

# A Systematic Review of Sources of English Language Anxiety

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## Abstract

Research on sources of language anxiety (LA) of undergraduates specifically when they engage in speaking activities has generated a plethora of discrete findings. An apparent gap is that these findings have not been used to inform a coherent framework where various sources of LA are identified and properly grouped. Such a framework is important for developing proper interventions to manage LA effectively in English as a Second Language (ESL)/English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. This paper utilized a systematic review methodology to examine the key studies published from 2015 to 2020 on sources of LA in ESL/EFL contexts. When assessed against the inclusion/exclusion criteria, five of the 121 studies identified were selected to be included in the systematic review. The review revealed a number of anxiety sources that emerge specifically when students engage in oral performance. These were categorized under three main headings: (i) learner-specific, (ii) in-class, and (iii) out-of-class. It further highlighted the importance of out-of-class sources in ESL/EFL contexts and how they have been neglected and underrated in the literature specifically in defining LA. Hence, it is expected that this review will advance the understanding of LA, especially regarding LA in socio-culturally complex ESL/EFL contexts. Such a comprehensive understanding of the sources of LA is fundamental in the reconceptualisation of a coherent framework to successfully address it.

**Keywords:** English as a Foreign Language, English as a Second Language, Language Anxiety, Systematic Review, University Students

## INTRODUCTION

Language learning generates a range of positive and negative emotions in learners (Shao et al., 2020), and these emotions are particularly evident in second and foreign language learning (Toyama & Yamazaki, 2021). The most researched emotion in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) is language anxiety (LA) (Gregersen et al., 2014), with research on LA having gained considerable momentum since the latter part of the 1980s.

Early examples of research into LA perceived it as a negative emotion that is confined to the language classroom. It was defined as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 128). In line with this classroom-confined perception of LA, the sources of anxiety identified by the early studies were mostly learner-specific and originating within the classroom (Dewaele, 2002; Jackson, 2002; Young, 1991).

Learner-specific factors such as learners’ negative self-perceptions of their own language ability (Young, 1991), learners’ expectations of their own failure (MacIntyre, 1999, 2017), learners’ self-derogatory comparisons of themselves with their peers in the classroom (Gregersen, 2003), and learners’ erroneous and unrealistic beliefs about language

learning (Young, 1991) significantly contribute to their LA. Moreover, self-factors such as self-esteem and self-confidence have been found to be closely associated with LA. In addition, several studies have postulated an association between LA and learners’ varying personality traits. Learners who are introverted and shy are more prone to become anxious, for they lack the willingness to engage in oral communication that is vital for their language development (MacIntyre, 1999). Perfectionists experience anxiety due to their disposition to overestimate the negative effect and the seriousness of their own mistakes. They feel overly sensitive to the evaluations of others (Luo, 2012). Learners with competitive personalities experience anxiety due to their tendency to compare themselves to peers in the classroom or to an idealised self-image (Bailey, 1983).

The anxiety sources that originate within the classroom are essentially related to the teacher, the teaching pedagogy, and the in-class social context. The teachers’ erroneous beliefs about language teaching (Young, 1991), their harsh manner of error correction (MacIntyre, 2017), and clashes between the learning and teaching styles of the respective learners and teachers (Oxford, 1999) are some of the key teacher-related sources of anxiety. Also, any teaching pedagogy that involves learners speaking in the FL causes

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the highest anxiety level in language learners (Horwitz et al., 1986; Koch & Terrell, 1991; Young, 1991, 1992). A classroom that is characterized by hostility, competition, and peer-ridicule also contributes to learners' LA (Zhang & Zhong, 2012). Additionally, the power dynamics in the classroom between the teacher and the learners are influential in triggering learners' LA.

In addition to learner-specific and in-class sources of anxiety, recent studies have indicated a tendency to acknowledge sources of anxiety outside the classroom context (Khan, 2015; MacIntyre, 2017). For instance, it was found that the differing cultural factors and the importance ascribed by a society to English achievement contribute to learners' nature of LA (Horwitz, 2016). English is considered as a very important language due to its potential for better career prospects in both local and international job markets. This situation is very common in ESL (e.g., Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan) and EFL (e.g., China, Japan, Thailand) contexts. The awareness of this importance itself creates pressure on learners to learn English. This pressure inevitably creates learners' LA (Cheng, 2008; Liu, 2006; Mak, 2011).

