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# CURING OR EXACERBATING FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING ANXIETY?

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## Abstract

*This article investigates foreign language learning anxiety within the general EFL context, examining its association with teacher behavior. Utilizing a self-report survey of 172 participants, the study analyzes the possible correlation between teacher dominance and student linguistic anxiety. The sample's diverse age tentatively suggests that this anxiety, regardless of current age, consistently stems from early language learning encounters. The results reveal a significant positive correlation (r = 0.60), indicating pedagogical harshness is strongly associated with linguistic inhibition, though the correlational design limits causal inferences. Ultimately, the study concludes that fostering psychological safety and mutual respect is crucial for overcoming threat rigidity and facilitating language acquisition.*

**Keywords:** English as a foreign language, foreign language anxiety, psychological safety, affective filter, teacher dominance, willingness to communicate

**JEL:** A22, I21, Z13

## INTRODUCTION

The English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom is a unique pedagogical environment where the impact of past experiences often dictates present performance. This study was directly inspired by experiences shared within the university EFL classroom, where adult learners consistently recounted how their initial, early-life encounters with language instruction shaped their current communicative hesitation. While mature learners are intellectually capable of grasping complex academic concepts, they frequently find themselves profoundly vulnerable when attempting to express these thoughts in a new language. This vulnerability is intimately tied to what Guiora (1972) explores regarding the "language ego" and the "permeability of ego boundaries". Speaking a foreign language authentically requires the ability to partially and temporarily suspend the psychological boundaries that maintain one's separateness from others. Because manipulating a new system of communication can be highly threatening to an

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established self-esteem (Stevick, 1976), negative early encounters can solidify these boundaries, creating a lasting barrier to language acquisition that persists well into adulthood.

Within this context, a student‘s reluctance to speak should not be dismissed as mere “shyness” or a simple lack of linguistic competence. Rather, it is often a manifestation of foreign language classroom anxiety, a construct widely established and measured within Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) traditions (Horwitz, 1983; Botes et al., 2022). This condition frequently operates as „state anxiety” defined as „the transient emotional reaction defined by feelings of tension and apprehension, accompanied by autonomic nervous system arousal” (Spielberger, 1983, cited in MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 549). Because asking for help, admitting errors, and seeking feedback inherently pose an interpersonal threat, individuals in organizational and classroom settings are often reluctant to disclose their shortcomings for fear of embarrassment. When learners face the risk of appearing incompetent in front of peers – or fear they will “get put on trial” and “blamed for mistakes” by an evaluator – they often experience a psychological blockage that severely inhibits language production.

In such a sensitive environment, the teacher‘s interpersonal approach becomes a critical variable, capable of either mitigating or re-triggering the anxiety rooted in those early encounters. When educators rely on dominance or condescension to establish control, they may exacerbate this fear of interpersonal risk-taking, a dynamic that is strongly associated with increased threat rigidity (Argyris, 1982) and communicative paralysis. Mitigating this anxiety requires the establishment of what Edmondson (1999, p. 350) terms “team psychological safety” – “a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking”.

While foundational theories – such as Guiora’s (1972) language ego, Krashen’s (1982) affective filter, MacIntyre et al.’s (1998) situational models, and Edmondson’s (1999) psychological safety – provide a conceptual basis for understanding communicative hesitation, their application benefits from integration with modern empirical research. Over the past decade, studies have further explored these constructs through empirical investigations into teacher immediacy, learner affect, and emotional classroom climate. Recent large-scale validations of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, such as those conducted by Botes et al. (2022), demonstrate that foreign language classroom anxiety remains a consistently measurable variable in modern educational contexts. By integrating foundational psychological constructs with recent empirical developments in FLCAS traditions, this study examines early negative educational experiences within the objective framework of contemporary classroom anxiety research.

Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to empirically investigate the association between pedagogical climate and foreign language classroom anxiety, acknowledging that such anxiety frequently stems from early educational experiences. Specifically, this research aims to test the correlation between perceived teacher dominance and students' self-reported linguistic inhibition. By examining these variables, the study asks whether an environment built on mutual respect and psychological safety correlates with a lowered affective filter. Ultimately, it is hypothesized that educators who minimize punitive dominance create a space where students perceive the interpersonal threat as sufficiently low to take the linguistic risks required to move from defensive silence to active fluency.

## Theoretical framework

The interplay between teacher behavior and student linguistic anxiety can be best understood through a multidisciplinary lens that combines second language acquisition theory, communicative psychology, and organizational behavior.

### Foreign Language Anxiety and the Affective Filter

To contextualize the learners' emotional barriers, this study grounds its analysis in the established traditions of FLCAS, which identifies foreign language anxiety as a distinct, situation-specific construct (Horwitz, 1983; Botes et al., 2022). Within second language acquisition theory, this anxiety is closely tied to Stephen Krashen‘s concept of the affective filter. Krashen (1982) posits that successful language acquisition relies on two primary conditions: the presence of comprehensible input and a low, or weak, affective filter. The affective filter acts as an emotional and psychological barrier. When a student experiences high anxiety, low motivation, or a lack of self-confidence, this filter is raised, which is hypothesized to block comprehensible language input from reaching the brain's internal language acquisition device. Consequently, the true causative variables in successful second language acquisition are the amount of comprehensible input the student receives and "the strength of the affective filter, or the degree to which the acquirer is 'open' to the input" (Krashen, 1982). Language acquisition best occurs when comprehension of real messages happens and "the acquirer is not ‚on the defensive'".

### Willingness to Communicate (WTC) and Teacher Control

This emotional barrier is strongly associated with a student's Willingness to Communicate (WTC) (McCroskey and Baer, 1985). A learner‘s readiness to enter into discourse is heavily dependent on their state communicative self-confidence,

which includes two key constructs: "(a) perceived competence and (b) a lack of anxiety" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 549). MacIntyre et al. (1998) suggest that interpersonal communication is fundamentally driven by two primary motives: *affiliation* and *control*. While affiliation aims to build relationships, control, "as a motivational orientation, instigates communication behaviour that aims at limiting the cognitive, affective, and behavioural freedom of the communicators" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 550). In a hierarchical, task-oriented classroom, this type of communication naturally emanates from the more powerful party, and the authors explicitly note that "teachers exercise control over students". When a teacher relies heavily on interpersonal control – utilizing extreme dominance or condescension – It may negatively impact students' self-evaluation and elevate state anxiety, thereby undermining communicative self-confidence and significantly reducing the students' WTC.

**Psychological Safety in the Educational Context**

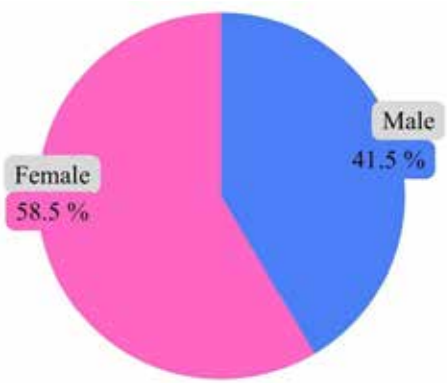
To mitigate this anxiety and lower the affective filter, the EFL classroom can be conceptualized through the organizational behavior construct of "team psychological safety", defined as "a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking" (Edmondson, 1999, p. 350). While originally developed for work teams, it could be argued that this construct is also highly applicable to the language classroom, where students operate as an interdependent learning group under the leadership of an educator. Learning and speaking a foreign language inherently involves actions that carry a high potential for embarrassment or interpersonal threat, as making errors is an inevitable part of the acquisition process. If a teacher's dominance cultivates a punitive atmosphere, students may become unwilling to ask for help, seek feedback, or speak up, for fear of sanction or being perceived as incompetent by their peers and evaluator. This dynamic could lead to a condition of passive evasion, where silence is maintained as a self-protective withdrawal. Conversely, an environment characterized by psychological safety could give students the confidence that they will not be embarrassed, rejected, or punished for well-intentioned linguistic risks. Only when this fear of sanction is minimized can students comfortably engage in the proactive learning behaviors necessary to make true linguistic progress.

