



Exploring the Impact of Foreign Language Anxiety on ESL Learners' Oral Performance: A Strategic Intervention-Based Study

¹ Suryakala Irulappan

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Abstract

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) continues to act as a key affective barrier in English as a Second Language (ESL) speaking contexts, hindering learners' communicative competence, fluency, and participation. Although prior research has examined the causes and impacts of FLA, short-term, classroom-based interventions remain underexplored. This quasi-experimental study investigated the effectiveness of a one-week, theory-informed strategy plan in reducing FLA and enhancing oral performance among 40 ESL learners. Drawing on the Foreign Language Anxiety framework by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), the intervention targeted communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation through guided peer collaboration, positive self-talk, scaffolded discussions, and mock speaking tasks. Pre- and post-test assessments, evaluated using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and structured group discussions, revealed statistically significant improvements across all performance measures (fluency, confidence, participation, content relevance, and language use). Effect sizes indicated medium to strong practical significance. Findings demonstrate that even short, targeted interventions can yield measurable gains in communicative confidence. This study contributes a replicable, classroom-friendly model and underscores the need for future research on extended interventions, diverse learner populations, and the integration of digital or AI-mediated affective supports.

Keywords - *Foreign Language Anxiety, ESL Speaking Performance, Strategic Intervention, Affective Strategies, Quasi-experimental Design, Classroom Pedagogy.*

¹ Irulappan, S. Scholar (English), Kalasalingam Academy of Research and Education, Srivilliputhur, Tamil Nadu, India. Email: 9623116010@klu.ac.in. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-1101-1683>.



1. Performance Anxiety in Non-Native Language Speaking - an Introduction

Speaking a non-native language in real-time interactions often triggers significant performance anxiety, especially in high-stakes or socially demanding settings. This anxiety manifests as nervousness, self-doubt, and physiological symptoms such as a racing heartbeat or dry mouth, which can severely hinder the ability to communicate effectively. While some level of anxiety is natural during second language acquisition, persistent or intense anxiety can obstruct learning, reduce confidence, and discourage learners from participating in communicative situations. The Foreign Language Anxiety Theory, proposed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), defines language anxiety as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning. According to this theory, language anxiety stems from three interrelated components:

Communication apprehension – fear or anxiety about actual or anticipated communication.

Test anxiety – fear of failure in evaluative situations.

Fear of negative evaluation – concern about others' judgments.

The FLA theory explains why some learners struggle disproportionately despite adequate language ability, as their emotional filter inhibits language performance.

1.1 Research Questions

1. What are the psychological and linguistic factors contributing to performance anxiety among ESL learners?
2. How effective is a one-week, classroom-based intervention in reducing ESL learners' Foreign Language Anxiety?
3. To what extent does the intervention improve learners' oral performance across fluency, confidence, participation, content relevance, and language use?

2. Literature Review

The experience of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) has been widely acknowledged as a critical affective factor influencing second language acquisition. Rooted in the foundational model by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), FLA is conceptualized as a situation-specific form of anxiety, arising from the unique pressures of language learning. This model identifies three core dimensions: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation, each of which directly interferes with spontaneous language production, particularly in oral tasks. Building upon this, later studies by Mac Intyre and Gardner (1991) emphasized how FLA impacts both input processing and output performance, reducing learners' willingness to communicate and creating a self-reinforcing cycle of avoidance. Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) further examined the role of perfectionism in exacerbating FLA, noting that many learners experience heightened anxiety when they internalize unrealistic standards for flawless language use.



Recent frameworks extend FLA analysis beyond the affective dimension to consider neurocognitive mechanisms. Performance anxiety activates the amygdala and suppresses prefrontal cortex functions (responsible for planning and speech production), especially under evaluation or time pressure (Scovel, 1991). This neuropsychological perspective explains why language learners, despite possessing sufficient linguistic knowledge, may “freeze” during communicative tasks. In your current study, this theory is applied through intervention strategies designed to reduce limbic system activation and strengthen executive control through repeated exposure and cognitive restructuring. Additionally, socio-cultural and digital-age perspectives (e.g., Dewaele & Mac Intyre, 2014; Huang & Hwang, 2024) have expanded the understanding of FLA by exploring how classroom dynamics, peer interaction, and technology-mediated learning environments influence anxiety. These theories argue that language anxiety is not purely internal, but deeply relational and contextual shaped by teacher feedback, peer comparisons, cultural mismatches, and digital fluency expectations.

