

# The Role of Native Speaker Peers on Language Learners' Fear of Negative Evaluation and Language Anxiety

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## Abstract

*This study investigated graduate-level international students' linguistic and learning experiences in classrooms predominated by native English-speaking (NES) students. The central objective was to discern the impact of NES students' presence on the fear of negative evaluation experienced by international students speaking English as a second language in an American university. A survey was initially administered to 22 graduate-level international students, and five international students, distinguished by heightened levels of anxiety associated with negative evaluation in classrooms primarily dominated by NES students, were interviewed. The interview data were analyzed with domain analysis. The findings elucidated that international students' fear of negative evaluation depended mainly on instructors' practices and international students' perceptions of NES peers' attitudes. Moreover, the increased fear of negative evaluation adversely impacted their linguistic behaviors and overall engagement with instructional content. The findings implied a need for more inclusive and safe learning environments in graduate schools.*

**Keywords:** fear of negative evaluation, native English speaker, language anxiety, languaging, participation

## Article info

Received: 12.10.2023

Revised: 06.12.2023

Accepted: 22.12.2023

Published online: 22.04.2024

## Introduction

Language anxiety has gathered profound attention in the last few decades due to its detrimental impacts on English language learners' academic achievement, comprehension and production in the target language, and classroom engagement of students (Aida, 1994; Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Trang et al., 2012; Xianping, 2003). Studies revealed that when second/foreign language learners experienced a high level of language anxiety, they often struggled to concentrate, had heart palpitations or dry throat, felt worried and scared, and even cried during tests due to language anxiety (Cheng, 2014; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Ran et al., 2022; Tanveer, 2007). Moreover, since they perceived 'languaging' as a threatening practice, they often sat in the back of the classroom, refrained from expressing their own opinions, and demonstrated lower school achievement than their native speaker counterparts (Conway, 2007; Pappamihel, 2002).

One of the components of language anxiety is the fear of negative evaluation. Studies revealed that language learners mostly experience fear of negative evaluation during listening and speaking (Ran et al., 2022) and often prefer staying silent in classrooms dominated by native English-speaking (NES) peers (Morita, 2004; Pappamihel, 2002). This way, they could avoid making mistakes and receiving unfavorable judgments from their NES peers with stronger language skills (Hanh, 2020; Hamouda, 2013; Price, 1991). To better understand the impact of NES peers' presence on language learners' learning and languaging experiences, this study explored international graduate students' experiences in two different classroom contexts: in classes where the majority of the classroom population was native speakers and in the classes, where the majority of the classroom population was international students. The study has important implications for professors teaching international students in classrooms predominantly populated with NES students.

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## Language Anxiety

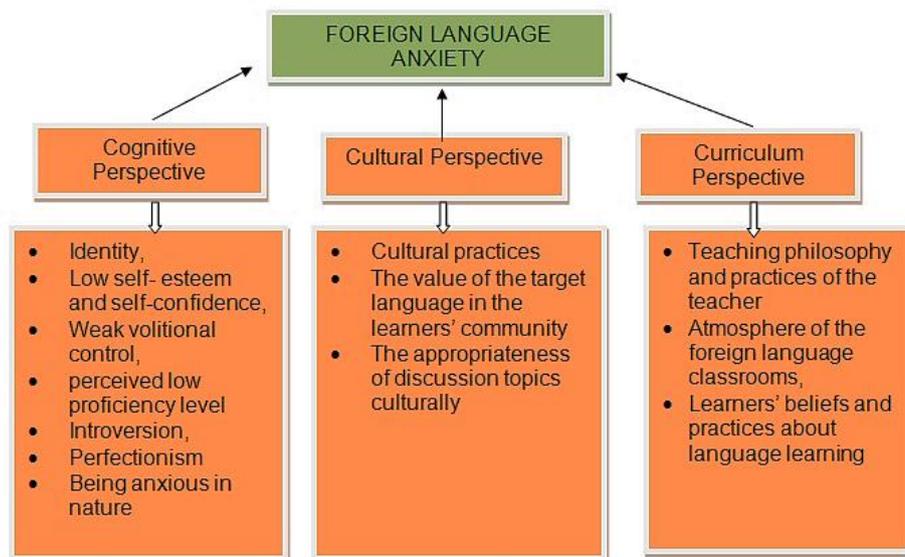
Anxiety includes trait, state, and situation-specific anxiety (Pappamihel, 2002). While trait anxiety is considered a personal characteristic of individuals, state anxiety appears in the presence of some factors, such as vicarious experiences. Test anxiety, public anxiety, or social anxiety are considered some types of state anxiety. Finally, situation-specific anxieties consider anxiety an emotion that appears in certain contexts.