## Methodology

### Survey Design and Instrument Reliability

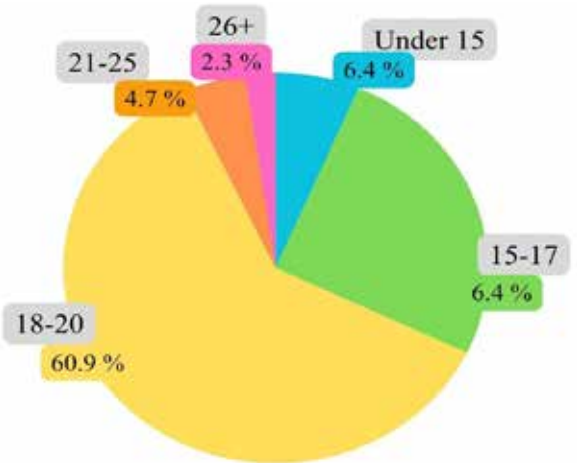
#### *Research Design and Participant Profile*

To investigate the relationship between teacher behavior and foreign language classroom anxiety, a correlational self-report survey methodology was employed. A convenience sample of 172 participants was recruited from various language learning environments. While the demographic core consisted of university-level learners closely followed by high schoolers, the total age range spanned from 11 to 67 years. Rather than being a confounding variable, this diverse cross-generational sample was deliberately utilized in its entirety to capture the lifespan persistence of linguistic anxiety, tentatively suggesting that pedagogical trauma acquired in early language encounters could continue to impact learners well into adulthood. Participants were primarily female (58.7%), though male representation (41.3%) was consistent across age groups. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of these profiles, the survey tracked several background variables alongside core psychological metrics: gender, current age, the age of onset for linguistic anxiety, and the total number of languages learned (linguistic density) apart from the native language.



