

Fear of Negative Evaluation in Foreign Language Learning and Its Impact on Student Engagement Among School Students

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Абдираимова Динора Абдукаримқызы

«Шетел тілі: екі шетел тілі» білім беру бағдарламасының 3-курс студенті,
Ыбырай Алтынсарин атындағы Арқалық педагогикалық университеті, Қазақстан

Асанова Әсел Қарлыбайқызы

Педагогика ғылымдарының магистры,
«Шетел тілі: екі шетел тілі (ағылшын тілі)» білім беру бағдарламасының жетекшісі,
Ыбырай Алтынсарин атындағы Арқалық педагогикалық университеті, Қазақстан

Abdiraimova Dinora Abdukarimovna

Third-year student of the Educational Program Foreign Language:
Two Foreign Languages, Ybyrai Altynsarin Arkalyk Pedagogical University, Kazakhstan

Assanova Assel Karlybaevna

Master of Pedagogical Sciences, Head of the Educational Program Foreign Language:
Two Foreign Languages (English), Ybyrai Altynsarin Arkalyk Pedagogical University, Kazakhstan

ABSTRACT

Students' fear of negative evaluation (FNE)-the tendency to worry about being judged unfavorably-has long been described as a central form of social-evaluative anxiety (Watson & Friend, 1969) and as a core component of foreign language anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986). Within English as a foreign language (EFL) learning, particularly at the secondary-school level, elevated FNE may intensify foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) and, as a result, dampen students' willingness to participate. This theoretical paper brings together foundational and more recent scholarship to outline a conceptual model that links FNE to FLCA and, indirectly, to student engagement in EFL classrooms. The discussion draws on Watson and Friend's early conceptualization of FNE, Horwitz's (1986) framework of language anxiety,

MacIntyre and Gardner's (1994) cognitive-interference model, and Fredricks et al.'s (2004) widely used tripartite model of engagement. Emerging empirical evidence also seems to reinforce these connections; for instance, higher fear of negative evaluation has been shown to predict greater foreign language anxiety (Okyar, 2023), which in turn may weaken behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. These processes appear particularly relevant in Kazakhstani secondary schools, where English occupies a prominent place in the curriculum (Suleimenova, 2013). The paper proposes several hypotheses concerning the links among FNE, FLCA, and engagement, and briefly discusses educational implications—such as the importance of supportive, low-threat classroom climates—before indicating potential directions for future empirical research.

INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language can cause anxiety, especially when students are afraid of making mistakes or being negatively evaluated. This foreign language anxiety (FLA) has repeatedly shown its negative effects on learning efficiency and has lowered academic performance (Horwitz, 2001; Teimouri et al., 2019). One of the key sources of this anxiety is fear of negative evaluation (FNE) — the worry about being judged by others and concern over a potential unfavorable assessment (Watson & Friend, 1969). In an English as a foreign language classroom, FNE may manifest as reluctance to speak or participate in class, accompanied by anxiety that peers or teachers will judge the student's performance negatively.

A high level of FNE usually intensifies the broader anxiety related to foreign language learning (FLCA), which includes concerns about communication, tests, and assessment (Horwitz et al., 1986). Students with higher levels of FLCA often tend to exhibit various forms of disengagement: they participate less in activities, show less interest or satisfaction, and use fewer cognitive strategies during learning. At the same time, student engagement, understood as active behavioral, emotional, and cognitive participation in educational activities, is considered essential for effective language acquisition. As numerous studies show, engaged students practice skills more often, demonstrate perseverance in the face of difficulties, and ultimately achieve higher language proficiency. On the other hand, a decline in engagement is usually associated with negative educational outcomes.