Language anxiety is “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Horwitz et al., 1991, p. 31). It is considered situation-specific since it appears specifically in second/foreign language-learning contexts due to unique situations that occur exclusively in foreign language courses.

Studies highlighted that multiple factors might elicit language anxiety, and its subtle impacts on the language-learning process can have detrimental outcomes for those with a high degree of language anxiety (Macintyre & Gardner, 1991; Oad et al., 2020; Ohata, 2005; Xianping, 2003; Young, 1991). Zheng (2008) classified these factors into three groups (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Potential Sources of Language Anxiety (Zheng, 2008)*



The cognitive perspective explores the impact of anxiety on the efficient cognitive processing of information in the target language, which, in turn, impairs students' capacity to perform well in class activities and evaluations (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Tobias, 1986; Zheng, 2008). Individual factors such as identity, low self-esteem and self-confidence, weak volitional control, introversion, perfectionism, being naturally anxious, worry, and sentimentality were found to impede the cognitive processing of information (Conway, 2007; Eysenck, 1979; Oxford, 1999; Pappamihel, 2002; Trang et al., 2012; Zheng, 2008). Studies revealed that language learners with high language anxiety were more likely to be adversely affected by extraneous activities in the classroom and that these distractions had a detrimental impact on their working memory (Eysenck, 1979). Furthermore, due to intrusive cognitive processes, the subjects experienced difficulty maintaining focus during text comprehension. Their vocabulary acquisition exhibited a decelerated pace, accompanied by difficulties retrieving recently learned lexical items. Additionally, the individuals encountered impediments in the timely completion of classroom assignments, as documented by Kasap and Power (2019), Krashen (1985), MacIntyre and Gardner (1989), Lee (2009), Morita (2004), and Sellers (2000).

The cultural perspective analyzes the practices considered normal and appropriate in language learners' cultures but unacceptable and improper in the target culture because these practices can hinder learners' comprehension and classroom participation (Ohata, 2005). The practices, such as taking turns or raising hands to volunteer for answers, can be perceived differently and face-threatening by some second language (L2) learners, provoke their language anxiety levels, and lead to undesirable results. For example, Ohata (2005) reported in his

qualitative study with five Japanese language learners that Japanese cultural values, such as avoiding expressing ideas or not being assertive during discussions, did not align with the target culture. Thus, they increased the learners' anxiety levels and hampered their active classroom participation.

The curriculum perspective examines classroom factors contributing to language anxiety, such as teaching practices, the safety of the learning environment, teachers' error correction strategies, and teachers' attitudes to mistakes (Malik et al., 2020; Tercan & Dikilitas, 2015; Zheng, 2008). These factors can impact language-learning processes, language production, and classroom participation since they can threaten language learners' faces. For example, Fandiño Parra's research (2010) with 17 beginner-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students found that learners experienced more anxiety when teachers implemented classroom activities requiring a more spontaneous and authentic use of the foreign language. Moreover, Young (1991) noted that language learners with high language anxieties refrained from languaging in classrooms due to the teacher's excessive correction of errors as it was perceived as offensive and embarrassing (Young, 1991).

### Performance Anxieties

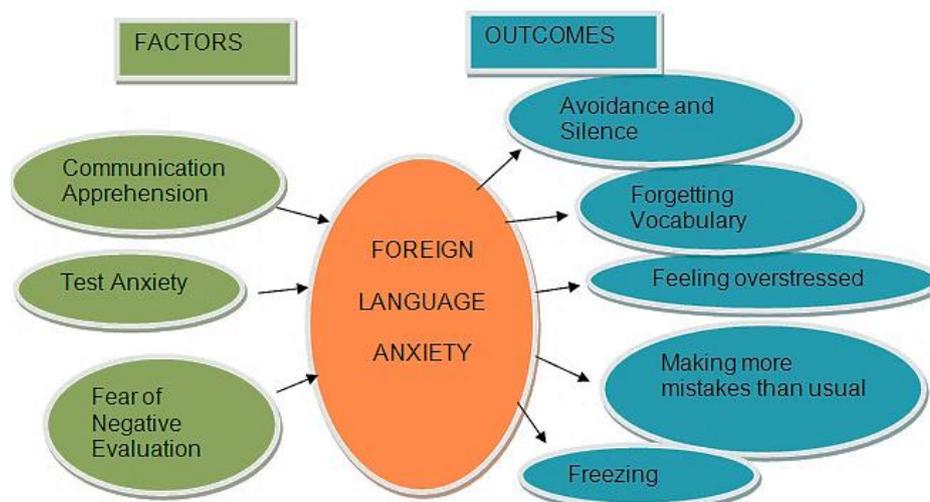
While some studies considered performance anxieties, i.e., communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation, as different types of language anxiety, other studies viewed them as components of language anxiety (Aydin et al., 2006; Tanveer, 2007). This study considers performance anxieties as factors contributing to language anxiety (See Figure 2).

