

Second-Language Anxiety and Its Behavioral Outcomes in Teens

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Abstract

Second-language anxiety (SLA), often conceptualized as foreign language anxiety (FLA), is a significant psychological phenomenon affecting adolescent learners during the critical developmental stage of identity formation and academic growth. This article examines the nature, causes, and behavioral outcomes of second-language anxiety in teenagers, integrating perspectives from educational psychology, sociolinguistics, and developmental psychology. Adolescents frequently experience heightened anxiety due to fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and performance pressure in second-language contexts. Empirical research indicates that increased language anxiety negatively affects classroom participation, willingness to communicate, academic achievement, and emotional well-being. The study synthesizes recent empirical findings, theoretical models, and behavioral observations to explain how anxiety shapes cognitive processing, motivation, and social behavior among teens. The article further presents structured tables summarizing causes, symptoms, and behavioral consequences, along with pedagogical implications for educators, parents, and policymakers. The findings suggest that supportive classroom environments, growth mindset interventions, and emotion-sensitive pedagogy significantly reduce anxiety and improve communicative competence in adolescent second-language learners.

Keywords

Second-Language Anxiety, Foreign Language Anxiety, Adolescents, Behavioral Outcomes, Language Learning Psychology, Communication Anxiety, Classroom Behavior, Teen Mental Health, Educational Psychology, L2 Acquisition

1. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, second-language proficiency has become an essential academic and social skill for adolescents navigating increasingly globalized educational and professional landscapes. English and other international languages are often positioned as gateways to higher education, career mobility, and cross-cultural communication. However, while cognitive models of language acquisition emphasize grammar, vocabulary, and communicative competence, psychological factors—particularly anxiety—play a decisive role in shaping learning outcomes among teenagers.

Second-language anxiety, commonly conceptualized as foreign language anxiety (FLA), refers to a situation-specific emotional state experienced when individuals engage in learning or using a non-native language. The foundational work of **Elaine K. Horwitz**, **Michael B. Horwitz**, and **Joann Cope** introduced the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which identified communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation as its core dimensions. Since then, research in applied linguistics and educational psychology has

consistently demonstrated that anxiety is not merely a byproduct of poor language skills but an independent affective variable influencing cognitive processing, motivation, and classroom behavior.

Adolescence represents a particularly sensitive developmental stage in which identity formation, peer comparison, and self-consciousness intensify emotional responses to academic challenges. Drawing on the developmental framework proposed by **Erik Erikson**, teenagers experience heightened concern about social evaluation and competence. In language classrooms, this translates into fear of making mistakes publicly, embarrassment over pronunciation, and apprehension about peer judgment. Consequently, second-language anxiety often becomes intertwined with self-esteem and social belonging.

From a theoretical perspective, the affective filter hypothesis proposed by **Stephen Krashen** suggests that anxiety functions as a psychological barrier that blocks language input from being fully processed. When adolescents experience elevated anxiety, their cognitive resources—particularly working memory—are diverted toward self-monitoring and worry, reducing effective language acquisition. Complementary models in educational psychology, such as control-value theory, further emphasize that emotions significantly shape academic engagement and achievement.

Empirical studies across diverse cultural contexts indicate that higher levels of language anxiety are associated with reduced willingness to communicate (WTC), lower classroom participation, avoidance behaviors, and diminished academic performance. Teen learners frequently display observable behavioral outcomes, including silence during discussions, reluctance to volunteer answers, withdrawal from oral tasks, and overreliance on their native language. These behaviors not only limit linguistic practice but also reinforce a cycle of anxiety and underperformance.

Moreover, the contemporary digital environment adds new dimensions to second-language anxiety. Online presentations, recorded speaking tasks, and social media comparisons may amplify performance pressure. At the same time, digital tools also offer low-risk practice environments that can mitigate anxiety when appropriately implemented.

Given the growing emphasis on communicative competence in secondary education, understanding the psychological mechanisms and behavioral consequences of second-language anxiety among adolescents is both academically and practically significant. This article explores the multidimensional nature of second-language anxiety in teenagers, examines its cognitive and behavioral outcomes, and highlights evidence-based strategies for reducing its negative impact. By integrating theoretical perspectives with empirical findings, the study aims to contribute to a holistic understanding of how emotional factors shape language learning during one of the most formative periods of human development.

2. Conceptual Framework of Second-Language Anxiety

Second-language anxiety is typically viewed as a multidimensional construct consisting of:

- Communication apprehension

- Test anxiety
- Fear of negative evaluation

According to educational psychology research, anxiety acts as a mediating emotional factor that directly affects academic achievement and learning engagement. ([MDPI](#))

2.1 Theoretical Foundations

Theory	Key Idea	Relevance to Teen SLA
Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen)	Anxiety blocks language input processing	Teens avoid speaking due to fear
Control-Value Theory	Emotions influence academic outcomes	Anxiety reduces engagement
Social Evaluation Theory	Fear of judgment shapes behavior	Peer pressure increases anxiety

3. Causes of Second-Language Anxiety in Teenagers

3.1 Fear of Negative Evaluation

Teenagers are highly sensitive to peer judgment. Being laughed at or corrected publicly in class can intensify anxiety levels and reduce participation. Studies show that teacher behavior and classroom dynamics strongly influence students' anxiety. ([SpringerLink](#))

3.2 Communication Apprehension

Communication anxiety is one of the most dominant triggers in second-language learning. Research indicates that communication anxiety negatively affects willingness to communicate (WTC) among middle school learners. ([PubMed](#))

3.3 Academic and Performance Pressure

Examination systems and oral assessments create performance anxiety in adolescents. High anxiety levels can reduce classroom engagement by nearly 20% and lower language achievement significantly. ([Ewa Direct](#))

3.4 Cognitive and Linguistic Factors

- Vocabulary retrieval difficulties
- Low self-efficacy
- Limited exposure to authentic language environments

These factors increase hesitation and fear during speaking tasks, especially in classroom settings.