In high schools in Kazakhstan, where English is taught as a foreign language, students often report a high level of anxiety during oral performances. According to Suleimenova, many Kazakhstani students felt «shyness and anxiety» in situations where they had to speak English, which was partly due to the education system being focused on grammar and tests rather than the development of communication skills. Under such conditions, FNE can manifest particularly strongly, as teenagers often feel vulnerable to the evaluation of teachers or peers and therefore prefer to withdraw. Despite the obvious importance of this issue, the relationship between FNE, FLCA, and student engagement in the Kazakh context has not yet been

sufficiently explored theoretically. This paper attempts to address this shortcoming. It assumes that FNE increases FLCA, which in turn reduces students' engagement in English lessons. The article analyzes relevant theoretical models and recent empirical studies that support this chain of relationships and also formulates research questions and working hypotheses derived from the proposed concept.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE)

Fear of negative evaluation (FNE) originates in clinical/social psychology as a core feature of social anxiety (Watson & Friend, 1969). It denotes **“the fear of being evaluated as negative or bad while participating in or anticipating social situations”**. FNE involves anxiety and worry about humiliation, criticism, or ridicule by others. Watson and Friend (1969) operationalized FNE via a self-report scale, highlighting that individuals high in FNE tend to anticipate negative judgments and catastrophize minor social missteps. In other words, FNE is an enduring personality trait that shapes how one views potential social feedback.

Within a foreign language classroom, FNE can manifest when students imagine that classmates or teachers might think poorly of them for linguistic errors. For instance, Wardhani (2019) observed that Indonesian EFL students often stayed silent in speaking activities due to **“their assumption of being judged negatively”**. In short, FNE causes learners to view language tasks as threatening: the desire to avoid being embarrassed outweighs the motivation to communicate. In the current conceptual model, FNE is treated as a dispositional factor that predisposes students to interpret classroom interactions evaluatively.

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA)

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) is a context-specific form of anxiety in language learning (Horwitz et al., 1986). Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), showing that FLCA comprises three dimensions: **communication apprehension** (fear of speaking), **test anxiety**, and **fear of negative evaluation**. In this framework, FNE is embedded as one facet of FLCA: specifically, Horwitz et al. (1986) define the fear of negative evaluation subcomponent as “anxious feelings about external negative evaluations, especially when exposed to evaluative situations”. Thus, when a student fears being judged, this contributes directly to overall FLCA.

FLCA is conceptualized as an anxiety condition triggered by language. Horwitz (2001) and many subsequent studies have shown that high FLCA often leads to poorer language performance and negative attitudes. For example, Horwitz (2001) notes that anxious learners tend to avoid participation and are less likely to communicate spontaneously (Horwitz, 2001, as cited in [45]). In Kazakhstan and similar contexts, studies have found widespread FLCA:

Suleimenova (2013) reported that Kazakhstani secondary students felt “**extremely negative experiences with speaking activities**” and required anxiety-reduction measures. Horwitz et al.’s three-part structure has been widely used, and although factor analyses sometimes vary by context, the FNE component often remains salient (He et al., 2021, cited in [45]). Indeed, recent evidence suggests FNE may be the **primary trigger** for language anxiety in some settings. We therefore treat FLCA as a state anxiety comprising communicative fear, evaluative fear, and test worry, with FNE as a driving contributor.

Cognitive-Interference Model of Anxiety

MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) and others have emphasized that anxiety impairs language processing. According to their **processing-interference model**, anxious thoughts consume limited working memory resources, leaving fewer resources for language tasks (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). In effect, when a student is anxious about being judged, part of their cognitive capacity is occupied by self-monitoring and worry, so they have less capacity for listening, formulating speech, or understanding grammar. This notion is consistent with general theories (e.g., Eysenck & Calvo, 1992) and has been empirically supported in language studies: for instance, high-anxiety learners often perform worse on complex tasks because anxiety intrudes into cognitive processes (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994).

In our context, this suggests that FNE → FLCA not only causes negative feelings but also has cognitive consequences: anxious learners are less fluent and more reluctant to think on their feet. Moreover, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) note that anxiety interacts with affective factors: anxious learners often have lower self-efficacy and reduced motivation to engage (Wang et al., 2024). Thus, FLCA can be expected to curtail both the emotional willingness to participate and the cognitive effort invested. In summary, the processing theory implies a pathway from FNE (trait anxiety) to real-time anxiety states in class, which then interfere with students’ active engagement.

