

Beyond General Anxiety: A Systematic Review of the Distinct Roles of English Four-Skills Anxiety in Language Acquisition

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Submitted: 2026, Jan 03; **Accepted:** 2026, Jan 31; **Published:** 2026, Feb 13

Citation: Alkamel, M. B. A. (2026). Beyond General Anxiety: A Systematic Review of the Distinct Roles of English Four-Skills Anxiety in Language Acquisition. *Arch of Pub Aff Inst Manag*, 1(1), 01-08.

Abstract

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is a significant affective factor in second language acquisition. While historically treated as a unitary construct, contemporary research posits it as multidimensional, with distinct manifestations across the four core language skills. This systematic review synthesizes evidence from 15 empirical studies published between 2015 and 2025 to analyze the distinctive nature of listening, speaking, reading, and writing anxiety among English language learners. The findings reveal that each skill anxiety is triggered by unique, modality-specific antecedents: speaking anxiety by fear of negative evaluation and real-time performance pressure; writing anxiety by perfectionism and evaluative concerns; reading anxiety by textual complexity and cognitive overload; and listening anxiety by the uncontrollable nature of aural input. These anxieties demonstrate differential correlations with learner variables, such as domain-specific proficiency and motivation, and exert unique impacts, acting as cognitive filters for receptive skills and performance inhibitors for productive skills. The synthesis culminates in a two-dimensional framework (receptive/productive, online/offline processing) to interpret these distinctions. The review concludes that a skill-specific lens is imperative, advocating for diagnostic assessments and targeted pedagogical interventions over general anxiety measures to effectively support learners and advance theory.

Keywords: Foreign Language Anxiety, Skill-Specific Anxiety, Systematic Review, Language Acquisition, Affective Filter

1. Introduction

Anxiety over learning a foreign language is an emotional roadblock that results in individuals struggling with acquiring their second language [1]. The term FLA describes the anxiety caused by learning and using a second language as well as learning and using English as a second language. The purpose of this paper is to clarify the development of FLA, define what FLA looks like for both students and teachers, identify an important area of research that has not been studied, and outline the goals of the current project.

1.1. The Evolution of Foreign Language Anxiety

Initially, FLA was seen as a single construct. In 1986, Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope introduced FLCA (Foreign Language

Classroom Anxiety) as a type of situation-related anxiety measured with a new scale called the FLCAS (Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale). According to these authors, FLCA negatively affected the totality of a student's experience learning a foreign language. However, subsequent research by Sparks and Ganschow demonstrated that students experience anxiety differently for different parts of learning a foreign language [2]. As a result, researchers began to classify FLA as having multiple dimensions, which are the separate but related anxieties about the various skills used when learning a foreign language (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, writing). Pae explains that the cognitive and performance demands of listening, speaking, reading and writing result in different types of anxious responses, requiring additional attention to the complexities of the relationship between FLA and the

different skills associated with learning a foreign language [3,4].

1.2. Constructs Definitions

Using the multidimensional framework as an anchor point, different types of anxiety related to the four skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) are defined and operationalised.

- **Speaking Anxiety**

Speaking anxiety is viewed as one of the main types of anxiety regarding foreign language acquisition, incorporating fear of negative assessment, self-consciousness, and concern over speaking errors [5-7].

- **Listening Anxiety**

A form of listening anxiety occurs as a result of cognitive overload caused by a rapid interpretation of spoken words (real-time processing), the inability to guarantee that the words you have heard are being understood correctly (fear of misinterpreting), and the temporary nature of spoken words. Listening anxiety is often related to a perceived lack of proficiency in listening [8].

- **Reading Anxiety**

Reading anxiety is described as a "unique combination of beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and behaviours associated with language learning in a classroom that results from the distinctiveness of the reading process." (p. 202) [9]. Reading anxiety may be caused by elements such as novel scripts (e.g., Arabic) or new themes (e.g., modern literature), new cultural references, or other similar variables [10]. Recent literature acknowledges the complex, multidimensional nature of reading anxiety [11].

- **Writing Anxiety**

Writing anxiety is typified by feelings of worry and a desire to avoid writing tasks. Writing anxiety frequently arises from concentration on accuracy of grammar, written structure, and assessment of one's written composition [12]. Writing anxiety is notably intertwined with the complexity and cognitive load of creating a piece of writing in a foreign language.