However, compared to the large number of studies concerning learner-specific and in-class anxiety sources, the out-of-class anxiety sources seem to have received scant attention in the research literature. The reason for overlooking the role played by the out-of-class anxiety sources could be better explained by using Braj Kachru's (1985) three concentric circles model of the English Language (cited in Hu & Jiang, 2011). Kachru explains the diffusion of English in relation to three concentric circles: the inner circle, the outer circle, and the expanding circle. The inner circle is represented by countries such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, where speakers use English as their first or native language (ENL). The outer circle is represented by countries that were formerly colonized by the British Empire, and includes countries such as India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Singapore, Malaysia, Ghana, and Nigeria, where English is institutionalized and often used as a second language (ESL). The expanding circle includes countries where English does not hold any historical or institutional value but is widely in use due to its value as the world's lingua franca. China, Japan, Russia, Korea, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia are some countries in the expanding circle. While LA has mostly been related to learners in second language contexts (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994), the majority of LA studies have been traditionally conducted in inner circle countries. Unfortunately, the former colonial masters in the inner circle may not be able to perceive how the post-colonial nations still grapple with language identity issues, or appreciate the subtle difficulties faced by ESL and EFL speakers in the outer and expanding circles, due either to lack of exposure to the various highly influential out-of-class sources or underestimation of the weight of the role these sources play in producing LA. As a result, while research in the inner circle has discussed in detail the learner-specific and in-class anxiety sources, there has been a failure to discuss the out-of-class anxiety sources in detail, and the items that recognize the influence of out-of-class sources have been ignored while developing instruments to measure LA. For instance, the popular LA measurement, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), "does not even include items eliciting anxiety triggers that people within particular cultural groups might experience" (Horwitz, 2016, p. 73). Thus, the instruments, concepts, and

definitions developed in the inner circle about the language anxiety of learners in the outer and expanding circles lack a crucial in-depth discussion of out-of-class anxiety sources. This lack of focus on out-of-class anxiety sources provides the impetus for this study. Arguably, it is when learner-specific, in-class, and out-of-class anxiety sources are viewed as interrelated and interdependent anxiety sources that one can gain a comprehensive understanding of LA. As mentioned earlier, due to the complex dynamics related to the English language and its speakers in ESL/EFL contexts, it is apparent that anxiety sources of language learners in such contexts may vary from that of other contexts (e.g., Western countries). Therefore, understanding anxiety sources specific to learners in ESL/EFL contexts is essential prior to devising and designing strategies and interventions to successfully manage it. Hence, this systematic review will provide important information to ESL/EFL practitioners, curriculum planners, and policy makers on sources of LA. This knowledge will help them devise methodologies, interventions, and strategies to manage language learners' LA and improve English language learning and teaching in ESL/EFL contexts.

Of note, LA has mostly been associated with the speaking skills of the students (King & Smith, 2017; Young, 1990) since speaking in a second/foreign language is regarded as the highest anxiety-provoking skill compared to anxiety over other language skills (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014; Horwitz et al., 1986). Added to that, several lines of research suggest that university students experience higher levels of anxiety compared to those who study in high or junior schools (Bailey, Onwuegbuzie and Daley, 2000; Dewaele, 2007; Donovan and MacIntyre, 2005). Hence, this systematic review aimed to answer the following research question:

What are the main sources of language anxiety in ESL/EFL learners at universities, in particular when they engage in speaking in English?

The following sections describe the methodology used for the systematic review, report the major findings, and conclude with a reconceptualisation of LA in which all of the relevant sources of LA are represented.

## METHODOLOGY

This systematic review is informed by the guidelines of Toyama and Yamazaki (2021), Siddaway et al. (2019), and the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) (Moher et al., 2009).