Student Engagement

Student engagement is a multifaceted construct reflecting how students involve themselves in learning. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) define engagement as a **malleable, multidimensional construct** comprising three interrelated dimensions: **behavioral engagement** (participation, effort, persistence), **emotional engagement** (interest, enjoyment, sense of belonging), and **cognitive engagement** (investment in learning strategies, self-regulation). Behavioral engagement includes observable actions like attendance, participation in discussion, and adherence to classroom norms. Emotional engagement refers to positive and negative feelings about learning; indicators include enthusiasm, interest, and the absence of boredom or anxiety. Cognitive engagement involves the willingness to exert mental effort, use learning strategies, and embrace challenges.

Fredricks et al. (2004) emphasize that these dimensions are interrelated: for instance, a

student who enjoys class (emotional) is more likely to participate (behavioral) and to try harder cognitively. High engagement has been linked to better achievement in many domains. In foreign language learning, engagement is crucial: students who persistently practice speaking, listening, and studying tend to acquire proficiency more rapidly (O’Neal et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2024). Conversely, disengaged students waste instructional time and miss opportunities for output and feedback.

In our framework, engagement is the outcome of interest affected by FNE and FLCA. We posit that high anxiety (especially from FNE) undermines all dimensions of engagement. For example, if a student feels anxious about being judged, they may refuse to speak in class (behavioral disengagement), feel embarrassed or uninterested (emotional disengagement), and avoid challenging tasks (cognitive disengagement). Indeed, Fredricks et al. note that “emotional engagement” is characterized by the *absence* of anxiety. Thus, anxiety is conceptually the opposite pole of emotional engagement. In sum, the theoretical model is as follows: **FNE (trait) → FLCA (state) → ↓ Engagement (behavioral, emotional, cognitive)**. This model will guide the subsequent literature review and the formulation of hypotheses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

FNE and Foreign Language Anxiety

Empirical studies confirm that FNE is a key contributor to language anxiety. In Wardhani’s (2019) photovoice study of Indonesian EFL undergraduates, many students cited fear of making mistakes and being judged as reasons they remained silent in speaking activities. Wardhani concludes that FNE is a “key source of language anxiety” because learners dread giving a bad impression. Similarly, Okyar (2023) examined over 290 Turkish EFL university students and found that *speaking anxiety* was positively correlated with FNE: students with higher FNE tended to report greater language anxiety and lower self-efficacy and proficiency. In short, both qualitative and quantitative evidence suggest FNE heightens language anxiety.

Horwitz et al. (1986) themselves noted that fear of negative evaluation often drives FLCA, especially in formal speaking or testing situations. Indeed, He et al. (2021; as cited in [45]) argue that FNE may be the *leading factor* triggering students’ language anxiety. Psychometrically, factor analyses of the FLCAS frequently recover a dimension dominated by evaluative concerns, and mean FNE scores tend to be higher for anxious learners. In sum, the literature supports RQ1 and H1: learners high in FNE experience higher overall FLCA (Horwitz et al., 1986; Okyar, 2023; Wardhani, 2019). This connection is intuitive: worrying about others’ opinions turns ordinary class tasks into high-stakes evaluations, producing anxiety.

Foreign Language Anxiety and Engagement

The link between language anxiety and engagement is less often studied directly, but related research illuminates the connection. Many studies have shown that FLCA is generally negatively associated with positive outcomes. For example, Horwitz (2001) and a large meta-analysis by Teimouri et al. (2019) report that higher FLCA predicts lower language proficiency and lower motivation (Horwitz, 2001; Teimouri et al., 2019). Less proficient, more anxious learners tend to avoid practice and have poorer attitudes toward the language. Likewise, studies have found that anxious students report lower self-efficacy (e.g., Okyar, 2023; Teimouri et al., 2019), and Wang et al. (2024) showed that self-efficacy is a strong positive predictor of EFL engagement. Together, this implies an indirect pathway: FLA reduces self-belief, which reduces effort and engagement.