1.3. Rationale and Knowledge Gap

Literature on Individual Skill Anxieties has been extensive, but the majority of studies have been based upon comparing one or more skills using only one sample or of researchers examining Individual Skill Anxieties separately from other Individual Skill Anxieties [13-15]. Because there has been a lack of comprehensive information on the relationship between Individual Skill Anxieties and between Individual Skill Anxieties and the two most deleterious outcomes that occur from learning this way Widespread knowledge gaps exist throughout the existing literature with regards to synthesizing the findings from all four of the four language skills to create an overview of the existing literature on the impact that each individual skill anxiety has had on academic success and the learner's aptitude [16-18]. In order to further improve our understanding of the comparison and

how each situation might differ as a result of increasing effort toward targeting the circumstances toward improving academic performance and Focus, a comparative Individual Skill Analysis needs to be done by Skill to enhance or create new ways to develop both the knowledge and what types of classroom interventions will impact learners most effectively.

1.4. Research Objectives

The purpose of this research is to identify the levels of anxiety associated with listening, speaking writing and reading that EFL learners report and compare this information across all four English skills as it relates to their overall foreign language learning (e.g., proficiency, achievement).

2. Methodology (Systematic Review Protocol)

The PRISMA 2020 Guideline for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) has provided the framework in which this review was developed to create a methodologically sound, transparent, and replicable study. The protocol was developed to systematically locate, evaluate, and amalgamate published research regarding the individual characteristics of listening, speaking, reading, and writing anxiety during the process of learning a second language (L2), or in this case, learning English as a second language.

2.1. Search Strategy and Information Sources

A systematic search was conducted across five prominent interdisciplinary databases: ERIC, PsycINFO, Scopus, and Web of Science, as well as LLBA (Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts). The search strategy employed controlled vocabulary and free-text keywords combined with Boolean operators to represent three core concepts: 1) population (i.e., learners of English as a Foreign or Second Language), 2) language skill (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, writing; productive skill, receptive skill), and 3) anxiety. The search string combined these elements: ("EFL" OR "ESL" OR "English as a foreign language" OR "English as a second language") AND ("listening" OR "speaking" OR "reading" OR "writing" OR "productive skill" OR "receptive skill") AND ("anxi*" OR "apprehension" OR "worry").

2.2. Eligibility (Inclusion/Exclusion) Criteria

Studies were screened against the following pre-defined criteria:

➤ **Inclusion Criteria:**

- Adolescent or adult learners of English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL).
- Empirical investigation of anxiety specifically linked to one or more of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing). Studies measuring only general FLCA were excluded unless they provided distinct analysis related to a specific skill outcome.
- Primary quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods studies published in peer-reviewed academic journals.
- Timeframe is January 2015 to December 2025. Three seminal pre-2015 studies were included post-hoc due to their foundational role in defining and validating skill-specific anxiety constructs, ensuring a comprehensive theoretical

- grounding [3,12,13].
 - Studies that were published in English.
- **Exclusion Criteria:**
- Studies focusing on languages other than English.
 - Theoretical papers, editorials, book reviews, dissertations, and conference abstracts.
 - Studies where anxiety was not a central variable or was conflated with a general psychological trait (e.g., trait anxiety).

2.3. Study Selection Process

The selection process followed the PRISMA 2020 framework (Page et al., 2021). Records from databases and citation searches were imported into EndNote 20 for deduplication. The process is documented in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1, Section 3.1).

2.4. Synthesis Methodology

Due to anticipated heterogeneity in study designs, measures, and contexts, a thematic narrative synthesis approach (Popay et al.,

2006) was employed. The synthesis progressed through developing a Preliminary Synthesis. Extracted data were organized into structured tables (see Table 1) to map findings by language skill and research objectives.

3. Results & Synthesis

This systematic review synthesizes evidence from 15 empirical studies published between 2015 and 2025 that investigate skill-specific foreign language anxiety among EFL learners. The synthesis is organized to facilitate a comparative analysis across the four language skills, identifying distinct antecedents, differential correlates, and unique impacts.