### Literature Search

Utilizing two online databases, Eric and Scopus, a systematic search was performed to locate studies relevant to sources of LA in undergraduates. Search parameters were developed using nested clauses, truncation, and the Boolean operators AND and OR. The parameters were developed according to the four concepts identified in the research question as follows:

1. ("English as a second language" OR ESL learn\* OR "English as a foreign language" OR EFL learn\* OR English) anywhere AND
2. ("language speaking anxiety" OR "communication apprehension" OR speaking anxi\* OR oral language anxi\* OR speech anxi\* OR "willingness to communicate" OR "WTC") anywhere except full text AND

3. (“higher education students” OR “university students” OR “adult students” OR “undergraduate students”) anywhere except full text AND
4. (“sources” OR “factors” OR “causes” OR “reasons”) anywhere.

The keywords in the second and the third parameters were searched ‘anywhere except full text’ whilst the keywords in the first and the fourth parameters were searched ‘anywhere’ in the article. As this review mainly focused on LA of undergraduates, especially when they engage in speaking activities, it was of paramount importance that the articles selected discussed the themes in the second and the third parameters as key aspects of their studies. Assuming that the key points of any study would appear in the title and/or abstract and/or keywords, we searched for language

speaking anxiety and equivalents and undergraduates and equivalents ‘anywhere except full text’ of the articles. Further, we did not include ‘out-of-class anxiety sources’ as a separate search term as we were unaware of any study that has distinguished or discussed out-of-class anxiety sources in detail. The search was performed in early March 2021 to source articles published in peer-reviewed journals in English within the last five years, that is from January 2015 to December 2020.

**Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

In order to identify studies that address the research questions (RQ), we established the following inclusion criteria as depicted in Table 1. Articles that did not meet the conditions mentioned were excluded from the review.

**Table 1:** Inclusion criteria for selection of journal articles

Category	Inclusion criteria
Study type	Empirical research
Study design	Qualitative or mixed methods
Study description	Related to ESL/EFL learners RQs are related to sources of language speaking anxiety
Participants	Undergraduates and/or university ESL/EFL teachers
Accessibility	Full text is available

**Data Extraction**

In the initial search of the databases, 121 studies were sourced: 112 from Eric and nine from Scopus. After removing one duplicate from Eric, 120 studies remained. To evaluate the relevance of the studies to the research question, the first screening process involved a review of their titles and the abstracts, which resulted in 83 studies being excluded: 80 from Eric and three from Scopus. The remaining 37 studies with full text were assessed against the

inclusion/exclusion criteria to check the eligibility to be included in the review. In these 37 studies, 16 were found to be purely quantitative, the research questions in six were not related to language speaking anxiety, and full texts were not available in four studies. In addition, some were not related to ESL/EFL contexts and others concerned neither undergraduates nor university ESL/EFL teachers as participants. Five studies were eventually included for the review and Figure 1 illustrates the flow of data extraction via the PRISMA flow diagram (Moher et al., 2009).