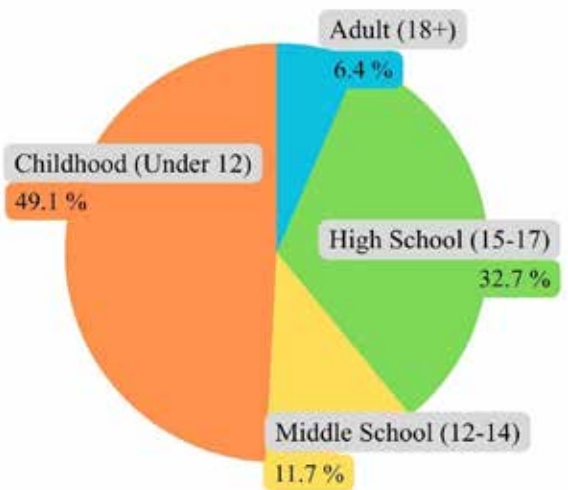

*Source:* Author's own research

**Figure 1:** Gender Distribution (N = 172)



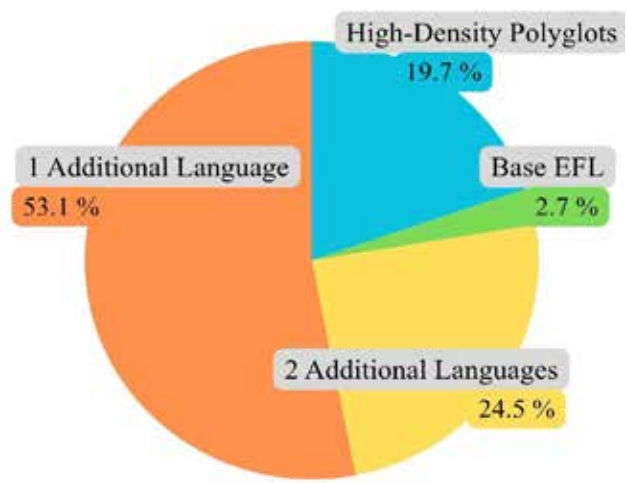

*Source:* Author's own research

**Figure 2:** Current Age Distribution of Participants (Grouped), N = 172




*Source:* Author's own research

**Figure 3:** Age of Onset/Exposure (N = 172)




*Source:* Author's own research

**Figure 4:** Linguistic Density, Additional Foreigh Languages (N = 172)

## Ethics Statement and Data Handling

Given the inclusion of vulnerable populations and the broad age range of the sample, strict ethical guidelines were enforced throughout the research design and data collection process. To ensure the psychological safety and full comprehension of the younger participants, the administration of the survey was closely supervised in a classroom setting; specifically, the respective teachers were responsible for overseeing the answers given by the students in order to ensure accuracy, provide contextual support, and mitigate self-report bias. The handling and lawfulness of processing of all personal data strictly adhered to established legal frameworks, including the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria (n.d.), the Child Protection Act (2020), and Article 6 of the General Data Protection Regulation (Art. 6 GDPR, n.d.). Prior to filling in the survey form, informed consent was obtained from all participants – and, in the case of minors, their supervising educators. Participation was entirely voluntary, and all collected data were subsequently fully anonymized to guarantee student confidentiality and prevent any potential pedagogical bias.

### Instrument Development and Definition of Variables

Measuring complex, internal psychological states – such as a student's fluctuating "affective filter" or their shared belief in a classroom's "psychological safety" – requires careful instrumentation. Relying on a single metric to define anxiety or teacher dominance could lead to skewed or superficial data. Therefore, this study utilized a Multi-Item Diagnostic Approach, evaluating participants across 10 distinct quantitative items (Q1–Q10).

The survey was measured on a standard 5-point Likert scale, with anchors ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). To ensure full comprehension and mitigate translation validity issues across the diverse age groups, the questionnaire was administered in the participants' native Bulgarian language. The construction logic of the items was conceptually adapted from Edmondson's (1999) team psychological safety scales and the FLCAS traditions (Horwitz, 1983; Botes et al., 2022). The 10 items were divided into two primary psychometric constructs:

- **Construct X (Teacher Dominance Index):** This independent variable assesses the environmental context, specifically whether the teacher relies on interpersonal motives of „control" to limit communicator freedom or utilizes intimidation that diminishes classroom psychological safety. The index is derived from the arithmetic mean of five specific indicators (Q1 – Q5). Representative items adapted for the pedagogical context include: "The teacher uses intimidation or condescension to control the classroom", and "If you make a mistake in this class, it is often held against you" (adapted directly from Edmondson, 1999, p. 382).
- **Construct Y (Linguistic Anxiety Index):** This dependent variable evaluates the „impact", measuring a learner's readiness to enter into discourse and the degree to which their affective filter has been raised blocking linguistic output. The index is calculated from the arithmetic mean of five indicators (Q6 – Q10) tracking symptoms such as anxiety, silence, physical tension, and a drop in communicative complexity. Representative items include: *"I feel a paralyzing sense of anxiety when asked to speak in the foreign language", "I actively avoid volunteering answers due to a fear of embarrassment or sanction", "I would rather use simple answers so I could avoid making a mistake", etc.*

### Instrument Reliability and Data Structure

The statistical strength of this study relies on the internal consistency of this 10-item matrix. Just as Edmondson conducted preparatory analyses to assess the psychometric properties of new survey instruments – including their internal consistency reliability – this study calculated Cronbach's alpha (α) to establish the

reliability of the scales. Both subscales demonstrated high internal consistency, with the Teacher Dominance Index (TDI) yielding an $\alpha = 0.84$ and the Linguistic Anxiety Index (LAI) yielding an $\alpha = 0.88$.

