that anxiety impaired their capacity to articulate ideas and thoughts as intended. Melissa stated,

> *When I experience anxiety in presentations, I feel that I cannot find the right word. Even when I know what to say, I find it hard to articulate my ideas, especially when I see people looking at me.*

Fatima described experiencing similar difficulties, particularly in finding appropriate words when anxious. In addition to challenges with articulation, participants reported difficulties organizing speech coherently during periods of anxiety. John emphasized the effort required to participate in whole-class discussions under these circumstances.

> *I just need to fight whenever I have to speak in front of my classmates. My mind is blank. I can't remember anything. I skip things, then I forget to mention that, and I forget to mention this.*

An unexpected finding across participants was that writing generated more anxiety than speaking. Although speaking requires immediate language production, participants perceived writing as carrying greater consequences because written work is permanent, subject to detailed evaluation, and often linked to academic success. Unlike spoken interactions, where misunderstandings can be clarified through follow-up questions and nonverbal cues, writing was experienced as a solitary activity that required participants to independently manage linguistic accuracy, organization, and disciplinary expectations. Participants also emphasized the pressure of deadlines and the expectation that written texts would be carefully scrutinized by professors and native English-speaking readers. These factors appeared to transform writing from a linguistic task into a highly evaluative experience, making it particularly anxiety-provoking. Melissa and Fatima both described spending excessive amounts of time composing academic texts and emails because they repeatedly revised their language choices. Sergio illustrated this experience:

> *I remember once I had to write a mini paper, just two single-spaced pages. I took a week to finish the paper because I kept writing just one paragraph a day. After I finished, it was not very coherent. It was more like random thinking. After I was done, I had to go over it and improve its coherence.*

Melissa identified the complexity of writing as a primary challenge, noting that the process often involves translating from the first language to English. She emphasized that literal translation often leads to ineffective communication.

> *What makes it even more complex is the fact that literal translation does not always work very well because, after you write the thought in English, it does not make sense to people. When you write, the first thing that comes to mind is the literal meaning. That's what makes writing hard, and that's what makes me nervous every day because I might not be able to submit my writing before the due date.*

Another factor contributing to the complexity of writing is the necessity to meet deadlines. This requirement was identified as a source of increased anxiety among participants. Melissa specifically noted that uncertainty about meeting writing deadlines heightened her stress.

Knowing that a professor is going to read and grade what you wrote is another aspect that connects writing with anxiety in academic settings, according to Sergio. He pointed out that, "How I feel that someone is going to read my writing, so fearful, so worried, so anxious, so not confident that I would say that it should be done in that way". Even when grades are not involved, writing is no less complex. An example of a specific type

of writing that is not graded is emailing professors, classmates, and others. John talked about how stressful writing formal emails is for him. He stated, "When I email a native English speaker, I experience anxiety because I have to be very careful with my linguistic choices, because it might not be the right way to express something in English".

Anxiety is an obstacle to skills other than speaking and writing, such as reading. The participants reported that facing hardcore readings could increase their anxiety and make them take a long time to finish their reading assignments. Melissa made this point clear in the following quotation.

> *Whenever I read and I cannot understand, I feel that I am crippled, and the more I read and I can't understand, the more I get frustrated, and I feel that I would not be able to finish the reading on time, and this is when the anxiety comes in.*

Fatima reported similar experiences, indicating that difficulty understanding readings led to repeated attempts and increased anxiety. For graduate students, such challenges may result in insufficient time to complete assignments and may discourage engagement with required readings.

Theme Two: Perceived self-confidence

A recurring theme among participants was the perceived impact of anxiety on self-confidence. Participants attributed reduced ability and slower task performance to diminished self-esteem during anxious episodes. All reported feeling incompetent when required to use English in academic contexts. Fatima described a tendency to avoid specific tasks when anxious.