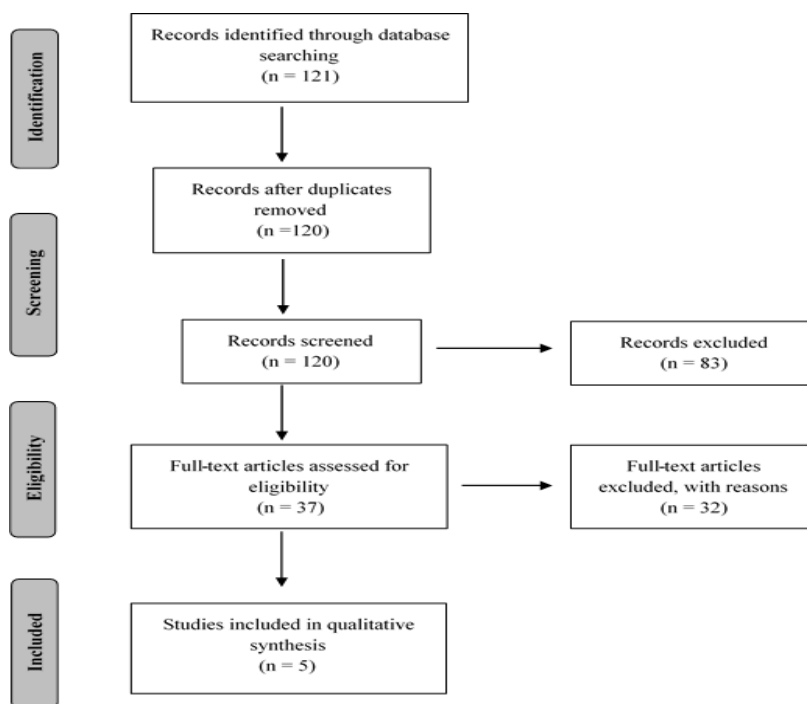


Figure 1: Selection process based on PRISMA flow diagram (Moher et al., 2009)

Extracted data were documented under the column headings of publication information, research design, research questions, participants, and major findings. The

included studies, as presented in Table 2, are arranged in alphabetical order by surname of the first author.

Publication information	Research design	Research questions related to sources of LA	Participants and context	Major findings related to sources of LA
Ahmed (2016)	Qualitative	What are the factors that contribute to speaking FLA in Kurdish university students? (p. 101)	30 second and third-year students at a Kurdish university named Soran	Sources of language speaking anxiety: Fear of negative evaluation, fear of making mistakes, poor linguistic ability, lack of preparation, teacher's unsupportive nature and lack of individual attention
Akkakoson (2016)	Mixed-methods	What are the levels of speaking in-class anxiety among students in the English Conversation course? What are the students' sources of speaking-in-class anxiety? (p. 65)	282 Thai students	Level of in-class speaking anxiety is moderate Sources of language speaking anxiety : (i) Individual (limited vocabulary, self-confidence, grammar/ accuracy, attitudes towards English, fear of negative evaluation, test-anxiety); (ii) Environmental (exposure to English outside the classroom); (iii) Educational (poor English knowledge).
Alnahidh and Altalhab (2020)	Mixed-methods	To what extent do Saudi EFL university students experience FL Speaking Anxiety (FLSA)? What are the perceived sources that may contribute to Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) among Saudi EFL university students? (p. 58)	85 female Saudi EFL students at a university	In-class FLSA level is moderate Sources of FLSA in order: fear of making mistakes, forced participation, limited vocabulary, lack of practice, poor grammatical knowledge, unpreparedness, teacher's negative attitudes, and oral presentations
Effiong (2016)	Qualitative	How does the teacher's Appearance influence classroom atmosphere and FLA? What peer characteristics influence classroom FLA? (p. 137)	24 students from 4 Japanese universities	Sources of FLA: teacher's age, friendliness, tone of voice, and teacher's self-presentation, humor, collaboration, and competitiveness in the classroom, peer familiarity and gender
Khan (2015)	Mixed-Methods	What are the main causes of speech anxiety among these learners? How far the speech anxiety affects students' learning oral communication skills? ( p. 49)	Students of HITEC University, Taxila, Pakistan QUAN-200 QUAL-10	Sources of speech anxiety: pedagogical, psychological, socioeconomic, linguistic, social and cultural Speech anxiety frightens the learners and negatively affect their self confidence which result in avoidance and less/lack of participation in English speaking activities

**Table 2:** Summary of the included studies for the review

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present review focused on sources of LA with a special focus on undergraduates in ESL/EFL contexts. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first systematic review that concerns the sources that trigger LA in undergraduates in ESL/EFL contexts, in particular when they engage in speaking activities in the classroom.

The systematic database search identified five studies, consisting of two qualitative studies (Ahmed, 2016; Effiong, 2016) and three mixed-method research studies (Akkakoson, 2016; Alnahidh & Altalhab, 2020; Khan, 2015).

The main objectives of these five studies were to investigate the levels and sources of language speaking anxiety of ESL/EFL undergraduates in universities. The number of participants in the included studies ranged between 24 and 282. With the exception that some EFL postgraduate students and teachers were involved in Effiong's (2016) study, the participants in the other studies were studying in their first/second/third academic years at university. The participants were intermediate or advanced learners of English, as they had been learning English as a foreign language for several years prior to entering university. All the participants were from ESL/EFL contexts: Pakistan (Khan, 2015), Iraq (Ahmed, 2016), Thailand (Akkakoson,

2016), Japan (Effiong, 2016), and Saudi Arabia (Alnahidh & Altalhab, 2020).