3.1. Overview of Included Studies

The study selection process followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines and is detailed in Figure 1. After screening, 15 studies met all inclusion criteria. The key characteristics of these studies are summarized in Table 1. The selection process is detailed in Figure 1 below.

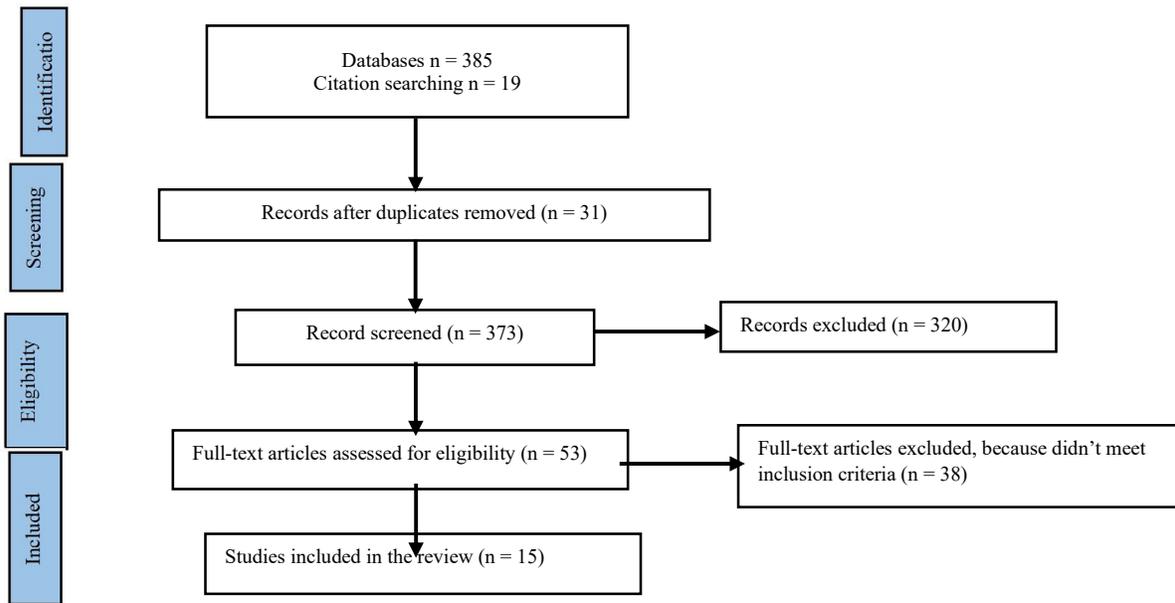


Figure 1: Prisma 2020 flow diagram of the study selection process

Author(s) & Year	Country/Context	Sample & Design	Skill(s) Investigated	Key Measures	Main Relevant Findings
Lu & Liu (2015)	China	208 university EFL learners; Quantitative, Correlational	Reading	FLRAS, Reading comprehension test, Strategy inventory	Reading anxiety negatively correlated with comprehension performance and metacognitive strategy use.
Çağatay (2015)	Turkey	102 university EFL students; Quantitative, Cross-sectional	Speaking	Adapted FLCAS	Fear of negative evaluation was the predominant source of speaking anxiety.