> *When I am asked to take notes for faculty meetings. I'm anxious. Whenever I'm giving a task like that, I'm worried because I want to be precise and detailed. I don't want to deviate from the original idea. So, I try to avoid those things because I feel that native speakers would do it better.*

Interestingly, feelings of inadequacy were reported even by highly successful multilingual students. Despite holding two master's degrees from U.S. institutions and being a doctoral student, Fatima still questioned her English proficiency. Similar feelings emerged in John's account, suggesting that anxiety was not simply a reflection of actual language ability but was closely tied to self-perceptions of competence. The participants' concerns emerged in their descriptions of interactions with native speakers. Rather than fearing communication with other multilingual speakers, participants reported heightened anxiety when communicating with native English speakers, worrying about linguistic accuracy and cultural appropriateness.

The fear of making mistakes was very strong across all the interviews. The participants emphasized that they constantly felt fear and anxiety when interacting, whether in writing or speaking, with native speakers. Interestingly, Sergio mentioned that the level of anxiety was higher in writing than in speaking. He explained that this is because, "From my personal experience in speaking in school, professors and classmates ask me to elaborate more and help me in order for them to be able to understand my message

and what I want to say, and this is not how it works in writing" (Sergio). Lack of feedback and nonverbal communication cues are indeed two of the main aspects associated with writing, but not with speaking.

Anxiety and lowered confidence not only discouraged participants from engaging in certain tasks but also restrained their creativity when using the target language. Fatima preferred to stay within familiar boundaries during academic activities and avoided experimenting due to perceived limitations.

Another aspect that may be linked to anxiety and low self-esteem is the feeling that there is a need to make significant improvements in specific areas of the English language. Melissa expressed her desire to enhance her writing skills. She stated, "I feel that I need so many improvements in terms of writing because it's already my second year, and soon I will be writing my comprehensive and dissertation". On the other hand, John demonstrated that he was not satisfied with his writing proficiency.

> *I feel that I need to be progressing in terms of the days and times I am spending writing. I feel that it would be acceptable for me to spend 5 days working on a short paper when I first started the Ph.D. program, but now I should have improved, and I should devote less time to writing a short paper, like a day or two instead of a week, but that did not happen with me. Honestly, I have made some improvements, but what I have accomplished is not good enough.*

John's comments indicate that while anxiety can motivate goal setting, unrealistic expectations may harm student well-being. His dissatisfaction with writing progress might reflect real stagnation or a perception shaped by anxiety and lowered self-confidence.

Across participants, reduced self-confidence appeared to stem less from actual linguistic limitations than from concerns about evaluation and legitimacy in academic communities. Participants often compared their language performance to native-speaker norms and treated minor errors as evidence of inadequacy. This finding suggests that anxiety was closely tied to perceptions of academic identity and belonging rather than to objective language proficiency alone.

Theme Three: Anxiety Reduction

Despite ongoing struggles with anxiety, participants described coping mechanisms they developed through personal experience during their academic journeys. All participants reported that they had not received formal instruction in strategies to manage English language anxiety. Additionally, they noted a lack of awareness or guidance from faculty members regarding this issue.

Returning to the main strategies the participants used to cope with anxiety, Sergio emphasized the importance of giving himself time to adjust and build confidence in his language skills. He said, "As I stayed more in school and I kind of improved my English skills, I started to be able to manage my anxiety and have more control over it." Melissa expressed a sentiment similar to that in the previous quotation. In her words,

> *Somehow, I have adjusted. Initially, yes, of course, during the first weeks, I was afraid of participating in the class, but now I feel much better and less anxious. Over time, since I have been here for two years, I have adjusted. I feel that I could cope with some of the conversations.*

Another strategy the participants discussed is to stop caring what people think of you and your proficiency level. Melissa stated, "*I am beyond caring about how people view me or my English proficiency*". John suggested another technique that could be beneficial for reducing anxiety. He made it clear that sooner or later, one must try to stop overthinking every utterance and "just speak".

> *When I came here, I used to think before I spoke, but now I just speak. I don't think about creating sentences before I speak; I just think about the sentence: "Is it right?" But now I just speak. I don't think about that. Correct or not.*

Fatima emphasized the importance of forgiving yourself when you make a mistake, especially when you speak. She discussed how you would not be able to succeed in graduate school if you don't give yourself a second chance whenever you make an error. Additionally, she pointed out that a person should focus on conveying their message simply. Fatima stated, "But nowadays I try to forgive myself, I try to kind of not focus on those things but more on the meaning of speech."