By averaging the responses across these specific item sets, the survey generated a composite TDI and a composite LAI for each of the 172 participants. This statistical reliability wished to check if the resulting indices reflect a stable psychological climate rather than a one-off emotional reaction. Table 1 exemplifies raw responses for items Q1 through Q10 across divergent cases to provide transparency into the diagnostic construction of the indices.

**Table 1:** Construction of Indices, Table with Example Responses

| Parti-cipant ID | Impact Level | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q5 | Q6 | Q7 | Q8 | Q9 | Q10 | TDI | LAI |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| #9 | Low | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1.0 | 1.0 |
| #11 | Moderate | 3 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2.4 | 2.0 |
| #167 | Very high | 5 | 5 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 4.8 | 4.8 |

*Source:* Author's own research

To analyze the data, this study employs the Pearson correlation coefficient ($r$) as the primary statistical measure to evaluate the strength and direction of the linear relationship between TDI and LAI. The coefficient of determination ($r^2$) is also utilized to assess the proportion of variance in linguistic paralysis that can be statistically explained by perceived teacher behavior. Further discussion regarding the limits of inference and the distinction between correlation and causation within this design is detailed in the Strengths and Limitations section.

## Results and analysis

### Descriptive Statistics and Variance

Before examining the correlational relationship, it is necessary to establish the distributional characteristics of the variables. The study measured two primary constructs across the sample ($N = 172$). To maintain scientific neutrality and prevent embedding interpretation into the measurement, the independent variable is identified as the Teacher Dominance Index /TDI/ (Construct X) and the dependent variable as the Linguistic Anxiety Index /LAI/ (Construct Y).

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics, including mean scores, standard deviations, and variance for both indices, providing a view of the data distribution prior to inferential analysis. The data indicates similar distributions for both variables. The mean scores for TDI and LAI are both 2.13. Both indices also demonstrate comparable dispersion, with standard deviations of 0.96 for TDI and 0.97 for LAI, alongside variances of 0.93 and 0.97, respectively. These overall mean scores place the average participant response in the lower-to-moderate range of the 1-5 scale. Following this baseline distribution, Table 3 showcases the index categorization.

**Table 2:** Overall Descriptive Statistics

| | **TDI** | **LAI** |
|---|---|---|
| **Mean** | 2.129069767 | 2.125581395 |
| **Standard Deviation** | 0.9633477543 | 0.9706402088 |
| **Variance** | 0.9280388957 | 0.9670610635 |

*Source:* Author's own research

**Table 3:** Index Categorization

| **Index Category** | **Score Range** | **Behavioral Correlates** |
|---|---|---|
| **Low** | 1.0 – 1.9 | Minimal pedagogical interference; high linguistic resilience. |
| **Moderate** | 2.0 – 3.9 | Identifiable aggressive cues; measurable hesitation/ fluency drops. |
| **High** | 4.0 – 5.0 | Severe pedagogical interference; acute communicative inhibition and anxiety. |

*Source:* Author's own research

## Correlation Findings

This study utilizes the Pearson correlation coefficient ($r$) to determine the strength and direction of the linear relationship between these two psychometric constructs. The primary finding of the analysis is a strong positive correlation of $r = 0.606$, $p < .001$, indicating a highly statistically significant relationship.

To further contextualize this association, the coefficient of determination ($r^2$) is approximately 0.367. This indicates that roughly 36.7% of the variance

in students‘ linguistic anxiety scores can be statistically explained by their perception of the teacher‘s dominance. While a correlational design precludes claims of absolute causality, this metric suggests high predictive validity; as the pedagogical environment becomes increasingly aggressive or controlling, there is a statistically significant, predictable increase in the severity of the student‘s self-reported linguistic inhibition.

### Subgroup Patterns: Extreme, Mitigated, and Persistent Anxiety

While the aggregate correlation demonstrates a strong linear relationship across the entire sample, isolating specific descriptive subgroups provides a more nuanced understanding of how pedagogical climate interacts with learner background. It must be noted that these subgroup patterns are observational and descriptive; while they cannot prove causality, they generate curious hypotheses for future inferential research.