Razak et al. (2017)	Yemen	200 university EFL students; Quantitative, Correlational	General FLA (Achievement focus)	FLCAS, Academic GPA	Found a significant negative relationship between general FLA and academic achievement; gender differences in anxiety levels.
Yassin & Razak (2017)	Yemen	200 university EFL learners; Quantitative, Cross-sectional	All Four Skills	Skill-specific anxiety items, FLCAS	Speaking anxiety was highest; anxiety levels varied by year of study, with sophomores most anxious.
Piniel & Albert (2018)	Hungary	117 advanced EFL learners; Quantitative, Cross-sectional	All Four Skills	Skill-Specific Anxiety Scales	Confirmed emotions vary significantly across skills; anxiety and enjoyment are not simple opposites.
Ali & Fei (2017)	Iraq	70 university EFL students; Quantitative, Correlational	General FLA (Classroom focus)	FLCAS, Final exam scores	A significant negative correlation was found between FLCA and achievement; no significant gender difference.
Joo & Damron (2015)	USA	75 KFL learners; Mixed-Methods	Reading	FLRAS, Interviews	Identified unfamiliar writing systems and vocabulary as key triggers for reading anxiety.
Rahmat et al. (2020)	Malaysia	60 ESL learners; Qualitative, Case Study	Speaking	Semi-structured interviews	Speaking anxiety stemmed from fear of mistakes, limited vocabulary, and negative self-comparison, impacting fluency functions.
Hamada & Takaki (2021)	Japan	192 university EFL students; Quantitative, Correlational	Reading	Multidimensional FLRAS, Reading test	Established reading anxiety as multidimensional; "Fear of making errors" was the strongest negative predictor of achievement.
Ahmad et al. (2023)	Pakistan	300 ESL undergraduates; Quantitative, Descriptive	All Four Skills	Researcher-made questionnaire	Reported a hierarchy: speaking anxiety highest, followed by writing, listening, and reading; identified skill-specific triggers.
Abbaszadeh (2023)	Iran	120 EFL learners; Quantitative, Correlational	All Four Skills	Skill-specific scales, LLAMA Aptitude Test	Found significant negative correlations between foreign language aptitude and anxiety in all four skills.

Oxford (2017)	Conceptual/Review	N/A; Theoretical	General FLA (Intervention focus)	Review of psychological frameworks	Argues anxiety is malleable; proposes strategies from positive psychology (e.g., growth mindset, resilience) to help learners "change their minds."
Pae (2013) [Incl. as foundational]	Korea	361 EFL learners; Quantitative, SEM	All Four Skills	Skill-specific scales, FLCAS	Skill-based anxieties are distinct but related; speaking anxiety showed the strongest link to general FLA.
Luo (2014) [Incl. as foundational]	USA	195 CFL learners; Quantitative, Cross-sectional	Speaking	FLCAS	Speaking anxiety was prevalent; linked to linguistic factors and fear of embarrassment in social contexts.
Cheng (2002) [Incl. as foundational]	Taiwan	433 EFL students; Quantitative, Scale Development	Writing	SLWAI	Identified cognitive, somatic, and avoidance behavior factors of writing anxiety; perfectionism was a key source.

Table 1: Characteristics of Included Studies (2015-2025)

3.2. Thematic Synthesis of Distinct Antecedents and Triggers

Analysis confirms that anxiety antecedents are skill-specific, rooted in each modality's unique demands.

- **Speaking Anxiety**

The most consistently reported and intense anxiety. Core triggers are fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension in real-time social performance [6,7,13]. This is exacerbated by linguistic insecurity (e.g., limited vocabulary, grammar worries) [7].

- **Writing Anxiety**

Primarily driven by evaluative concerns and cognitive demands. Key antecedents include perfectionism and fear of grammatical inaccuracy, lack of ideas or content, and anxiety about organization and meeting formal rhetorical standards [12,15].

- **Reading Anxiety**

Triggers are largely cognitive and text-based. Major sources are unfamiliar script or complex orthography, high density of unknown vocabulary, and cognitively overload from long or complex sentences [10,11,14].

- **Listening Anxiety**

Stems from the uncontrollable nature of aural input. Key triggers are the perceived speed of speech, inability to recognize known words in connected speech, and lack of visual or contextual support to aid comprehension (inferred

from general FLA studies on processing).

3.3. Thematic Synthesis of Differential Correlates with Learner Variables

Skill-specific anxieties show distinct, rather than uniform, relationships with other learner factors.

- **Correlation with Proficiency and Achievement**

A strong, domain-specific negative correlation is well-established: skill anxiety predicts poorer performance in that same skill (e.g., reading anxiety with lower reading scores; general FLA with lower overall achievement) [11,16,19]. Studies like Pae support the discriminant validity of these constructs [3].

- **Relationship with Motivation and Self-Efficacy**

A reciprocal, negative relationship exists. High anxiety undermines self-efficacy and can diminish motivation further show that emotional profiles (anxiety, enjoyment, self-efficacy) are skill-specific, not global [4,20].

- **Association with Cognitive Factors**

Anxiety interacts with language aptitude and strategy use. Abbaszadeh found aptitude negatively correlates with all skill anxieties. Anxious learners often use fewer effective strategies; for example, high reading anxiety is linked to poorer metacognitive strategy use [18,21].