Sergio emphasized the importance of being prepared by completing the reading assignments and taking notes in his notebook before coming to class. He showed that this strategy was very helpful in lowering his anxiety.

> *I think that just being and coming prepared helps a lot. You have to know what you are talking about, and then you will be fine. Otherwise, you will be in trouble. Also, try to memorize what you will be talking about. Write notes, make flashcards, and create PowerPoint slides. Do anything that would help stay on topic and say what you need to say.*

In managing reading anxiety, Melissa discussed how one should approach reading properly. She mentioned that she would engage in a dialogue with the text to help her understand the main idea and grasp the overall meaning. The following quote illustrates her strategy.

> *With reading, I try to engage in conversation with the text if I don't understand it to gain comprehension. I ask myself questions like what this means and similar ones. Also, I go over the reading twice or thrice. Also, taking notes while I am reading helps me understand the reading.*

Across accounts, coping was experienced as a gradual development of agency: participants managed anxiety by increasing preparedness, reducing self-judgment, shifting attention to communicative meaning, and normalizing imperfection within academic participation.

DICUSSION

From this study, the interview data offer a picture of multilingual students' experiences with anxiety in academic settings. For the first theme, which is anxiety as an obstacle, what the participants discussed and their experiences with anxiety align with existing literature on anxiety in the foreign or second language classroom. In the literature, a negative correlation has been established between anxiety and performance in a second or foreign language (e.g., Aida, 1994; Almotiary, 2022; Aporbo, 2024; Gregersen, 2003). Shih (2019) states, "The L2 anxiety functions as the predictor of self-efficacy, goal-setting, and self-regulatory strategies" (p. 31). The more anxious a second language learner feels, the lower their sense of self-efficacy becomes, the fewer challenging goals they set, and the fewer strategies they employ to improve their academic achievement.

Abdullah et al. (2022), Price (1991), and Samimy and Tabuse (1992) found that language anxiety is a major factor influencing the oral performance of foreign language learners in the classroom. Abdullah et al. (2022) also suggest that anxiety greatly affects second language learning, particularly in oral communication. In addition to speaking, Leki (1999) notes that research on writing anxiety indicates that second language anxiety has a negative impact on writing performance.

In the study, participants reported feeling less effective in using English when they were anxious. Additionally, when anxious, they started to forget words and some grammatical rules, leading to mistakes they would not normally make. Horwitz et al. (1986) identify communication apprehension and difficulty speaking as primary effects of anxiety. They note that anxious second language learners frequently report experiences such as "freezing in class, standing outside the door trying to gather enough courage to enter, and going blank before tests" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 128). Hoffman (1986) argues that anxiety can redirect attention from meaning to linguistic form, as anxiety may lead second-language speakers to focus on the physical characteristics of words, such as acoustic properties, word order, and phonetic similarities, while overlooking their semantic content.

The interview data in the study align with the earlier statement. All participants tended to focus on grammar rather than meaning when anxious. Sergio explicitly stated that he always tried to produce grammatical statements, both in speaking and writing. John emphasized the importance of avoiding grammatical mistakes in his speech. Fatima and Melissa mentioned that they do not tolerate grammatical mistakes, especially in writing. They also highlighted the importance of their written work for academic purposes, stressing that it should always be perfect.

One of the aspects the participants discussed, which clearly contradicts the literature, is that speaking was not the most affected skill by anxiety. Most participants highlighted that academic writing was their biggest concern. Previous research indicates that speaking in class is the most prevalent concern among anxious second-language learners (Aida, 1994; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Mak & White, 1997; Mak, 2011). This contradiction could be due to the differences in research context between this study and earlier research. Most previous studies were conducted in foreign-language or second-

language classrooms, whereas the participants in this study were second-language speakers learning in academic settings with native English speakers. With that in mind, the prominence of writing anxiety in the present study is consistent with findings reported by Jawas (2019), who found that writing tasks can generate substantial anxiety among English learners and that students often develop personal strategies to cope with these challenges. While Jawas examined learners in an EFL context, the present findings suggest that writing anxiety may remain a significant concern even for multilingual students operating in academic environments where English is used for disciplinary purposes.