4. Symptoms of Second-Language Anxiety in Teens

Category	Symptoms	Behavioral Indicators
Physical	Trembling, sweating, stuttering	Avoid speaking tasks
Cognitive	Forgetfulness, confusion	Poor test performance
Emotional	Nervousness, fear, embarrassment	Withdrawal from class
Social	Silence, isolation	Reduced peer interaction

Research involving secondary school students found that anxiety manifests physically (stuttering, freezing), psychologically (fear, nervousness), and cognitively (lack of motivation and forgetfulness). ([DergiPark](#))

5. Behavioral Outcomes of Second-Language Anxiety in Adolescents

5.1 Reduced Classroom Participation

One of the most observable behavioral outcomes is avoidance behavior. Anxious teens often refrain from answering questions, participating in discussions, or engaging in oral presentations. Studies confirm that anxiety restricts verbal expression and lowers communicative engagement in classrooms. ([PMC](#))

5.2 Lower Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

Anxiety directly decreases adolescents' willingness to communicate in the target language. Even when students possess adequate knowledge, anxiety suppresses language output and spontaneous interaction. ([PubMed](#))

Table: Anxiety vs Communication Behavior

Anxiety Level	Willingness to Speak	Classroom Interaction
Low	High participation	Active discussions
Moderate	Occasional hesitation	Selective interaction
High	Silence/avoidance	Minimal engagement

5.3 Academic Underperformance

Foreign language anxiety negatively correlates with academic achievement. Research indicates that anxious learners show significantly lower proficiency and learning outcomes compared to low-anxiety learners. ([Ewa Direct](#))

Additionally, anxiety partially mediates the relationship between curiosity and academic success in junior high students, suggesting emotional regulation is crucial for achievement. ([MDPI](#))

5.4 Avoidance and Withdrawal Behavior

Highly anxious teens may:

- Avoid speaking in class
- Skip language activities
- Depend excessively on native language
- Withdraw socially

Such behaviors reduce exposure to language practice, creating a cycle of anxiety and poor performance.

5.5 Impact on Mental Health and Identity

Second-language anxiety is closely linked to self-esteem and identity development in adolescents. Research shows that anxious language learners are less likely to participate in

synchronous speaking sessions and may avoid communicative tasks entirely due to confidence barriers. ([Cambridge University Press & Assessment](#))

During adolescence, language learning intersects with identity formation, making linguistic errors feel like personal failures rather than learning steps.

6. Psychological Mechanisms Behind Behavioral Outcomes

6.1 Cognitive Load and Anxiety

Anxiety consumes working memory resources, reducing language processing efficiency and causing:

- Speech hesitation
- Memory lapses
- Reduced comprehension

6.2 Emotional Regulation and Motivation

Communication anxiety negatively affects motivation and growth mindset, which in turn reduces learning persistence among adolescents. ([PubMed](#))

Table: Psychological Pathway Model

Factor	Effect on Anxiety	Behavioral Outcome
Low Self-confidence	Increases anxiety	Silence & avoidance
Negative Feedback	Heightens fear	Reduced participation
Growth Mindset	Reduces anxiety	Active communication

7. Social and Cultural Influences

Teen learners are deeply influenced by:

- Peer comparison
- Cultural expectations
- Teacher attitudes
- Classroom competitiveness

Negative teacher behaviors, such as harsh correction or domination in class, significantly increase student anxiety levels. ([SpringerLink](#))

8. Gender and Personality Differences in Teen SLA

Research suggests:

- Introverted teens show higher speaking anxiety
- Female students often report higher language anxiety
- Perfectionist learners experience stronger fear of mistakes

Personality traits such as shyness and low resilience intensify behavioral withdrawal in language contexts.

9. Strategies to Reduce Second-Language Anxiety in Teens

9.1 Pedagogical Interventions

- Supportive classroom climate
- Error-tolerant teaching methods
- Interactive learning activities
- Peer collaboration

Teachers are encouraged to provide positive emotional feedback and psychologically safe environments to enhance communicative competence. (PMC)

9.2 Psychological Interventions

Strategy	Description	Expected Outcome
Growth Mindset Training	Focus on progress over perfection	Increased confidence
Emotional Regulation Training	Coping with stress & fear	Reduced anxiety
Self-Compassion Practices	Reducing fear of mistakes	Better participation

9.3 Technological Support

AI-based tutors, virtual simulations, and bilingual scaffolding tools help reduce anxiety by providing low-pressure speaking environments and gradual exposure.

10. Implications for Educators and Policymakers

- Curriculum should integrate emotional support mechanisms
- Language classrooms should prioritize psychological safety
- Assessment systems must reduce performance pressure
- Teacher training should include emotional pedagogy

Educational institutions must recognize that emotional factors are as important as cognitive abilities in second-language acquisition.

11. Conclusion

Second-language anxiety is a pervasive psychological barrier among adolescents that significantly influences their behavioral, academic, and emotional development. The evidence indicates that anxiety leads to reduced participation, communication avoidance, academic underperformance, and identity-related stress. However, the negative behavioral outcomes can be mitigated through supportive pedagogy, emotional regulation strategies, and psychologically informed language instruction. Addressing second-language anxiety in teens is not merely a linguistic concern but a developmental necessity that shapes their confidence, social interaction, and future academic success.

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