Prior studies have documented the negative influence of FLA on language learning (Horwitz et al., 1986; Young, 1991). Recent research emphasizes the importance of strategy-based interventions. For example, Kayhan (2025) highlights through meta-analysis that targeted classroom interventions significantly lower speaking anxiety. Similarly, Huang and Hwang (2024) explored digital storytelling as a tool to boost speaking confidence, while Jim et al. (2025) demonstrated the effectiveness of augmented reality in training learners to speak with reduced anxiety. Studies also point to AI-based speaking assistants (Qin et al., 2025) as emerging solutions. However, most interventions require advanced technologies, long durations, or high resources. The present study contributes by demonstrating that even a brief, one-week plan focused on peer collaboration, self-reflection, and scaffolded speaking tasks can produce significant outcomes.

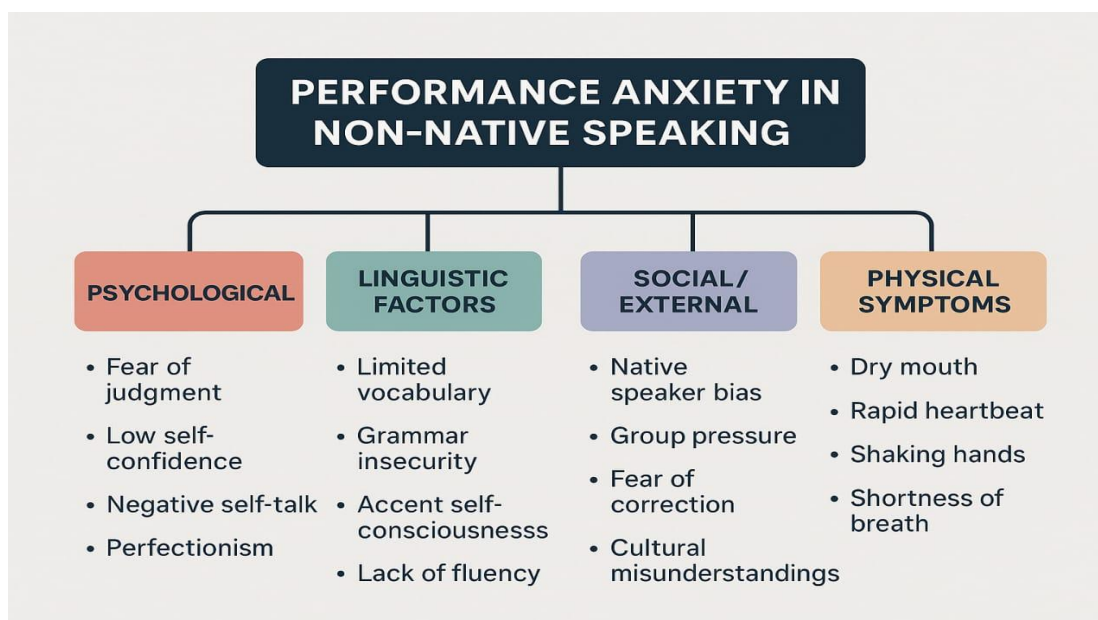
In this light, the present study positions itself at the intersection of affective, cognitive, and behavioural paradigms. While traditional studies have documented the impact of FLA, fewer have implemented empirically measured, practice-based interventions that target each FLA dimension through structured strategies. Drawing from Oxford’s (1990) affective strategy taxonomy and Kondo & Ying-Ling’s (2004) anxiety coping mechanisms, this research applies repeated speaking tasks, peer-supported interactions, and real-time feedback to assess how short-term interventions can rewire learners’ emotional and cognitive responses.

By embedding Horwitz’s theory within an experiential, classroom-based framework, this study offers a novel contribution to the FLA literature: not only affirming the theory’s explanatory power, but demonstrating its utility as a diagnostic and intervention blueprint. It bridges the gap between theoretical understanding and pedagogical action, providing measurable insights into how psychological safety, structured exposure, and cognitive reframing can reduce ESL learners’ speaking anxiety and enhance their oral performance.



3. Performance Anxiety in Non-Native Language Speaking: Causes, Effects, and Strategies

Performance anxiety is a frequent and significant barrier faced by individuals speaking in a non-native language. This form of anxiety, particularly common among second-language (L2) learners, can manifest in social, academic, and professional contexts, often impeding fluency, reducing confidence, and negatively impacting overall communicative competence.