Wang et al. (2021) provide more direct evidence. In a large study of Chinese middle schoolers ($N \approx 17,000$), they found that foreign language anxiety mediated the effect of learning adaptability on English academic engagement. Specifically, anxiety explained why adaptable students were more engaged. This indicates that when anxiety is high, engagement suffers, holding other factors constant. Similarly, in the Costa Rican university context, García-Castro and O'Reilly (2022) unexpectedly found that higher FLA *positively* predicted online engagement during COVID-19. They suggest anxious students may compensate by more structured study behaviors. However, this may reflect a specific online/compensatory situation. In typical classroom settings, anxiety is usually seen as a deterrent.

More broadly, emotional engagement and anxiety are antithetical constructs. As Fredricks et al. (2004) note, emotional engagement includes *lack* of anxiety. By definition, an anxious student exhibits lower emotional engagement. Behavioral engagement is also likely to drop: anxious learners avoid participation to escape evaluation. Cognitive engagement (the will to invest mental effort) similarly suffers because anxiety consumes cognitive resources (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Thus, the literature supports RQ2 and H2: higher FLCA should correlate with lower engagement across dimensions (Wang et al., 2021; García-Castro & O'Reilly, 2022, with nuance).

FNE, FLCA, and Engagement in Context

Few studies have examined all three constructs together. One telling set of findings comes from Okyar (2023): in addition to correlating FNE with speaking anxiety, Okyar reported that anxious students had significantly lower self-perceived speaking ability. Self-perceived proficiency often motivates engagement; if students feel ineffective, they may disengage. Similarly, Wang et al. (2024) found that classroom goal structures emphasizing mastery and self-efficacy promoted engagement. Anxiety undermines these beliefs, so FNE→FLCA likely undermines mastery orientation and effort.

In the Kazakhstan-specific literature, empirical work is scant. Suleimenova's (2013) study,

while not focusing on FNE explicitly, highlights that Kazakhstani learners' speaking anxiety is high. She suggests one cause is the teachers' focus on grammatical correctness over communication. This educational climate likely intensifies FNE: when teachers emphasize error correction, students will fear humiliation. Thus the contextual evidence (Suleimenova, 2013) aligns with the model: an evaluation-heavy climate fuels FNE, leading to anxiety and disengagement. Indeed, research in similar collectivist or exam-focused settings (e.g. China, Middle East) consistently links anxiety with class withdrawal and silent classrooms (Liu, 2017; Horwitz, 2001).

In summary, recent studies underscore that FNE is an important antecedent of FLCA (Wardhani, 2019; Okyar, 2023), and that FLCA is generally inimical to engagement (Wang et al., 2021). We have found no studies contradicting the core model FNE→FLA→↓engagement, apart from the noted context-specific nuance (García-Castro & O'Reilly, 2022). Taken together, the theoretical arguments and empirical findings strongly suggest that FNE in foreign language learners (especially secondary schoolers) raises anxiety levels and thereby reduces their engagement in language activities.

METHODOLOGY

As this is a conceptual/theoretical article, no new data were collected. Instead, we used a **theoretical-reasoning approach** to develop and justify the conceptual model. We began by synthesizing foundational theories of FNE, FL anxiety, and engagement, then surveyed recent empirical literature in each domain to validate assumed links. The “method” consisted of (a) defining constructs rigorously, (b) mapping proposed causal pathways among them, and (c) checking these paths against existing research findings. The mediational hypothesis (FNE → FLCA → engagement) was treated as a conceptual model rather than a statistically tested one. Thus, no statistical analysis or sampling was involved. Rather, we integrated theory-driven arguments with select findings from peer-reviewed studies (see References). This methodological stance follows precedents for conceptual modeling in language education (Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Fredricks et al., 2004).

PROPOSED RESULTS (CONCEPTUAL MODEL OUTCOMES)

Based on the theoretical framework and literature review, we outline the expected “results” of the proposed model. These are not empirical findings but logical inferences from the literature.