### Communication Apprehension

McCroskey and colleagues (1985) define communication apprehension as the anxiety or fear an individual experiences when communicating with others, either in real-life or anticipated situations. Language learners experienced communication apprehension when they believed their language proficiency was insufficient to convey their ideas clearly (de Blakeley et al., 2017; Horwitz et al., 1991; Thompson & Lee, 2013). This lack of confidence caused learners to refrain from speaking in language classes and shy away from conversing with more proficient speakers (Conway, 2007; McCroskey et al., 1985; Pappamihel, 2002; Tsang, 2020). For example, Mustapha, Ismail, and Singh's (2010) study found that 45% of students studying Business Administration at a Malaysian college avoided public speaking and felt tense and nervous when communicating in group discussions due to high communication apprehension. As a result, communication apprehension may cause learners to avoid speaking in the classroom and experience high anxiety when asked to communicate with others (Lee, 2009; Morita, 2004).

### Figure 2

*Performance Anxieties as Factors Provoking Language Anxiety and Some Possible Outcomes*



### ***Test Anxiety***

Test anxiety is a form of performance anxiety that can contribute significantly to foreign language anxiety (Cheng et al., 2014). It is common among language learners who believe that their language skills are being tested, and they may fail in this test. Test anxiety can cause language learners to experience high levels of stress before an exam, leading to forgetfulness and difficulty recalling vocabulary and grammar during the test (Horwitz et al., 1991). This can also result in language learners feeling overstressed and frustrated and even crying during the tests due to fear of failure (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Because of test anxiety, language learners may perform poorly on language tests, exacerbating their future language anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986). This is particularly true when language learning is compulsory, and success on language tests is necessary to enroll in college or obtain a job (Zheng, 2008). Test anxiety is, therefore, a significant contributor to foreign language anxiety among language learners.

### ***Fear of Negative Evaluation***

The fear of negative evaluation is a type of performance anxiety that arises from the fear of being judged or making mistakes (Giray et al., 2022; Hanh, 2020; Hamouda, 2013). This type of anxiety is closely linked to communication apprehension and can be especially detrimental to language learners. Language learners may feel ashamed of their language skills and worry about making grammar or pronunciation mistakes, which can increase their language anxiety (Aydin, 2008; Mesri, 2012; Ohata, 2005). Studies have demonstrated that the fear of negative evaluation is a major contributor to foreign language anxiety (Aydin, 2008; Kitano, 2001; Koralp, 2005), and it can impact communication with teachers and classmates and attitudes toward language learning. It is essential to consider and address the fear of negative evaluation to address foreign language anxiety among language learners.

The fear of negative evaluation pertains to the apprehension caused by perceived disapproval or criticism from others for not meeting their expectations. Individuals may experience fear of negative evaluation when they sense negativity or disapproval from others (Giray et al., 2022). This fear can be particularly detrimental for language learners, as they may feel that those around them are evaluating their language skills, competence, and performance. Consequently, language learners may become overly concerned about making a good impression on others and fear that they will be humiliated or criticized if they make mistakes (Capan & Simsek, 2012; Mesri, 2012; Ohata, 2005).

Several studies have investigated the impact of the fear of negative evaluation on language learners' performance in the classroom (Tatar, 2005). For example, Capan and Simsek (2012) found that many Turkish EFL students reported feeling afraid to speak in class due to fear of making mistakes in front of others. Additionally, Price (1991) and Doyman and Yumru (2020) found that anxious students who compared their language skills to their peers and felt lower proficiencies were likelier to feel anxious and experience low classroom participation. These studies highlight how much the fear of negative evaluation can affect language learners' classroom participation and performance. Therefore, researchers and educators need to pay more attention to this factor in decreasing language learners' anxiety levels.

### **Factors Contributing to the Fear of Negative Evaluation**

The factors contributing to the fear of negative evaluation among language learners include language learners' personality traits, teachers' language ideologies, classroom dynamics, perfectionist tendencies, learners' multilingualism, and learners' ages and language proficiencies (de Blakeley et al., 2017; Dewaele, 2007; Dewaele et al., 2008; Jee, 2022; Oad et al., 2020; Thompson & Khawaja, 2016). These factors can be categorized under two themes: individual factors and classroom-related factors.