3.1 Causes of L2 Performance Anxiety

Several interrelated factors contribute to performance anxiety in L2 speaking. One of the most common is the fear of making mistakes; learners often worry about grammatical errors, mispronunciations, or the use of inappropriate vocabulary. This is closely tied to self-consciousness and fear of negative evaluation, particularly in situations involving native speakers or high-stakes communication. Additionally, perceived language inadequacy can lead learners to doubt their own abilities, heightening stress levels. Cultural unfamiliarity may also play a role, as navigating unknown social norms and pragmatic rules can add an extra layer of uncertainty and discomfort.

3.2 Symptoms and Cognitive Impact

The symptoms of L2 performance anxiety vary but frequently include physiological responses such as increased heart rate, sweating, trembling, and dry mouth. Cognitive effects are also profound: anxious learners often experience mental blocks, stammering, and forgetfulness, all of



which disrupt speech flow. From a neurological perspective, performance anxiety activates the amygdala, the brain's emotional processing center, triggering a fight-or-flight response. This activation can inhibit the prefrontal cortex, responsible for executive functions like planning and attention, and can also overload work memory, leaving fewer cognitive resources available for processing and producing language.

3.3 Managing and Reducing Performance Anxiety

Effective strategies for managing L2 performance anxiety focus on both psychological well-being and linguistic development. Preparation and practice, especially in contexts similar to those in which the language will be used and can reduce uncertainty and boost confidence. Gradual exposure to speaking tasks, beginning with low-pressure scenarios and advancing to more challenging ones, helps learners build resilience. Additionally, mindfulness techniques such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and meditation have been shown to reduce anxiety levels and promote emotional regulation.

Cognitive- behavioural strategies, including positive self-talk and cognitive reframing, can help learners shift from a fear-based mindset to one focused on growth and communication. Creating supportive learning environments is equally crucial; teachers and peers play an important role in reducing anxiety through nonjudgmental feedback, error tolerance, and encouragement. Emphasizing communication over perfection allows learners to focus on conveying meaning rather than fixating on flawless language use.

3.4 Pedagogical Implications

For educators, understanding the roots and impacts of L2 performance anxiety is essential. Language classrooms should foster a low-anxiety atmosphere where mistakes are treated as part of the learning process. Incorporating brain-based strategies, such as scaffolded speaking activities, multimodal learning, and emotional safety techniques that can support neuroplasticity and facilitate more effective language acquisition. When learners feel emotionally safe and cognitively supported, their brain becomes more receptive to learning, allowing anxiety to decrease and fluency to improve.

4. Research Purpose and Direction

This study seeks to identify effective, evidence-based strategies to reduce performance anxiety among non-native speakers, particularly in English as a Second Language (ESL) settings. Through the examination of brain-based learning approaches, cognitive-behavioural strategies, classroom interventions, and practical communication exercises, the study aims to discover which methods can significantly mitigate language anxiety and boost learners' confidence and fluency.

Here are the crisp research objectives for the research paper



1. To identify the key psychological and linguistic factors contributing to performance anxiety in non-native language learners.
2. To examine the relevance and application of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) Theory in ESL speaking contexts.
3. To evaluate brain-based and classroom strategies that effectively reduce speaking anxiety and enhance learner confidence.

5. Strategic Approaches to Reduce Anxiety

The following strategies are explored for their potential to reduce performance anxiety:

1. **Cognitive Restructuring:** Helping learners reframe negative thoughts and self-talk.
2. **Peer Support and Collaborative Learning:** Reducing fear of judgment through shared experiences.
3. **Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT):** Engaging students in real-world tasks to build authentic fluency.
4. **Positive Reinforcement and Error Normalization:** Encouraging a growth mindset and embracing mistakes as learning opportunities.

6. Pre-Test Procedure: Group Discussion Activity

To assess the baseline level of performance anxiety and communication competence among ESL learners, the researcher conducted a pre-test in the form of a structured group discussion. This quasi-experimental research is planned with 40 students. 40 students were divided into 5 groups of 8 members each. Each group was assigned the same discussion topic, designed to stimulate spontaneous speaking, encourage interaction, and elicit observable signs of anxiety or fluency issues.