- **FNE positively affects FLCA.** Consistent with H1, students with higher fear of negative evaluation should report higher foreign language classroom anxiety. In practice, this means items reflecting worry about others' judgments on anxiety scales would load more strongly for these students. For example, a learner highly

concerned about being ridiculed for an English mistake is more likely to feel anxious about speaking tasks (Wardhani, 2019; Okyar, 2023).

- **FLCA negatively affects engagement.** Consistent with H2, students with higher FL anxiety are expected to show lower engagement. Concretely, they would participate less in class (behavioral), enjoy class less (emotional), and invest less effort (cognitive). This aligns with Fredricks et al.'s insight that engaged students feel positive, whereas anxious students feel worry or boredom (the latter being a lack of interest). For instance, a highly anxious student might avoid volunteering answers (reduced behavioral engagement) and feel disconnected or “done” with class (reduced emotional engagement).
- **FLCA mediates FNE's impact on engagement.** Under H3, the effect of FNE on engagement is largely indirect: fearing negative evaluation increases anxiety, which in turn suppresses engagement. One would thus expect a student with high FNE to be less engaged *because* that fear has elevated their FLCA. The model implies that if FLCA could be controlled, the direct effect of FNE on engagement would diminish.

Overall, the conceptual “results” predict a negative association between FNE and engagement, channeled through anxiety. We do not claim this holds in all cases (e.g. García-Castro & O'Reilly found a positive link in online learning, but it represents the normative expectation: anxiety stemming from evaluative fear typically hinders active involvement (Wang et al., 2021).

DISCUSSION

The proposed model is coherent with established theory. Fear of negative evaluation, as originally defined by Watson and Friend (1969), creates a hyper-sensitive stance to social judgment. In a language classroom, this leads students to interpret routine activities as stressful evaluative situations. Horwitz et al. (1986) explicitly identified evaluative fear as a core component of foreign language anxiety. Our model situates FNE as an antecedent trait that activates the FLCA system. When FLCA is triggered, MacIntyre and Gardner's (1994) processing-interference perspective comes into play: anxious thoughts intrude, dividing attention between worry and the language task. Thus FNE → anxiety has both affective and cognitive consequences.

These effects directly undermine student engagement. Behaviorally, anxious students will often «sit on their hands» instead of participating. Emotionally, they feel stress and embarrassment rather than interest or pride. Cognitively, they avoid deep processing or effortful learning out of fear of failure. Fredricks et al. (2004) note that emotional engagement is characterized by **lack of anxiety**. Thus, at high levels of FNE-induced FLCA, emotional engagement (positive feelings about class) is predictably low. Likewise, Wang et al. (2024) found that self-efficacy and adaptive beliefs boost engagement; conversely, anxiety

undermines those beliefs, leading to disengagement.

Our conceptual “results” echo patterns in the literature. Okyar’s (2023) finding – that speaking anxiety correlates with higher fear of negative evaluation and lower self-efficacy– illustrates the chain FNE→anxiety→reduced confidence, which is the psychological underpinning of disengagement. The large-scale study by Wang et al. (2021) showed that foreign language anxiety and self-efficacy sequentially mediated engagement, supporting our mediation hypothesis. The lone contradictory finding (García-Castro & O’Reilly, 2022) suggests the need to consider context: online learning during COVID may have altered how anxiety affects effort (perhaps anxious students studied more carefully at home). In typical classroom environments, anxiety is usually detrimental to active engagement.

In sum, the argument proceeds as follows: students who **fear negative evaluation** enter the classroom preloaded with self-doubt. As they engage in tasks, FLCA intensifies. This anxiety saps their motivation to engage – they stop volunteering, avoid eye contact, complain of dislike for class, or mentally check out. Thus, FNE indirectly leads to disengagement. Our model provides a unifying lens for understanding cases where anxious language learners seem “lazy” or “unmotivated”: often they are simply anxious about judgment, which blocks genuine participation.

