

## PERFECTIONISM AS A SOURCE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY IN EFL STUDENTS

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### Abstract

This study examines perfectionism as a significant source of foreign language anxiety among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. Perfectionism, defined as the tendency to set excessively high standards and engage in critical self-evaluation, has been increasingly recognized as a key psychological factor influencing language learning outcomes. A mixed-method approach was employed, integrating quantitative data from standardized questionnaires and qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate a strong relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and elevated levels of foreign language anxiety, particularly in speaking activities. Students with higher perfectionist tendencies demonstrated greater fear of negative evaluation, avoidance behavior, and reduced spontaneous communication. The study also reveals that while adaptive perfectionism may enhance motivation, maladaptive perfectionism significantly undermines communicative confidence. Pedagogical implications are discussed to support more psychologically responsive teaching practices.

**Keywords:** *EFL, foreign language anxiety, perfectionism, speaking anxiety, learner psychology, mixed-method research*

### Introduction

Foreign language learning is a complex process influenced not only by cognitive abilities but also by emotional and personality-related factors. Among these, foreign language anxiety is considered one of the most critical barriers to successful language acquisition. In recent years, researchers have increasingly focused on perfectionism as a potential contributor to this anxiety.

Perfectionism involves setting extremely high performance standards combined with a strong fear of making mistakes. In EFL contexts, such tendencies can significantly affect learners' willingness to communicate, especially in speaking activities where spontaneity and imperfection are inevitable.

This study aims to explore how perfectionism contributes to foreign language anxiety among EFL students by integrating both statistical patterns and personal experiences into a unified analysis.

### Literature Review

Perfectionism is commonly conceptualized as a multidimensional construct consisting of adaptive and maladaptive dimensions. Adaptive perfectionism is associated with goal orientation and persistence, whereas maladaptive perfectionism is characterized by self-criticism, fear of failure, and avoidance behaviors.

Foreign language anxiety, as defined by Horwitz et al. (1986), includes communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Previous research has shown that learners with perfectionist tendencies are more likely to experience anxiety due to their intolerance of errors and excessive self-monitoring during language production.

However, existing studies often treat perfectionism and anxiety separately, without fully integrating quantitative outcomes with learners' subjective experiences. This study addresses that gap by combining both perspectives.

## Methodology

The study employed a mixed-method design involving 50 undergraduate EFL students aged 18–24. Participants completed the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS) and the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore students' emotional and behavioral experiences in depth.

Quantitative data were analyzed using correlation analysis and descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis. The integration of both datasets allowed for a comprehensive interpretation of how perfectionism influences anxiety.

## Results and Discussion

The findings reveal a consistent and strong relationship between perfectionism and foreign language anxiety. Quantitative analysis showed a significant positive correlation between maladaptive perfectionism and anxiety levels ( $r = 0.62, p < 0.01$ ), indicating that students who exhibit higher levels of self-critical perfectionism tend to experience greater anxiety in EFL contexts.

More specifically, a large proportion of students with high perfectionism scores reported intense anxiety during speaking tasks. Approximately 70% of participants indicated that they felt uncomfortable speaking unless they were fully confident in their answers, while 65% reported avoiding participation in classroom discussions due to fear of making mistakes. These results suggest that perfectionist learners are highly sensitive to performance situations where errors are visible.

At the same time, qualitative insights provide a deeper understanding of these statistical patterns. Students consistently described a strong internal pressure to speak perfectly, often equating mistakes with personal failure. This belief led to heightened emotional strain and reluctance to engage in spontaneous communication. Many

participants reported that they mentally prepared sentences in advance before speaking, which reduced fluency and increased cognitive load during interaction.

A recurring theme across interviews was the fear of negative evaluation. Students expressed concern that both peers and teachers would judge them harshly for grammatical or pronunciation errors. This fear reinforced avoidance behaviors, such as remaining silent during discussions or waiting for others to speak first. Such behaviors align with the quantitative finding that a significant proportion of students avoid participation in speaking activities.

Interestingly, the data also revealed that not all forms of perfectionism are detrimental. Students with adaptive perfectionist traits demonstrated higher motivation and persistence in language learning tasks. Although they still experienced moderate anxiety, it did not prevent them from participating actively. This suggests that adaptive perfectionism may function as a motivational factor when balanced appropriately.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data highlights a clear pattern: maladaptive perfectionism amplifies foreign language anxiety by increasing self-imposed pressure, reducing willingness to communicate, and strengthening fear of evaluation. In contrast, adaptive perfectionism may support achievement-oriented behavior without significantly increasing anxiety levels.

From a cognitive perspective, excessive perfectionism appears to increase mental processing load during language production. Students engage in constant self-monitoring, which interferes with spontaneous speech and reduces fluency. Emotionally, perfectionist learners experience frustration and dissatisfaction when their output does not meet internal standards, further reinforcing anxiety cycles.

Pedagogically, these findings suggest that classroom environments should actively discourage perfection-oriented thinking. Teachers play a crucial role in reshaping learners' attitudes toward mistakes by promoting a growth-oriented mindset.

Encouraging communication over accuracy, normalizing errors as part of learning, and providing supportive feedback can significantly reduce anxiety levels among perfectionist learners.

### Conclusion

This study confirms that perfectionism, particularly in its maladaptive form, is a significant source of foreign language anxiety among EFL students. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrates that perfectionist learners are more prone to speaking anxiety, avoidance behavior, and fear of negative evaluation. However, adaptive perfectionism may have a positive motivational role when properly guided.

The findings highlight the importance of addressing psychological factors in language education. By fostering supportive learning environments and encouraging risk-taking, educators can help students overcome perfectionism-driven anxiety and improve communicative competence.

Future research should explore larger populations and consider additional variables such as cultural background, proficiency level, and instructional context to further understand the complexity of this relationship.

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