6.1 Objectives of the Pre-test

The primary objective of the pre-test was to evaluate the students' spontaneous speaking ability within a group discussion setting. By placing learners in real-time communicative situations, the researcher aimed to observe natural language use, interaction dynamics, and the students' ability to express ideas under social pressure. Additionally, the activity was designed to identify clear indicators of performance anxiety, such as hesitation, avoidance of speaking, nervous body language, and verbal disfluencies. These behavioural and linguistic signs served as valuable insights into the psychological barriers faced by learners. Ultimately, the pre-test provided a critical performance benchmark, allowing the researcher to measure initial speaking competence and anxiety levels before implementing targeted strategies aimed at reducing foreign language anxiety in subsequent phases of the study.



6.2 Task Description

As part of the pre-test activity, each group was assigned a 15-minute discussion task based on the topic: “The Impact of Social Media on Language and Communication Skills.” The purpose of this task was to encourage spontaneous speech and observe students in a natural communicative environment. Participants were instructed to clearly share their opinions, actively respond to their peers’ ideas, and support their arguments with relevant examples. Emphasis was placed on staying focused on the topic and maintaining a coherent flow of discussion. This task allowed the researcher to assess the students' speaking ability, confidence, interaction patterns, and anxiety-related behaviours in a semi-formal, peer-driven setting.

Table 1: Group Scores – Pre-Test Results

Team No.	Fluency & Clarity	Confidence Level	Participation	Content Relevance	Language Use	Total Score	Average Score
Team 1	3	2	3	3	2	13	2.6
Team 2	2	2	2	2	2	10	2.0
Team 3	3	3	3	3	3	15	3.0
Team 4	2	1	2	2	1	8	1.6
Team 5	3	3	4	3	3	16	3.2

Scores reflect an overall moderate to low performance level, indicating the presence of performance anxiety and language hesitation across teams. These results show the baseline for intervention in the upcoming study phase.



7. One Week FLA-Infused Strategy Plan for Reducing Speaking Anxiety in ESL Learners

Day	FLA Focus	Activity	Description	Objective
Day 1	Awareness of All FLA Components	FLA Introduction Session	Interactive session introducing FLA (communication apprehension, test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation) with examples and open discussion.	Build self-awareness and destigmatize anxiety.
Day 2	Communication Apprehension	Positive Self-Talk & Affirmations	Learners write down negative thoughts and reframe them using supportive language.	Help reduce internal fear of speaking through cognitive restructuring.
Day 3	Fear of Negative Evaluation	Peer Support Roleplay	In pairs, students practice simple roleplays and give only positive peer feedback.	Lower fear of being judged by normalizing peer errors.
Day 4	Communication Apprehension	Guided Small Group Discussion	Learners form small groups to discuss a light topic using prompt cards. Teacher observes, but no evaluation is given.	Encourage low-pressure speech to build fluency and confidence.
Day 5	Test Anxiety	Mock Speaking Test + Reflection	Simulated 1-minute oral test. Students self-reflect on their performance using a checklist.	Reduce fear of testing situations by normalizing the experience.

7.1 Implementation of the 1-Week FLA-Infused Strategy Plan

To address the issue of performance anxiety experienced by ESL learners while speaking in a non-native language, the researcher implemented a structured one-week strategy plan rooted in Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) theory. A total of 40 students participated in the intervention, which was designed to target the core components of FLA—communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation—through carefully selected classroom activities.



The week began with an introductory session aimed at building awareness about the nature and impact of foreign language anxiety. Students were introduced to the theoretical background of FLA and encouraged to reflect on their personal experiences with language anxiety. This foundational activity helped normalize the feeling of anxiety and fostered a supportive environment. On the second day, the focus shifted to communication apprehension, where learners engaged in positive self-talk exercises. They identified negative thoughts commonly associated with speaking English and restructured them into affirmations. This cognitive-based activity was designed to challenge internalized fears and promote a more confident speaking mindset.

Midweek, students participated in peer roleplay sessions, specifically designed to address the fear of negative evaluation. By working in pairs and providing only positive feedback, learners were able to express themselves freely without the pressure of being judged. This reduced psychological barriers and helped build trust among peers. On the fourth day, students took part in small group discussions on familiar topics, guided by conversation prompts. This activity provided a low-risk environment for spontaneous speaking, aiming to reduce communication apprehension through gradual exposure.