Another possible explanation for this difference is the nature of the communicative demands in academic environments. Unlike foreign- and second-language classrooms, where language use is often structured around learning activities, participants in this study used English in a broader range of situations, including academic writing, email, classroom discussions, presentations, and interactions with professors and native-English-speaking peers. Additionally, participants generally did not receive systematic linguistic correction or language-focused feedback from English instructors. Instead, they were expected to meet academic expectations while independently monitoring the accuracy and appropriateness of their language use.

Although speaking requires immediate language production, participants perceived writing as carrying greater academic consequences because written work is evaluated, graded, and often permanently documented. Several participants also emphasized concerns about coherence, linguistic accuracy, and meeting deadlines. Unlike spoken interactions, where misunderstandings can be clarified through follow-up questions and nonverbal cues, written communication places greater responsibility on writers to ensure their intended meaning is conveyed. These characteristics may help explain why writing emerged as a particularly anxiety-provoking activity in this study.

For the second theme, perceived self-confidence, participants reported that their self-confidence and ability to use English were influenced by anxiety. Shih (2019) states that L2 anxiety predicts self-efficacy, with higher anxiety associated with lower self-efficacy. In line with this, all participants reported feelings of incompetence, especially when asked to perform a task for others.

The participants' perception of their self-confidence while experiencing anxiety is a theme that is both similar to and different from what is found in the literature. Aida (1994), Almotiary (2022), Horwitz et al. (1986), and Mak (2011) assert that negative self-evaluation is a subcategory of the fear of negative evaluation by teachers and peers. In other words, foreign or second-language learners tend to evaluate themselves negatively because they fear receiving negative feedback from their teachers and peers. Along those lines, some participants reported feeling anxious because they felt that their English proficiency was being judged by their professors and peers. Additionally, some participants reported feeling anxious and incompetent simply because they knew someone would read their writing.

What is notable about the data in this study, and not often seen in existing research, is that some participants compared their language skills to those of native speakers.

Additionally, some participants reported feeling anxious about their writing when they knew a native speaker would read their email. Since language classrooms are primarily for non-native speakers, comparisons with native speakers are rarely included in the literature because earlier studies focused on this setting. The occurrence of this aspect adds significant value to the study and supports the idea that anxiety in language classrooms differs from anxiety when studying with native speakers in academic environments.

This finding also suggests that anxiety in academic settings may extend beyond concerns about language proficiency alone. Participants' accounts indicate that comparing themselves to native speakers affected not only how they evaluated their linguistic abilities but also how they perceived their place in the academic community. In this sense, anxiety appears to be connected to issues of belonging, legitimacy, and academic identity, particularly when participants felt their communication was being evaluated against native-speaker norms. Learners' interpretations of expectations, interpersonal relationships, and instructional structures influence the development of anxiety (Lambert, 2023).

Another layer of complexity in studying with native speakers and being treated as one of them is the urgent need for cross-cultural academic adaptation among second-language speakers to function properly and succeed in their academic endeavors. This challenge can heighten anxiety, particularly when learners perceive that their academic identity and communication skills are evaluated against native-speaker norms and institutional standards (Chong et al., 2025). Similarly, Soheili and Lanz (2025) and Xu and Chai (2025) note that cultural adaptation and social integration function as key mechanisms by which academic pressures affect psychological outcomes.

Taken together, these findings suggest that anxiety in academic settings may be shaped by linguistic, academic, and sociocultural factors. Rather than reflecting language proficiency alone, participants' experiences indicate that anxiety can arise from navigating unfamiliar educational expectations, adapting to new academic cultures, and communicating in environments where language functions as a tool for academic participation rather than simply an object of study. This finding is noteworthy, as several participants in this study had extensive experience using English prior to their current academic studies. For example, some participants had taught English or used it professionally for many years but nevertheless continued to experience substantial anxiety in academic settings. This observation suggests that language anxiety may not be solely a consequence of limited linguistic proficiency. Rather, participants' experiences indicate that anxiety may persist even among highly proficient English users when communication occurs in contexts involving evaluation, academic performance, and identity. In this sense, anxiety appears to be shaped not only by what participants know linguistically but also by how they perceive the expectations placed upon them as multilingual students in higher education.