### The Dominance-Anxiety Peak

The “Peak” cohort represents participants who reached the upper limit of the survey indices, typically scoring ≥ 4.0 on both scales. These cases illustrate the upper bound of the correlation where extreme pedagogical stressors are consistently associated with severe linguistic inhibition.

**Table 4:** Peak Findings

| Participant ID | TDI average score | LAI average score | Age of Experience |
|---|---|---|---|
| #16 | 5 | 4.6 | 17 |
| #17 | 4.6 | 5.0 | 15 |
| #166 | 4.4 | 4.6 | 14 |
| #167 | 4.8 | 4.8 | 13 |

*Source:* Author’s own research

From a psychometric standpoint, these cases represent the maximum effect size of the data. Participants listed in the table all reaching an LAI of over 4.5 demonstrate that once perceived dominance passes a critical threshold (approx. 4.5), the probability of severe communicative paralysis becomes nearly absolute. While this descriptive subset cannot prove direct causation, it strongly supports the hypothesis that severe pedagogical aggression is deeply intertwined with communicative inhibition.

### *The Polyglot Buffer: Multilingual Mitigation*

This section explores participants with high linguistic density (defined as having learned 3 or more languages). The descriptive data suggests that multilingualism may serve as a psychometric buffer, potentially dampening the impact of teacher dominance on the anxiety response.

**Table 5:** Polyglots

| Participant ID | Languages Learned | TDI | LAI |
|---|---|---|---|
| #25 | 4 | 1.8 | 1.8 |
| #29 | 5 | 1.2 | 1.0 |
| #31 | 4 | 2.0 | 1.0 |
| #81 | 3 | 1.2 | 1.2 |
| #135 | 3 | 2.8 | 1.2 |
| #154 | 4 | 2.4 | 1.0 |
| #169 | 4 | 1.0 | 1.2 |

*Source:* Author's own research

The polyglot buffer is best observed through a controlled comparison of participants with identical or similar TDI scores. For instance, Participant #154 (Polyglot: 4 languages) faced a TDI of 2.4 but maintained a negligible LAI of 1.0. Conversely, Participant #3 (Monoglot: 1 language) faced the same TDI level of 2.4 yet exhibited a significantly higher LAI of 2.8. This divergence hypothesizes that polyglot status may provide a layer of cognitive or emotional resilience that prevents moderate pedagogical dominance from crystallizing into chronic linguistic anxiety.

### *Lifespan Persistence: Long-Term Impact Observations*

A unique segment of the dataset reveals the potential lifespan persistence of these symptoms. By isolating participants with significant temporal gaps between the initial language learning experience and their current age, the data allows for an observation of the long-term shadow of pedagogical trauma.

**Table 6:** Lifespan Persistence vs. Developmental Interference

| Participant ID | Current Age | Age of Onset | Duration of Impact (Years) | LAI |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| #128 | 67 | 15 | 52 | 1.8 |
| #154 | 62 | 12 | 50 | 1.0 |
| #29 | 45 | 44 | 1 | 1.0 |

*Source:* Author's own research

While the indices for older participants like #128 and #154 are lower than the adolescent Peak cases, the critical finding is the apparent *lifespan persistence*. Participant #128 continues to report measurable linguistic interference (LAI = 1.8) over half a century after the initial experience. This suggests that while the intensity of the anxiety may attenuate over decades, the underlying behavioral correlate remains embedded in the participant's psycholinguistic profile, indicating a persistent shift in communicative confidence.

***The Sensitive Learner: Moderate Range Responses***

The Sensitive Learner cohort includes participants scoring in the 2.0 to 3.0 range on both indices. This group demonstrates that the relationship between dominance and anxiety is not merely a phenomenon of extremes but remains tightly correlated at moderate levels.