The week concluded with a mock speaking test, simulating real evaluation conditions in a supportive setting. Learners completed a self-assessment checklist to reflect on their performance. This final task specifically targeted test anxiety, helping students become familiar with the format and reduce fear associated with high-stakes speaking scenarios. Throughout the week, learners engaged actively in all sessions, and preliminary observations indicated increased participation, improved confidence, and reduced hesitation. This one-week strategy plan served as a foundation for enhancing speaking fluency by systematically addressing the psychological barriers rooted in FLA. The results from this intervention provided valuable insights for further strategies and long-term planning in ESL instruction.

8. Post-Test Evaluation with New Discussion Title

After the successful execution of the one-week FLA-infused strategy plan, a post-test group discussion was conducted with the same 40 ESL students (divided into five groups of 8 members). This time, to ensure a fresh speaking context and to avoid memorization or repetition, a new discussion topic was introduced. "Is Technology Replacing Human Interaction in Daily Life?" This new topic was chosen for its relevance, accessibility, and potential to stimulate critical thinking and diverse perspectives. The same assessment rubric used during the pre-test was applied again, focusing on five key criteria.



8.1 Post-Test Score Table – Group Results

Team No.	Fluency & Clarity	Confidence Level	Participation	Content Relevance	Language Use	Total Score	Average Score
Team 1	3	3	4	3	3	16	3.2
Team 2	3	3	3	3	3	15	3.0
Team 3	4	4	4	4	4	20	4.0
Team 4	3	3	3	3	2	14	2.8
Team 5	4	4	4	3	4	19	3.8

8.2 Improvements and Impact

Compared to the pre-test, each team demonstrated measurable improvements in fluency, confidence, and collaboration. Teams that previously struggled with participation and hesitation (e.g., Team 2 and Team 4) showed noticeable progress, while high-performing teams (like Team 3 and Team 5) achieved near-perfect scores. These results indicate that students were more comfortable, engaged, and expressive during the discussion—clear signs of reduced anxiety and increased communicative competence. The shift to a new discussion title did not hinder performance, which confirms that the skills and coping mechanisms developed during the 1-week FLA intervention were transferable. This validates the effectiveness of the strategy plan in equipping learners with tools to manage language-related anxiety in various contexts.



8.3 Comparison Table: Pre-Test vs. Post-Test Results (Group Discussion Performance)

Team	Pre-Test Score (20)	Post-Test Score (20)	Improvement	Explanation of Progress
Team 1	13	16	+3	Showed better clarity and increased participation; members spoke more confidently and supported ideas with examples.
Team 2	10	15	+5	Significant improvement in fluency and interaction; anxiety markers like long pauses and hesitation decreased.
Team 3	15	20	+5	Already a strong team, but they achieved greater polish in grammar, vocabulary, and group coordination.
Team 4	8	14	+6	Marked progress in confidence and clarity; initially hesitant speakers became more active and engaged.
Team 5	16	19	+3	Improved use of vocabulary and tone; displayed reduced fear of judgment and stronger arguments.

Team 4 showed the highest improvement (+6 points), indicating the FLA strategies were especially effective for students with high anxiety. Teams 2 and 3 also made major gains (+5 points each), reflecting growth in confidence and reduction in speech hesitation. All teams showed a positive shift, suggesting that even a short 1-week strategy plan can measurably reduce language performance anxiety. This comparative analysis clearly illustrates that post-intervention performance was superior across all student groups. The gains in speaking fluency, confidence, and participation confirm that applying FLA-theory-based strategies in the ESL classroom can significantly improve learners' ability to communicate in a non-native language without the burden of overwhelming anxiety.

9. Research Finding

This study aimed to address the performance anxiety faced by ESL (English as a Second Language) learners while speaking in a non-native language, especially in academic and evaluation-based contexts. Performance anxiety often manifests as hesitation, avoidance, loss of fluency, and non-verbal cues of discomfort, significantly hindering oral communication. Such anxiety stems from