3.4. Thematic Synthesis of Unique Impacts on Acquisition Processes and Outcomes

Different anxieties impair the learning mechanism in specific ways, leading to varied long-term consequences.

➤ Cognitive and Behavioural Impact

• Receptive Skills (Listening/Reading)

Anxiety acts as a cognitive filter or block, consuming working memory resources needed for decoding and comprehension, leading to avoidance of practice [9].

• Productive Skills (Speaking/Writing)

Anxiety functions as a performance inhibitor, disrupting retrieval, planning, and monitoring processes. This leads to avoidance behaviors (silence in class, task procrastination), significantly reducing essential output practice [6].

➤ Impact on Skill Development

The cumulative effect of avoidance is a skewed or stunted linguistic profile. A learner with high speaking anxiety may develop stronger passive skills while oral fluency plateaus, creating a competence gap [1].

➤ Psychological and Developmental Consequences

Chronic anxiety can solidify negative self-beliefs and learned helplessness, creating a vicious cycle that hinders long-term progress. Conversely, as Oxford argues, this cycle can be broken by fostering resilience, a growth mindset, and positive emotional experiences [22]. This synthesis demonstrates that while skill-specific anxieties share a common affective core, their antecedents, correlates, and impacts are distinctly shaped by the nature of the language skill involved. This underscores the necessity for targeted, skill-specific interventions in language pedagogy.

4. Discussion

The findings of this systematic review strongly affirm that foreign language anxiety (FLA) is not a monolithic experience but a constellation of distinct, skill-specific emotional responses. This review not only confirms that there are differences between FLA and other forms of anxiety, but it also offers a framework for understanding how each type of anxiety interacts with others and how these interactions can influence language acquisition. Additionally, we identify how the four skill-specific anxieties have been addressed in previous research, the implications of these differences for the theory and practice of language acquisition, and finally, we recognize the limitations of both the current body of literature and this review itself regarding the study of FLA.

4.1. Interpreting the Distinctiveness: A Framework for Four-Skills Anxiety

The review's findings necessitate a framework that accounts for the unique cognitive and performative demands of each language skill. A two-dimensional model, crossing the receptive-productive modality with the online-offline processing dimension, offers a robust explanatory structure.

• The Receptive (Listening/Reading) vs. Productive (Speaking/Writing) Anxiety Divide

There are two main types of anxiety related to language skills: receptive and productive. Language processing (cognitive): Most studies have found that receptive skills (listening and reading) often lead to cognitive blocks due to anxiety. As demonstrated in studies by Lu & Liu and Hamada & Takaki, anxiety during receptive tasks is likely to consume the limited working memory needed to decode and comprehend input, which restricts a student's ability to receive comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982) [11,14]. In contrast, productive skills (speaking and writing) are primarily impacted by anxiety that blocks language performance. Anxiety disrupts a student's ability to formulate, retrieve, and monitor their output, leading to dysfluency, simplification, or even complete avoidance of speaking or writing [6,12]. This distinction between these two types of anxiety helps explain why a student may understand a text but demonstrate higher anxiety when discussing it orally, indicating that a general FLA score is not sufficient to predict the quality of oral output.

• The Online (Listening/Speaking) vs. Offline (Reading/Writing) Processing Dimension

A second intersecting dimension relates to how time affects various types of processing. Online processing anxiety related to listening and speaking exerts more immediate and ephemeral pressure on learners. Compared to listening, which creates anxiety due to the rapidly changing pace and lack of control over when to listen and the 'once-only' nature of speech, speaking generates anxiety through real-time feedback from the audience and the fear of negative responses [13,23]. The anxiety associated with reading and writing is less immediate and easier to regulate than that of listening or speaking, although it still exists. Reading creates a sustained mental load and a complicated source of information, while writing is often associated with perfectionism and the need to produce work that meets evaluative standards [10,15]. This framework supports the finding that speaking anxiety continues to be the most commonly reported form of anxiety among learners [15,17]. Therefore, speaking anxiety represents a confluence of the highest productive stakes and the greatest degree of temporal pressure in real-time contexts.