#### ***Individual Factors***

Perfectionist tendencies of language learners can be viewed as an individual factor contributing to the fear of negative evaluation among language learners. These tendencies may lead learners to feel threatened by the negative judgments of others (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). For example, Xianping (2003) found that perfectionist language learners were seldom satisfied with their achievements and were far more concerned about their limitations than non-perfectionist language learners. Zheng (2008) added that language learners with perfectionist tendencies believed they always had to speak native-like to avoid being scrutinized. After interviewing eight college-level L2 learners, Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) suggested that perfectionist

language learners' anxiety levels spiked substantially when speaking in front of others in the target language since it was considered a risk-taking activity. Thus, perfectionist tendencies may increase L2 learners' fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Lack of preparedness for classroom discussions can also contribute to language learners' fear of negative evaluation. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) observed that students tended to become tongue-tied in situations that demanded spontaneous language use but found comfort in rehearsed speeches and drills. Students may feel anxious about being called on because they fear making mistakes and receiving negative evaluations from teachers or peers (Pappamihel, 2002). Therefore, language learners may experience high levels of fear of negative evaluation due to their lack of preparedness for spontaneous language production (Fandiño Parra, 2010).

Self-perceived language ability or language ability mindsets can serve as a gauge for fear of negative evaluation among language learners (Kitano, 2001; Saito & Samimy, 1996; Wu et al., 2015). Young (1991) and Jee (2022) contend that students who perceived their language proficiency as low were more vulnerable to fear of negative evaluations in class. Ozdemir and Papi (2022) found that students' beliefs about the malleability of their language learning intelligence influenced their anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Kitano's (2001) and Zarei and Moussavou's (2022) studies revealed that the second language learners' levels of fear of negative evaluation relate to their self-perceived speaking skills and that this correlation also impacted their language anxieties. Thus, language learners who deemed their communicative competence in the target language inadequate to express themselves or communicate with the native speakers were likely to experience high levels of fear of negative evaluation in the classroom.

Age could also be considered a factor affecting the fear of negative evaluation (de Blakeley et al., 2017; Santos et al., 2017). Frost et al. (1995) revealed that low self-esteem led to a higher fear of negative evaluation, and Orth et al. (2010) argued that people generally gain self-esteem as they grow older. Aydin (2008) noted that younger language learners tended to worry about their peers' opinions and were often preoccupied with pleasing others in foreign language classes compared to older students (Young, 1992). Consequently, higher self-esteem in older adults may represent a lesser level of fear of negative evaluation (Santos et al., 2017).

Finally, gender may play a role in determining language learners' fear of negative evaluation (Dewaele, 2007). However, the role of gender in fear of negative evaluation is controversial. While some studies revealed a lower threshold of fear of negative evaluation among females (Mesri, 2012; Ozturk & Gurbuz, 2013; Ran et al., 2022), others suggested that males suffer from the fear of negative evaluation more than females (Capan & Simsek, 2012; Zheng, 2008). Pappamihel (2002) argued that males are less likely to acknowledge their fears, which could be one reason why some studies have found females to be more afraid of being judged than males. As a result, males and females might differ in experiencing fear of negative evaluation in language classes.

### ***Classroom-Related Factors***

The fear of negative evaluation can also be increased due to the teachers' practices (Horwitz et al., 1986; Pappamihel, 2002; Yan & Horwitz, 2008). Teachers' constructive feedback or error corrections can give language learners the impression that they are incapable of mastering the target language. Von Wörde (2003) discovered in his study involving 15 language learners that students experienced irritation and frustration, particularly when teachers started to admonish them for their errors. Additionally, Capan and Simsek's (2012) research, which involved 131 Turkish college-level English language learners, found that many students feared making mistakes due to teachers' potential negative attitudes or feedback. Therefore, teachers' practices may increase the fear of negative evaluation if students perceive any threats to their faces.

The presence of native speakers or more proficient peers in a shared classroom may provoke the fear of negative evaluation among language learners (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Conway, 2007; Doyman & Yumru, 2020; Ohata, 2005; Pappamihel, 2002). For instance, many language learners expressed concerns about their performance during classroom activities and oral presentations due to the fear of negative judgments or humiliation from more proficient peers in Ohata's (2005) and Young's (1991) studies. Similarly, Conway (2007) claims that "anxious students compare their skills with native speakers of the target language, which leads to embarrassment and shame when they are not pronouncing exactly like the native speakers" (p. 5). Similarly, Pappamihel (2002) reported higher levels of fear of negative evaluation among ESL students in mainstream classrooms rather than in ESOL classrooms due to the presence of native speakers in mainstream classrooms.

Some teacher practices can decrease students' fear of negative evaluation and anxiety. For example, Patra et al. (2022) revealed in their study with 76 male EFL learners that corrective feedback diminished anxiety and increased students' engagement. Fattahi-Marnani and Cuocci (2022) suggested that teachers know their students' ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds better to relate the topics to their lives. Seltzer and de los Ros (2018) suggested that teachers design critical discussions in their study so that students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds could connect with each other. Finally, Russell (2020) suggested that teachers can provide EFL students with learning tips, have them do some relaxation activities such as deep breathing, assigned tasks such as role plays or journaling to express their emotions in speaking a foreign language and construct support teams.