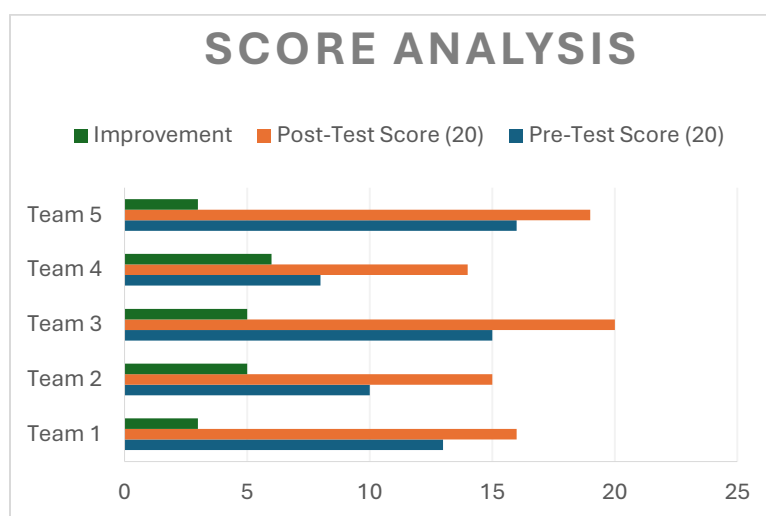


multiple sources, including communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation for the core components of the Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) Theory proposed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986). The FLA theory served as the foundational framework for this research. It identifies anxiety not just as a general psychological issue but as a language-specific affective filter that disrupts learners' ability to communicate effectively. Each FLA component was specifically addressed through classroom strategies, making the intervention targeted and theory-driven. To measure the effectiveness of the strategy, a pre-test/post-test format was used. Each test consisted of a group discussion task evaluated using five key rubrics: fluency & clarity, confidence, participation, content relevance, and language use.

Pre-Test Topic: “The Impact of Social Media on Language and Communication Skills”

Post-Test Topic: “Is Technology Replacing Human Interaction in Daily Life?”

Chart 1



Referring to chart 1 the scores showed consistent improvement across all groups, with Teams 2 and 4 showing significant gains in confidence, fluency, and interaction. Notably, students who had exhibited higher anxiety during the pre-test demonstrated the greatest improvement, indicating that the FLA-based strategies were most impactful for high-anxiety learners. These findings affirm that a targeted, theory-backed strategy plan can significantly reduce performance anxiety and enhance speaking ability in ESL learners. The incorporation of FLA theory not only shaped effective interventions but also helped students understand and manage their own psychological barriers.

10. Research Limitations and Future Recommendations

While this study provides valuable insights into reducing Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) through targeted classroom interventions, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The research was conducted with a relatively small and homogenous sample of 40 university-level ESL students from a single institution, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader learner



populations. Furthermore, the one-week duration of the intervention, though effective in producing short-term gains in fluency and confidence, does not allow for assessment of the long-term sustainability of these improvements. The absence of a control group also restricts the ability to fully isolate the effects of the intervention from other potential contributing factors, such as incidental learning or classroom familiarity. Additionally, part of the data relied on self-reported reflections and checklists, which could be influenced by personal bias or inaccurate self-perception. Although the study was grounded in the core components of FLA related communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation and it did not explore other closely related affective variables such as motivation, self-efficacy, or language enjoyment. Lastly, the strategies were applied in a semi-formal academic setting with guided discussions; their effectiveness in more formal or spontaneous speaking scenarios remains uncertain.

To build upon these findings, future research should consider expanding the sample size and including participants from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds. Longitudinal studies are recommended to examine the lasting impact of FLA-reduction strategies over time. Incorporating a control group and exploring additional emotional constructs, such as language enjoyment and learner autonomy which can provide a more holistic understanding of anxiety in language learning. Moreover, applying similar interventions in varied contexts, such as formal presentations or high-stakes oral evaluations, would enhance the ecological validity of this research and inform more robust, transferable pedagogical practices.

11. Summation

This study investigated the issue of performance anxiety among ESL learners while speaking in a non-native language, focusing on symptoms such as hesitation, avoidance, and fear of negative evaluation, which often hinder effective communication. Grounded in the Foreign Language Anxiety. The research targeted the three main anxiety components: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. The results showed clear improvement across all five teams, with Team 4 recording the highest gain (+6 points) and overall average scores increasing from 12.4 to 16.8 out of 20. Post-test observations revealed increased confidence, smoother speech, reduced hesitation, and greater engagement in discussion. These findings affirm the effectiveness of a focused, theory-driven strategy in mitigating foreign language anxiety and improving oral performance. The study concludes that integrating FLA theory into ESL instruction not only equips learners with coping mechanisms but also fosters a supportive environment that enhances spontaneous language use and communication skills.

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