**Table 7:** Moderate Range Responses

| Participant ID | TDI | LAI |
|---|---|---|
| #3 | 2.4 | 2.8 |
| #8 | 2.2 | 2.8 |
| #12 | 2.2 | 2.4 |
| #15 | 2.6 | 3.0 |

*Source:* Author's own research

In this moderate range, we observe a high degree of sensitivity to pedagogical style. The data indicates that even mid-level dominance (characterized by frequent correction or mild impatience) is associated with a linear increase in anxiety. This suggests that linguistic inhibition scales proportionately with pedagogical aggression across the entire spectrum of classroom interactions.

## Discussion

### The Placebo Effect of Dominance and the Affective Filter

The results of this study, highlighted by the strong positive correlation (r = 0.606) between the Teacher Dominance Index and the Linguistic Anxiety Index, suggest that the classroom climate is strongly associated with a student's willingness to communicate. When educators rely on condescension or aggressive dominance, they shift the interpersonal dynamic from one of affiliation to one of control. In hierarchical, task-oriented situations, teachers naturally exercise control over students, but when this control is perceived as excessive dominance, it could negatively impact a student‘s communicative self-confidence.

Many educators may justify strict dominance as a means to maintain discipline and academic rigor, yielding a quiet, seemingly attentive room. However, the data implies this may operate as a placebo effect. The silence is frequently not a marker of disciplined learning, but rather a manifestation of threat rigidity and passive evasion. According to Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter hypothesis, high anxiety and a defensive posture raise an emotional barrier that prevents comprehensible input from reaching the brain‘s language acquisition device. Language acquisition is optimized only when the student is not put „on the defensive". Therefore, a classroom environment perceived as highly dominant may create a condition where students are too anxious to process or produce the target language. This aligns directly with the findings in the Sensitive Learner cohort, demonstrating that even moderate levels of perceived teacher dominance are tightly correlated with an increase in linguistic inhibition.

### *Lifespan Persistence and the Language Ego*

The observational data regarding the Lifespan Persistence subgroup generates a critical hypothesis regarding the longevity of pedagogical trauma. Participants reported measurable linguistic interference decades after their initial negative language learning experiences. This phenomenon can be interpreted through Guiora‘s (1972) concept of the language ego. Speaking a foreign language authentically requires the ability to partially and temporarily suspend the psychological boundaries that maintain one‘s separateness from others, indicating a level of permeability in the language ego. Because manipulating a new system of communication is highly threatening to an established self-esteem, extreme pedagogical aggression during early encounters may solidify these boundaries, creating a lasting barrier to language acquisition.

Conversely, the Polyglot Buffer subgroup suggests that the successful acquisition of multiple languages may provide a layer of cognitive or emotional

resilience. By successfully navigating the language ego‘s permeability in prior contexts, polyglots may develop a psychological buffer that prevents moderate pedagogical dominance from crystallizing into chronic linguistic anxiety.

### *Overcoming Threat Rigidity: Psychological Safety as the Standard*

If perceived teacher dominance exacerbates foreign language anxiety, the data strongly suggests that the structural remedy is the establishment of psychological safety. The transition from affective silence to proactive fluency requires students to take profound interpersonal risks. Because making grammatical or pronunciation errors inherently poses a threat to an adult‘s ‘face’ (Goffman, 1955, p. 220), learners may fear appearing incompetent and suffering a blow to their image. When the educational environment is perceived as punishing, students engage in self-preservation by withdrawing entirely from discourse.

Overcoming this threat rigidity requires cultivating team psychological safety, which Edmondson (1999) defines as “a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking” (Edmondson, 1999, p. 354). Adapting this organizational construct to the EFL classroom implies that the professor might act as a “strict surgeon” – maintaining rigorous academic standards and providing complex comprehensible input, while intentionally removing the infection of condescension and interpersonal threat.