### **The Impacts of Fear of Negative Evaluation on Student Engagement**

The fear of negative evaluation can reduce student engagement as it can cause students to become overly worried about making mistakes and being judged by others (Morita, 2004; Tatar, 2005). Specifically, speaking activities may be perceived as threatening for language learners who experience this fear, leading to a reluctance to initiate conversations and minimal interaction during group discussions (Xianping, 2003; Zarei & Moussavou, 2022). Studies showed that students with high levels of fear of negative evaluation often remained passive in class, avoided participating in activities that could help them practice their speaking skills, and allowed them opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge (Xianping, 2003).

The fear of negative evaluation can extend its adverse impact on language output. Individuals harboring this fear often display an intensified focus on the precision of language production. Paradoxically, their excessive concern about avoiding mistakes may lead to an elevated occurrence of errors in their linguistic output (Kasap, 2023; Ludwig, 1982; Pak, 2014). Xianping's (2003) research, which involved interviews and observations of 97 non-English major college students, revealed that those with high levels of fear of evaluation tended to speak less, produce shorter sentences, and make more errors in their output. Similarly, Ran et al. (2022) noted that students with high levels of fear of negative evaluation spoke slowly, frequently forgot vocabulary and grammar rules, and could not convey their messages in the target language. Finally, Nikolov and Djigunovic (2006) revealed that students had "long mid-clause pauses, and rarely repeated the main points and started with false discourse to the conversation" due to the high levels of fear of negative evaluation (p. 246).

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This qualitative research study is designed as a multiple case study. Multiple case studies help researchers accumulate a rich and diverse set of data, enhancing the depth of understanding of the subject under investigation (Crowe et al., 2011). Moreover, this design gives researchers a more holistic understanding of a complex phenomenon. This multi-case study aimed to explore the international graduate students' languaging and learning experiences in classrooms involving native English speakers (NES) peers. Specifically, the study explored the role of native-speaker peers in students' fear of negative evaluation and classroom participation. Thus, it sought answers to the following questions:

1. How does the presence of native-speaker peers influence international graduate students' fear of negative evaluation?
2. How does the presence of native-speaker peers influence international graduate students' participation?

The research methodology employed in this study is a component of my master's thesis submitted to the University of Florida. It is important to note that while this manuscript focuses on specific aspects of the larger thesis, the methodology outlined here represents a key element of the comprehensive research conducted for the completion of my master's degree.

### **Context**

This study took place in a public university in the U.S.A. International students who studied at this university had to score above 90 on the TOEFL IBT test to get admitted to the graduate programs in this university. Moreover, to get accepted to graduate programs at this university, all students had to score above a certain score on the GRE test, which measures students' reading, writing, and analytical thinking skills. Graduate programs required

students to take compulsory and elective courses. While compulsory courses were offered only to students in specific programs, elective courses were offered to students studying in different disciplines. Based on students' interests and familiarity with the content, while some courses were chosen mainly by native English students (e.g., history of American Education), others were chosen by mostly international students (e.g., Cross-cultural Communications).

## Participants

The survey participants were selected with convenience sampling as the first author distributed the survey link to people in her social network. This sampling strategy implied that everyone in the population did not have an equal chance of being selected, and thus, the findings of the survey results cannot be generalized to the whole NNS graduate student population in the USA. As the function of the survey was to determine interview participants and not propose any generalizable hypothesis, convenience sampling was considered appropriate for this study. The survey was given to 22 graduate students studying at various universities in the United States. The participants were from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Chinese (9), Turkish (5), Arab (2), Korean (2), Persian (1), Japanese (1), Dutch (1), and German (1). Sixteen of the participants were female, and six were male. The age range of participants varied from 18 to 55, with 59% falling within the 26-35 age group. A significant majority (82%) of participants were pursuing graduate studies in ESOL/Bilingual Education or Linguistics. All participants had initially learned English as a foreign language in their home countries and currently spoke it at an advanced level as a second language. Before recruitment, it was confirmed that all participants took courses in classes where the majority of students were native speakers and classes where the majority were non-native speakers.

Interview participants were selected using a purposive sampling method (Palinkas et al., 2015). From the survey participants, five participants exhibiting a notable fear of negative evaluation in classrooms predominantly composed of native speakers were selected for individual interviews to delve deeper into their experiences in such settings. All participants were female, with three—Bao, Yin, and Zhen—being of Chinese descent, Alina being Arab, and Daria being German. Four of the participants—Bao, Yin, Zhen, and Daria—were graduates. Students in the ESOL/Bilingual Education program, while Alina pursued her graduate studies in the Linguistics department. All participants were fluent in English.

## Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection tools of this study included only interviews. However, the researchers used an online survey only to determine the interview participants. The online survey was prepared in the Qualtrics program. The survey included 60 items and was prepared as a combination and adaptation of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) designed by Horwitz (1986), the English Language Anxiety Scale (ELAS) (Pappamihel, 2002), the Japanese Class Anxiety Scale developed by Kitano (2001), Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (Leary, 1983) and the researcher's personal experiences. Since this study specifically examined the role of native speakers on fear of negative evaluation and there was no scale that served this purpose, different items that focused on native speakers' presence were selected from the abovementioned scales. The survey data were analyzed with descriptive statistics. The five students who scored higher mean scores in certain items ( $m > 3.7$  out of 5.0) were selected for the interviews as their scores implied a high level of language anxiety in classrooms with predominantly native English speakers.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant to explore international students' experiences in classrooms with predominantly NES students. Each interview with the five participants involved 10 to 12 open-ended questions and took 35-45 minutes. The questions included items regarding NES students' attitudes to their presence or contributions, how these attitudes influenced their academic or linguistic performance and instructors' inclusive practices and interactions with them. These items were determined based on participants' answers to the survey questions and the purpose of this study. The interviews were audio-recorded to be transcribed and analyzed later with the "Domain Analysis" technique (Spradley, 1979).

Domain analysis was selected because we considered graduate classrooms as one domain that had different demographics (involved more culturally and linguistically diverse students compared to undergraduate programs) and jargon as they included more academic and critical discussions. The first step of the data analysis process involved identifying the elements related to the fear of negative evaluation in the data and coding them with key terms such as biased attitudes, language proficiency as power and misinterpretations of international students' contributions. The second step included organizing the key terms into categories based on the elements

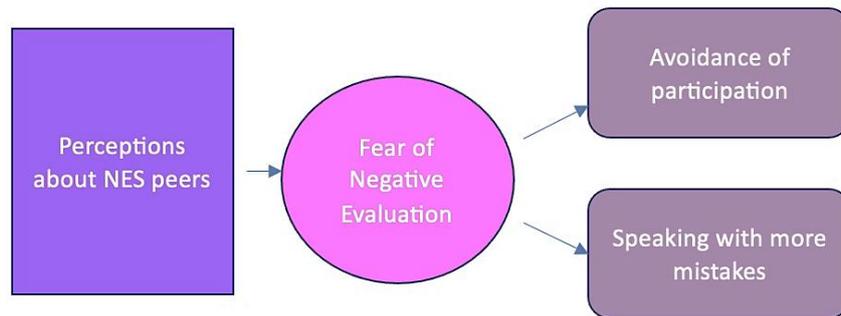
of graduate programs, such as instructors, peers, and pedagogies. Finally, the related key terms, such as perceptions, participation, and production, were compiled under the cover terms and presented as themes.

### Findings

The findings revealed that the presence of NES peers influenced international graduate students' fear of negative evaluation and participation in class activities. The data showed that international students' perceptions of their NES peers' attitudes and practices determined their fear of negative evaluation. Based on their perceptions, this fear influenced both their engagement with the activities and languaging practices (see Figure 3).

#### Figure 3

*The Impacts of NES Presence on Fear of Negative Evaluation*



#### International Students' Perceptions of the NES Peers' Attitudes and Practices

All participants highlighted that their NES peers were generally benevolent towards them and did not judge them based on their language proficiency. However, they also agreed that some NES peers demonstrated biased attitudes toward international students, often increasing their fear of negative evaluation. Zhen explained the negative attitudes of her NES peers as such:

Students in the elementary education program, some of them are really bad... in terms of their attitude to international students and they, I guess, intentionally give us the pressure, give us the fear like they don't care about us, and they don't want to hear our ideas or our decisions. They don't want to interact with us in group discussions. They just express what they think as group idea. That makes me feel really bad, so I don't like the classes I had with students in the elementary education program (96-98).

Daria experienced similar discriminatory attitudes from some of her NES peers, and claimed that international students' non-native accents were the main reason for these attitudes. She said:

With native speakers, I am afraid that they don't understand me first of all because of my accent, because I experienced that people asked me 'what?', and then I repeated, and they said 'what?' again. And that happened maybe three times, so that happened often. And in that cases, I try to speak more pronounced, but at times people couldn't understand me, I don't know why. So that was pretty uncomfortable situation, and people in this academic language, people are speaking on the very high level, and I just try to, I just feel I have to match that somehow (151).

Alina claimed that some of her NES peers positioned her as cognitively incompetent due to her linguistic 'deficiencies.' She said:

I feel like when they are listening to me, if you are some non-native or your sentence is full of mistakes, I feel like they perceive you as a person who is, I don't want to say stupid, but you need to speak more English, or you need to learn before speaking (8).