The findings also raise questions about how academic disciplines may shape the experience of anxiety. Academic fields differ considerably in their communication practices, expectations, and assessment methods. For example, some disciplines place

greater emphasis on written argumentation, whereas others rely more heavily on presentations, discussion, or collaborative work. Although the present study was not designed to examine disciplinary differences, participants' accounts suggest that the academic demands of particular fields may influence how anxiety is experienced. Future research could explore whether multilingual students in different disciplines experience distinct sources and manifestations of academic language anxiety.

Fatima raised an important issue that could challenge the power structure in American universities. She stated that the way classes are set up benefits native speakers because they have more advanced linguistic abilities than international students and are familiar with the culture of schooling and the teaching style in American universities. Fatima expressed her desire to see instruction modified to better meet the needs of second-language speakers and suggested creating opportunities for international students to express ideas beyond oral and written production, including through the arts. Although this perspective represents the experience of a single participant, it highlights a potentially important area for future research on how multilingual students experience participation, evaluation, and inclusion in higher education settings.

For the third theme, anxiety reduction, the participants discussed how they handled anxiety in academic settings. The importance of the coping mechanisms they used lies in their differences from those found in the literature. According to Tanveer (2007), making the classroom environment less formal and friendlier and encouraging students to make mistakes are the most common suggestions to decrease language anxiety.

Aldubaikhi (2023) and Proulx (1991) assert that effective communication between the instructor and their language learners, a flexible grading system, and private meetings with students can be very helpful techniques for reducing anxiety in the foreign- or second-language classroom. Increasing students' confidence is another strategy that teachers can use to reduce language anxiety among foreign- or second-language learners. This can be achieved by having students recognize their irrational beliefs and fears about using the target language (Young, 1991). Young (1991) also suggests that teachers should ask students to write about their second language anxiety, including reasons and solutions to help lower their anxiety levels.

The techniques mentioned position language teachers primarily as key figures in reducing anxiety, but they have limited applicability outside language classrooms. This teacher-focused view often overlooks the experiences and strategies of second- or foreign-language learners themselves. Future research should explore the coping strategies used by second-language speakers in academic settings. Such studies could discover new methods, enrich the existing literature, and offer practical advice for international students dealing with anxiety.

The findings of this study should be interpreted with caution. Given the small sample size and the phenomenological focus on lived experience, the study was not intended to produce statistically generalizable conclusions but to provide a detailed understanding of how anxiety was experienced by these participants. Future research with larger, more diverse samples may help determine the extent to which these experiences are shared among multilingual students across different academic contexts.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have practical implications for educators, academic institutions, and language support services. First, promote inclusivity by training faculty and peers to recognize and address L2 challenges, thereby creating a supportive, low-anxiety academic environment. Next, develop language support programs that focus on reducing anxiety. These can include peer mentoring, public speaking skills training, and mindfulness exercises. Train educators to identify language anxiety and use participation strategies that involve students without putting pressure on them. Implement policies that allow non-native speakers to select their preferred language for assessments and presentations.

CONCLUSION

In summary, multilingual students' academic anxiety is complex. Participants described their anxiety during academic language tasks and how it impacts their confidence, language ability, and skills. They also shared strategies for managing their anxiety. Stakeholders should use these insights to improve academic practices and support systems. Participants' accounts offer valuable insights into second-language anxiety from learners' perspectives. More qualitative research is needed to explore this complexity and the individual differences it entails. This study aims to shift the focus to the challenges second-language speakers face in academic settings beyond the language classroom. Future research should compare anxiety across different disciplines, cultures, and levels. Longitudinal studies could show how anxiety and coping strategies develop over time.

Importantly, the findings suggest that language anxiety in academic settings cannot be understood solely as a language-learning issue. Participants' experiences indicate that anxiety is intertwined with academic expectations, identity, communication, and adaptation to new educational environments. By moving beyond the traditional language-classroom focus, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how multilingual students experience and navigate anxiety in higher education. Recognizing these experiences is essential to creating academic environments that support both students' linguistic development and their full participation in academic life.

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