As Edmondson notes, psychological safety does not imply “a careless sense of permissiveness, nor an unrelentingly positive affect” (ibid.). Rather, it means that students possess a shared confidence that the group “will not embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up”. The inherent risks of learning behavior in social settings can be mitigated by a tolerance of imperfection and error. Only when educators successfully establish this specific tolerance can students lower their affective filters, take the necessary linguistic risks, and move safely from silent evasion toward true language acquisition.

## Strengths and limitations

### *Strengths of the Study*

The primary strength of this study lies in the high relevance of its topic to contemporary educational psychology and the practical pedagogical importance of its findings. By attempting to quantitatively measure the emotional climate of the classroom through the Teacher Dominance Index (TDI) and the Linguistic Anxiety Index (LAI), this research hopes to provide an empirical lens to an issue often treated as purely qualitative or anecdotal. The findings try to highlight the critical role that psychological safety plays in the language acquisition

process, offering actionable insights for university EFL educators to adjust their interpersonal approach and facilitate greater communicative competence among their students.

**Methodological Limitations**

Despite these strengths, the current research serves primarily as a pilot study – a tentative attempt at showcasing an observation regarding classroom dynamics and anxiety. As such, the study‘s design presents several limitations that must be acknowledged to ensure scientific transparency.

First, the cross-sectional, correlational nature of the research precludes any claims of absolute causality. While a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.606$) exists between perceived teacher dominance and linguistic anxiety, establishing direct causation requires a rigorous experimental design where all control variables are held constant to isolate the specific effect of pedagogical behavior. As MacIntyre et al. (1998, p. 547) note, authentic communication in a second language is the result of a complex system of interrelated variables and situational influences. Consequently, the observed relationship must be interpreted as a deeply related dynamic rather than a strict cause-and-effect mechanism.

Second, the study relies heavily on self-report data, which introduces the potential for response bias. Participants may under-report or over-report their anxiety or the perceived dominance of their teachers based on subjective memory or current emotional states.

Additionally, while the survey items were conceptually adapted from established models such as FLCAS and Edmondson’s psychological safety matrix, the specific 10-item instrument synthesized for this study requires further psychometric testing to ensure external validity.

Finally, there is a necessary clarification regarding the sample and generalizability. While this research was directly inspired by observations of communicative hesitation within the university EFL classroom, its objective encompasses a broader design: investigating the phenomenon of foreign language classroom anxiety across the lifespan. Consequently, the participant convenience sample (ranging from 11 to 67 years) extends considerably beyond the standard university demographic. While this wide range is deliberate and allows for the valuable observation of lifespan persistence, it does limit the strict generalizability of the aggregate findings to exclusively adult university cohorts without further controlled subgroup analyses and, as a whole, a bigger pool size.

## Conclusion

The ultimate measure of an EFL educator‘s success should not be calibrated by the degree of rigid compliance they command, but rather by the volume and quality of the language their students actively and confidently produce. The data from this pilot study, reflecting a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.606$) between the Teacher Dominance Index (TDI) and the Linguistic Anxiety Index (LAI), suggests that exacerbating foreign language learning anxiety through dominance and condescension is strongly associated with communicative inhibition. When educators rely on interpersonal control rather than affiliation, it negatively impacts a student‘s state communicative self-confidence, raising the affective filter and impeding the language acquisition process.

Addressing this communicative hesitation requires a conscious pedagogical shift across all levels of language instruction. Language programs should move away from a punitive Judge-Subject dynamic toward a collaborative Expert-Apprentice partnership, characterized by team leader coaching and context support. By acting as a critical intervention point, educators can help mitigate the persistent, long-term impact of early negative educational experiences. By operating as strict surgeons who maintain high academic standards while concurrently cultivating team psychological safety and a tolerance for imperfection, educators can effectively lower the perceived interpersonal threat. Only within this safe, respectful environment will learners feel secure enough to temporarily suspend the boundaries of their language ego, take the necessary interpersonal risks, and successfully transition from defensive silence to true fluency.

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