4.2. Theoretical Implications: Refining Models of Affective Filter and Language

Acquisition

The evidence compels a refinement of key theoretical models. Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter hypothesis, while foundational, is rendered more precise. The filter is not a single, uniform barrier but a skill-specific modulator. A heightened affective filter for speaking may severely restrict output and negotiation of meaning, while a lower filter for reading may allow richer written input to be processed. This aligns with the findings of Piniel and Albert, who demonstrated that emotional profiles are skill-dependent. Furthermore, the strong domain-specific correlations between anxiety and proficiency (e.g., reading anxiety with reading scores)

challenge purely affective explanations and lend support to the interactionist perspective articulated by Sparks and Ganschow (2007), wherein anxiety may often be a symptom or consequence of underlying skill deficits rather than solely a cause [2,4].

4.3. Practical Implications for Assessment and Instruction

Reliance on general measures like the FLCAS is inadequate for diagnosing the specific source of a learner's struggle. Educators and researchers must employ diagnostic, skill-specific assessments (e.g., FLRAS, SLWAI) to create accurate learner profiles. Piniel and Albert demonstrated that a learner can experience high enjoyment in reading alongside high anxiety in speaking, a nuance completely obscured by a general scale [4]. Identifying the precise skill anxiety is the first step toward targeted intervention.

➤ **Targeted Pedagogical Interventions for Each Skill Anxiety**
Effective intervention must be as differentiated as the anxieties themselves:

- **For Speaking Anxiety**
Focus on reducing the threat of public evaluation. Strategies include structured pair work before whole-class activities, the use of guided scripts or formulaic language, and explicitly teaching communication strategies. Creating a classroom culture that normalizes error, as suggested by Oxford, is paramount [22].
- **For Writing Anxiety**
Combat perfectionism by separating drafting from editing. Use process writing approaches, provide clear, structured models, and focus initial feedback on content over grammatical accuracy to lower the evaluative threat [12].
- **For Reading Anxiety**
Build cognitive confidence by pre-teaching vocabulary and cultural schemata. Use graded readers and scaffold texts with glossaries or visual aids. Explicit strategy instruction, particularly in metacognitive monitoring, can empower learners [14].
- **For Listening Anxiety**
Increase learners' sense of control. This can be achieved by using audio visual materials for contextual support, pre-listening activities to activate knowledge, and allowing multiple repetitions of aural input. Teaching bottom-up decoding skills can also reduce ambiguity-related stress.

4.4. Limitations of the Reviewed Literature and the Present Synthesis

This synthesis is constrained by several limitations inherent in the primary literature. First, the vast majority of included studies are cross-sectional and correlational in design, which precludes definitive causal conclusions about whether anxiety impedes proficiency or low proficiency fosters anxiety. Second, there is a geographical and contextual imbalance, with a predominance of studies from Asian and Middle Eastern university settings,

limiting the generalizability of findings to other age groups or learning contexts (e.g., secondary schools, immersion settings). Third, while skill-specific measures are used, many studies still rely on adaptations of general scales rather than instruments fully validated for a specific skill within a given cultural context.

Limitations of the present review include its restriction to English as the target language and the inclusion of a limited number of foundational pre-2015 studies, which, while justified for theoretical grounding, slightly deviate from the strict 2015-2025 timeframe. Future research must prioritize longitudinal and experimental designs to disentangle causality, expand into under-researched contexts, and develop more nuanced, culturally situated models of how these four skill anxieties interact dynamically over the course of language acquisition.

5. Conclusion

This systematic review has explored the landscape of foreign language anxiety (FLA) as it appears in the four main language skills. By combining insights from 15 important studies published between 2015 and 2025, along with earlier foundational research, it moves beyond a one-size-fits-all view of anxiety to create a detailed, skill-specific understanding. This review marks an important shift in how we think about foreign language anxiety, transforming it from a vague cloud that affects the overall learning experience to distinct "storms," each stemming from specific situations and causing unique challenges. The evidence highlights that learners don't just experience "language anxiety"; they face listening anxiety, speaking anxiety, reading anxiety, and writing anxiety. Recognizing these differences is crucial for advancing our understanding, improving assessments, and, most importantly, developing effective teaching strategies that enable anxious language learners to not only cope but thrive. This change can even help them rethink their abilities in language learning altogether [22,24-32].

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