These negative attitudes often increase ESL students' fear of negative evaluation. Zhen explained the situation as such:

If they (NES peers) try to help and accept us as who we are and how our English is, we will have lower anxiety. If you can sense from her or his facial expression, 'oh maybe he or she doesn't like my English and doesn't want to pay attention', we say, 'oh my God, I have to try really better to express my ideas'. So when I have teammates who are native English speakers, they didn't pay attention to what I am saying, I feel a little bit pissed off, frustrated, and also nervous ... They don't care what international students think (90).

In sum, international students perceived negative vibes from some of their NES peers due to their accents or identities. When their attitudes or practices threatened their faces or positioned them cognitively inferior, their fear of negative evaluation increased.

### **The Impact of the NES Presence on International Students' Participation**

Due to their linguistic advantage, the international students agreed that their NES peers were one step ahead of them in learning or participation. Daria exemplified the situation as such:

Let's say some philosophical discussions about something, they, for sure, are advantaged, and I mean before I have formed my thoughts about something on the high level like this, at least myself, ... you have them right there. Just being a native speaker is a big advantage; you have two pieces together (181).

Yin agreed with Daria and noted that "sometimes, international students, non-native students, they will also have very quick ideas, but due to the language barrier, they may have a hard time explaining their ideas" (323).

Instructors' interactions with NES peers also influenced ESL students' engagement with the content. All participants agreed that instructors interacted with their NES peers more often than the international students. Alina shared her observation about instructors' attitudes as such: "Professors sometimes feel more comfortable talking with the native speakers because they get the answer quickly, and they can understand any small details when they are saying... They are looking at them more than they are looking at non-native speakers" (14). Similarly, Daria complained that instructors provided more compliments to her NES peers than she did, although she tried very hard to be successful in the courses.

Instructors' limited comprehension or ignorance of international students' ideas also influenced their fear of negative evaluation. Daria and Zhen claimed that instructors had difficulties understanding the international students' points due to their linguistic 'limitations' and rarely asked for clarification, implying that they did not value them. Zhen said:

One thing I found always is that they didn't understand what we were talking about. Most of the time, they won't ask questions to clarify ideas. So they will just rephrase what we said, but that's not exactly our words or our thoughts. That's just how they think we said. So we had different ideas. What the professor said was not our words. They did not understand, but they didn't want to clarify, I don't know why. Maybe they don't want to make us feel bad, or they just don't want to waste time listening to us (96).

The discussion topics that required a high level of academic language were another point that influenced ESL students' engagement and fear of negative evaluation. Daria expressed that the philosophical topics requiring a high level of academic language put her under stress because she felt that her academic English language skills sometimes remained insufficient to understand and discuss these topics (177). Similarly, Alina said she would avoid discussing topics such as religion that made her uncomfortable because they could leave an unfavorable impression on her NES peers. Thus, discussion topics discussed in the classrooms could also influence ESL students' fear of negative evaluation.

All participants noted that the presence of NES peers influenced their engagement and willingness to participate considerably because they feared being judged by them when they made a mistake. For example, Daria proposed that she wanted to speak in a native-like manner, especially with her pronunciation, to leave good impressions on her NES peers or professors (157). Thus, they claimed they would participate only when they were confident in their languaging practices. For example, Alina emphasized that she spoke whenever she was sure that her sentences were accurately formed because she did not want to sound stupid. Zhen said:

What I observe is all classmates, when we had more native speakers, we would prefer not to participate. I don't know whether because we don't know the answer, or like me, we are just afraid of making mistakes (88).

Finally, they expressed that they would participate in lessons more if they did not fear making mistakes. For example, Yin said: “If I didn’t really care how others judge my pronunciation or my proficiency, I would like volunteering more, I guess” (345).

In conclusion, all participants acknowledged that the presence of NES peers in their classrooms influenced instructors’ practices, linguistic requirements of the discussion topics, and their feelings about fear of making mistakes and being judged. International students perceived the privilege of NES peers’ practices in classrooms with NES peers and felt more fear of negative evaluation as they practiced differently from them. These varying practices influenced their participation and engagement in the lessons.

### **The Impact of the NES Presence on International Students’ Language Practices**

Most participants felt comfortable interacting with other international and NES people in their social network. For example, Alina said, “When I am speaking with my friends, I feel more free. I can use more idioms. I feel like I am more like a native” (8). Zhen explained why she felt less anxious around other international students: “I feel less anxious. I don’t know why, I guess because I think we are all learners, and it’s normal to make mistakes.”