IMPLICATIONS

Understanding the FNE-FLCA-engagement link has several pedagogical implications, especially for secondary EFL teachers. First, classroom climate should explicitly minimize evaluative threat. Wardhani (2019) recommends creating a “conducive, comfortable, and non-threatening” environment to reduce language anxiety. In practice, teachers can emphasize that mistakes are natural and learning opportunities, not reasons for ridicule. Group work or pair activities can allow shy students to practice language skills in lower-stakes settings. Public speaking tasks can be scaffolded carefully, and positive feedback should outweigh corrective feedback so as not to amplify fear.

Second, fostering self-efficacy and mastery goals can counteract anxiety. Wang et al. (2024) show that when students believe in their ability and value effort, engagement increases. Teachers should encourage growth mindsets and recognize improvement, which can reduce FNE by shifting focus from judgment to learning. For instance, praising effort rather than inherent ability can help anxious students stay engaged.

Third, teachers and schools in Kazakhstan (or similar contexts) should be aware of cultural factors. Suleimenova (2013) noted that the Kazakh system’s test orientation may inadvertently heighten FNE. Schools could consider incorporating more communicative and supportive assessment methods (e.g. portfolio grades, project work) instead of only high-stakes exams. Professional development for teachers on language anxiety could help them recognize when a

student's quietness reflects anxiety rather than lack of ability.

Finally, at the policy level, curricula might include social-emotional learning to help adolescents manage evaluative fears. Providing counseling or peer support for anxious learners could improve engagement. In sum, if FNE and FLCA are reduced – through pedagogical strategies that emphasize safety and positive motivation – student engagement should improve, leading to better language learning outcomes.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations apply to this conceptual analysis. First, as a theoretical model, it is not empirically validated. The proposed relationships are inferred from prior studies and theory, but they must be tested with actual data. Our literature review drew on studies from various contexts (e.g., Indonesia, Turkey, China, Costa Rica) which may not perfectly generalize to Kazakhstan's secondary schools. Cultural and instructional differences could moderate the FNE-engagement link, as hinted by the differing results in online vs. face-to-face settings.

Second, the model simplifies a complex reality. Student engagement is influenced by many factors beyond anxiety (family background, teacher quality, peer relations, curriculum, etc.), which we have not incorporated. FNE itself interacts with personality (e.g., shyness) and classroom dynamics; these were not modeled in detail. Also, our focus was on FNE and FLCA, but other forms of anxiety (e.g. general trait anxiety) and positive factors (e.g., enjoyment, as Dewaele & MacIntyre discuss) could play roles.

Third, definitions and measures vary. We treated engagement as Fredricks et al.'s tripartite construct, but some studies use different or narrower definitions (academic engagement, learning engagement, etc.). Similarly, our notion of FNE is based on Watson & Friend's classical definition and its language-learning analogs; different studies may operationalize these constructs inconsistently. This conceptual paper does not resolve these measurement issues.

Lastly, the paper is confined to a school setting (secondary EFL in Kazakhstan). The dynamics might differ at other levels (primary, tertiary) or in immersion versus foreign-language contexts. Hence, while we believe the model is broadly applicable, its specifics may need adaptation for other populations. Future empirical research should directly test these hypotheses with Kazakhstani students to confirm or refine the conceptual model.

CONCLUSION

This paper presents a comprehensive theoretical account of how fear of negative evaluation influences foreign language classroom anxiety and student engagement. Drawing on foundational and recent literature, we propose that FNE – the apprehension about being judged – acts as an antecedent to FLCA, and this heightened anxiety then undermines engagement in

learning English. High FNE and FLCA are expected to manifest as behavioral withdrawal, negative emotions, and minimal cognitive effort in language lessons. The model underscores the importance of addressing evaluative fears in the classroom to improve engagement.

For EFL educators, especially in Kazakhstan's secondary schools, the implications are clear: creating a supportive, low-threat language environment is crucial. By reducing students' fear of embarrassment and building confidence (Wardhani, 2019), teachers can help anxious learners participate more fully. Ultimately, recognizing the FNE→FLCA→engagement pathway can lead to targeted interventions – from classroom practices to curriculum design – that enable anxious students to become engaged language learners.

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