Semi-structured interviews and questionnaires were utilised as the primary data collection instruments by four of the five included studies. Although these are commendable approaches to gathering data especially on a subtle psychological construct such as LA, it is important to bear in mind that both interviews and questionnaires are self-report measures that may lead to biased responses. Only Effiong's (2016) study has used observations in addition to semi-structured interviews to gather data from the participants. The five studies revealed several sources of LA. The most striking finding across the studies was recognising the role played by the out-of class factors in evoking learners' LA. This finding and other major findings are presented next.

### ***Out-of-class Anxiety Sources***

Out-of-class anxiety sources mainly stem from the socio-cultural and socio-political factors in a country. These factors contribute significantly to forming the language attitudes and beliefs of a society, which, in turn, shape the attitudes and beliefs of ESL/EFL students and teachers and affect their classroom behaviour. For instance, a common feature in the majority of anxious ESL/EFL students is their unfavourable attitudes towards the English language (Akkakoson, 2016; Attanayake, 2019; Khan, 2015). These attitudes of the individual students could be attributed to the prevailing attitudes of the society towards English. On the other hand, it is the society that determines the value of a language: powerful versus powerless, prestigious versus lowly, or worthy versus worthless. The speakers of that particular language are also identified accordingly (Attanayake, 2019). This power of language can trigger LA in some students. Also, many post-colonial countries such as Pakistan and Sri Lanka consider English as a status symbol (Gunasekera, 2005; Khan, 2015). Hence, those who are fluent in English and use native-like pronunciation are considered "wealthy and talented" (Khan, 2015, p. 52), which results in the people who are not proficient in English experiencing an inferiority complex that triggers their LA (Khan, 2015). Thus, the perception of English as a status symbol rather than a tool of communication makes students anxious when speaking English. The differences in social status of the interlocutors also have a significant influence on the LA of some students (Hashemi, 2011; Pica, 1987, cited in Khan, 2015; Tanveer, 2007). The study conducted by Ahmed (2016) in Iraq showed learners with high English proficiency were considered better students and had access to better jobs in the labour market. In such a society, students are pressured to learn English to make themselves competitive candidates in the labour market. This high importance given to English achievement could significantly influence students' nature of LA (Horwitz, 2016). Therefore, the socio-cultural dynamics of power, status, and the importance of English in the specific society should be carefully considered when discussing how attitudes lead to LA, for L2 attitudinal variations exist in learners, especially in the Asian region (Effiong, 2016).

Local and international politics along with the nuances of socio-cultural practices could also be a source of students' LA. For example, in Effiong's (2016) study, Japanese students' resentment towards Chinese students negatively influenced the intragroup interactions of the former. This resentment was largely a result of international politics. Additionally, the Chinese students' purpose for learning English was found to be different from that of Japanese

students. Chinese students need to be proficient in English to be competitive in the international job market; hence, they are more motivated to learn the language than Japanese students, who lack this particular focus. Consequently, while the classroom behaviour of the Chinese students was motivated, the Japanese students had "poor L2 attitude and low L2 self-concept" (Effiong, 2016, p. 148), which in consequence made them reticent, especially while engaging in intragroup activities.

### ***In-class Anxiety Sources***

This review also revealed a number of in-class anxiety sources comprising some teacher variables, the teaching pedagogy, and the in-class social context. The teacher variables of teacher's dress, age, gender, friendliness, and tone of voice have been found to be highly instrumental in arousing students' LA. The teacher's dress code was identified to have the potential to determine the nature and the strength of the relationship students have with the teacher (Effiong, 2016) and hence can directly influence students' LA. Some of the students and teachers in Effiong's (2016) study readily agreed that the more formal the dress, the higher the anxiety levels generated in students. Teachers who were formally dressed were seen as "scary, unapproachable and less friendly" (p. 141). The students further mentioned that they preferred teachers of the opposite gender, for they believed they could build better interpersonal relationships and therefore experience reduced levels of LA with opposite-gender teachers than with same-gender teachers. Further, teachers' strict, unfriendly appearance in the classroom using a formal, "business-like tone" of voice (Effiong, 2016, p. 144) and lack of individual attention, support, and compassion for students (Ahmed, 2016; Alnahidh & Altalhab, 2020) were identified as anxiety-provoking teacher variables.

Teacher's attitudes and classroom behaviour may also contribute to making the in-class social context anxious. For example, "evaluative and stressful classroom settings" (Khan, 2015, p.51) where students are always being judged and assessed and a teacher who is unsympathetic towards students' errors and corrects them in a very rough manner inevitably generates LA (Young, 1991; Zhang & Zhong, 2012). Consistent with the literature (MacIntyre, 2017; Young, 1991), Alnahidh & Altalhab (2020) found teachers' mocking and negative attitudes towards students' errors as another major reason for LA. Not only teachers, the attitudes and behaviour of peers indubitably influence students' LA. The peers contribute to the LA of each other when they treat language mistakes as a point for humiliation (Khan, 2015), which explains the reason for the participants in Ahmed's (2016) and Alnahidh and Altalhab's (2020) studies mention the fear of making mistakes in front of the peers as their strongest source of anxiety. These results are in accord with the ideas of Gregersen (2003) and Price (1991) who reported fear of being ridiculed by others as the main anxiety trigger for their participants.

Additionally, teaching methodologies that require the implementation of different in-class speaking activities produce LA in students. In line with the literature (Price, 1991; Young, 1990; Koch & Terrell, 1991), Saudi undergraduates in Alnahidh and Altalhab's (2020) study reported oral presentations as the most anxiety-provoking in-class activity. Aggravating this, some teachers force students to participate in oral activities, which intensifies the situation. Several examples were found where students were not given enough time to prepare for such activities or

were asked to answer questions on the spot (Ahmed, 2016; Alnahidh & Altalhab, 2020; Khan, 2015). By their very nature, in-class speaking activities are anxiety-provoking, and lack of preparation and impromptu speaking tasks can rapidly elevate students' anxiety levels (Horwitz et al., 1986; Price, 1991; Young, 1990).

Collaborative activities that involve the opposite gender or unfamiliar and/or competitive partners also tend to evoke students' LA. More than half of the interviewees in Effiong's study (2016) reported they experienced high anxiety levels while sitting with unfamiliar or opposite-gender partners in pair-work activities. They also complained about the rising anxiety they experienced when they were grouped with more proficient international students.

### **Learner-specific Anxiety Sources**

In addition to the in-class and out-of-class anxiety sources, learners' special personality traits and negative self-factors such as negative self-perception, low self-esteem, and lack of self-confidence have also been identified as anxiety triggers.

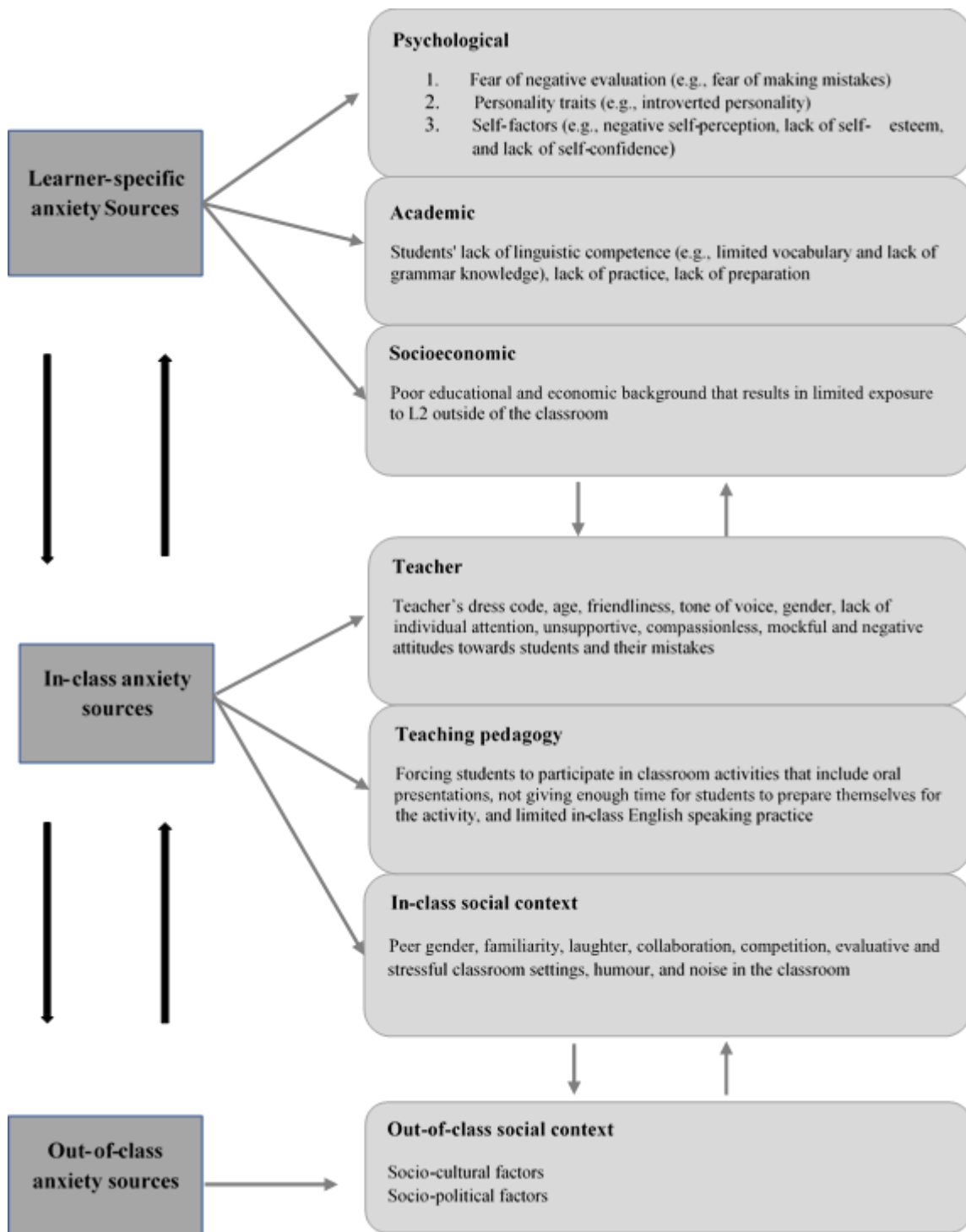
Students with introverted personalities may easily become anxious in contrast to less-anxious extroverted personality types (Khan, 2015). Further, a student's negative self-perception (Khan, 2015) and their expectation of failure contribute to LA. The tendency of anxious students to compare their performance in FL in a "self-underrated manner" (Zhang & Zhong, 2012, p. 28) with the performance of their peers increases their LA levels because comparisons essentially convince the students that they have weaker language skills compared to others in the class (Price, 1991). In Effiong's (2016) study, the Japanese students' comparison of themselves with their more proficient Chinese counterparts and consequent low self-concept and negative language attitudes triggered the LA of the Japanese students.

In accordance with the results of the previous studies that have demonstrated the influence of low self-esteem (MacIntyre, 2017; Young, 1990, 1991) and low self-confidence (Attanayake, 2019; Rubio, 2007; Tuncel, 2015)

on LA, Khan (2015) and Akkakoson (2016) also found these two self-factors to be highly influential sources of LA. Cohen and Norst (1989) claim that "[L]anguage and self are so closely bound, if not identical, that an attack on one is an attack on the other" (p. 61). MacIntyre (1999) corroborates this by stating that learning a language not only embarrasses and frustrates a learner, but also challenges their self-esteem and self-identity (MacIntyre, 1999). Self-esteem has been considered as the "single strongest and most consistent" correlate of LA (Daly, 1991, p. 8).

The economic and educational background of the student has also been identified as a reason for LA (Khan, 2015). Those who have a good economic background have access to rich educational opportunities where they are provided with an environment that is conducive to learning English. This boosted students' self-confidence while reducing their inclination to become anxious (Khan, 2015). This relates to one of the major problems that students in EFL contexts face: reduced exposure to English (Akkakoson, 2016; Khan, 2015). In the studies reviewed, English was not the dominant language in those contexts and native languages served the common purposes of everyday life and consequently these EFL/ESL students did not get enough opportunities to use English outside of the classroom. The reduced exposure to English along with their negative attitudes towards English (Akkakoson, 2016) made them highly vulnerable to anxiety, especially when they were expected to speak in English in the classroom.

All these different sources of LA may be organised as a taxonomy (Figure 2): (i) learner-specific anxiety sources, (ii) in-class anxiety sources, and (iii) out-of-class anxiety sources. First, learner-specific anxiety sources comprise psychological, academic, and socioeconomic anxiety variables. Second, some in-class anxiety sources involve the teacher, the teaching pedagogy, and the in-class social context. Third, the review identified several out-of-class anxiety sources that are shaped by the socio-cultural and socio-political features of a country.



**CONCLUSIONS**

Notwithstanding the significant number of studies carried out on sources of LA over the past four decades, this systematic review is the first that has been undertaken on the sources of LA especially in undergraduates of ESL/EFL contexts. The review will make a significant contribution to the field of SLA by revealing anxiety sources specific to ESL/EFL contexts (learner-specific, in-class, and out-of-class). Contrary to the literature, it indicates that out-of-class anxiety sources are just as important as learner-specific and in-class anxiety sources and therefore should receive

appropriate consideration. In some ESL/EFL contexts, out-of-class sources can be even more influential than learner-specific and in-class anxiety sources (Khan, 2015). Understanding these potential sources of anxiety will help ESL/EFL practitioners identify students who experience LA while doing in-class speaking activities, which in turn will assist in providing solutions for effective management of learners' LA.

The systematic review points to the limitation in definitions of LA developed thus far, which fail to emphasise all the sources of students' LA. Horwitz et al. (1986) define FLA as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and

behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of language learning process" (p. 128). This definition is restricted, for it failed to identify the social, cultural, and political dynamics that an individual brings into the class with himself/herself and viewed LA as stemming only from the uniqueness of the language learning process. Similarly, Gregersen and MacIntyre (2014) define LA as "the worry and negative emotional reaction when learning and using a second language and is especially relevant in a classroom where self-expression takes place" (cited in Gkonou, Daubney, & Dewaele, 2017, p. 1). Although this definition has captured some important points, it is incomplete as it does not acknowledge the context-sensitive nature of LA, nor does it clarify whether the reaction was fixed or fluctuated over time. The fluctuating nature of LA over time was demonstrated by the study of Gregersen et al. (2014). A longitudinal study done by Piniel and Csizér (2015) also showed the complex dynamic quality of LA and the related variables.

To address the limitations, the systematic review provides a reconceptualization of LA by recognising the complex interactions of multiple potential sources of LA, as represented in Figure 2. We offer a definition of LA for ESL/EFL students as follows: LA is a transitory mental state that ESL/EFL learners experience when they respond to the situational demands of second/foreign language engagement amid the complex interactions of learner-specific, in-class, and out-of-class factors. This reconceptualisation of LA will convince theorists and researchers in the field of SLA to view LA from a different perspective which might result in a new line of empirical research based on ESL/EFL learners.

This review on sources of LA of undergraduates in EFL/ESL contexts has several methodological limitations. As we only selected studies published in English as journal articles, we do not claim our review is comprehensive; however, we do maintain that as the peer-reviewed articles were selected from two reputable academic research databases, our review is in a good position to address the research question and gain a state-of-the-art understanding of the sources of LA. However, given the limited number of studies synthesised in this review, a review that includes a larger number of studies and different types of literature is recommended to explore more out-of-class anxiety sources that may influence learners in different socio-cultural contexts.

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