On the other hand, they felt very anxious and worried about being negatively judged when interacting with their more proficient international and native English-speaker classmates. These feelings, in return, influenced their languaging practices negatively and prevented them from demonstrating their full linguistic potential. For example, Daria said:

I feel very much that I have to speak very well and also my pronunciation on one hand, I feel like I try to suppress my accent, my German accent, but then when I try harder, it comes out more. Because I am more tense, and I am less... I think I speak better English if I’m more relaxed. Then, the American pronunciation would come out better. Then being tense causes me to pronounce it more hard like a German word. (157).

She added the following to explain how her sentences were influenced by her anxiety as such:

It’s the vocabulary..., I cannot find the right word in English. And then, I am afraid that my sentences are kind of very simple maybe, you know, because if you try to explain something difficult or use simple words, it may sound like, you sound like low-level English, you know... when I then use simple words to explain something, that’s when I feel all that may be sounding very bad, or I mix the forms, maybe I use the present form, or I make a mistake maybe with the tenses or sentence structure sometimes depending (193).

To sum up, international students had less anxiety around other international students than their NES peers. Moreover, international students’ fear of negative evaluation influenced their languaging practices negatively.

## **Discussion**

The findings revealed that the international students’ fear of negative evaluation increased, whereas their willingness to participate in whole-class discussions decreased in the presence of native English speaker peers in the classrooms. The fear of negative evaluation among international learners was mainly influenced by their perceptions of their native English-speaking (NES) students’ attitudes and practices. The international graduate students often harbored a pervasive belief that their NES counterparts perceived them as outsiders and as academically less proficient, largely on the basis of their discernible international accents (Ozdemir & Papi, 2022; Tan et al., 2021). This perception led to a pronounced sense of otherization within the classroom environment (Coppinger & Sheridan, 2022). Thus, in settings predominantly populated by NES peers, international students commonly experienced heightened levels of anxiety. This dynamic underscores the importance of creating inclusive, safe, supportive educational environments in graduate schools that foster cultural understanding and appreciation for linguistic diversity (Bruen & Kelly, 2017; Tercan & Dikilitas, 2015). Addressing these perceptions and fostering an atmosphere of acceptance and mutual respect is imperative, ultimately enhancing the overall learning experience for all students involved (Ozdemir & Papi, 2022).

Instructors’ practices were the second factor that influenced the international students’ fear of negative evaluation, as also found in Malik et al. (2020). Participants in the study noted that certain aspects of classroom practices, such as the way teachers corrected errors, their interactions with international and NES students, and the topics covered in group and class discussions, could negatively impact international students’ fear of negative evaluation. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) found that specific teacher practices, such as failing to

acknowledge the achievements of international students, engaging in warmer social interactions with NES students, or displaying varied attitudes during corrections, can increase international students' anxiety and influence their language production, and class participation. Moreover, the unfamiliarity of international students with the discussed topics can influence their language use and occasionally decrease engagement. These findings implied that academic staff had an important role in international students' attitudes to courses and engagement with the content. Thus, academic staff who had international students in their classrooms need to design their curriculum, teaching practices and interaction patterns in an inclusive way that linguistic diversity is celebrated and mistakes are seen as valuable learning opportunities rather than sources of anxiety.

The fear of negative evaluation impacted the classroom participation of international students considerably, primarily due to their fear of being judged by their NES peers who had linguistic power in the classrooms. This erratic power dynamic often created a perceived discrepancy in communication proficiency, leading international students to exhibit reticence in participating actively in classroom discussions, as also found in Ran et al. (2022). They may have felt a sense of apprehension or inadequacy and insecurity in their linguistic or academic abilities around NES students as they positioned NES students more knowledgeable (Doyman & Yumru, 2020; Russell, 2020; Tan et al., 2021). When instructors' practices, such as more positive feedback to NES students' contributions, confirmed this belief, their fear of negative evaluation was increased, and international students behaved abstentionist, as also revealed in Ran et al.'s (2022) and Fattahi-Marnani and Cuocci's (2022) studies. As a result, it is essential for educators to implement strategies that level the playing field, ensuring that all students, regardless of their linguistic background, have equal opportunities to contribute meaningfully to the learning environment. Moreover, instructors can engage students in critical discussions or create support teams that build connections between NES and international students and reveal international students' expertise, as suggested by Seltzer and de los Rios (2018) and Russell (2020).

Lastly, the presence of NES peers exerted a discernible influence on the languaging practices of international students, with notable variations in response (Ludwig, 1982). When in the company of NES peers, some students experienced a heightened fear of errors, driven by the desire to attain a level of linguistic proficiency akin to that of a native speaker (Pak, 2014). This pursuit of perfection inadvertently exacerbated their anxiety levels, leading to an increase in linguistic missteps (Ran et al., 2022; Xianping, 2003). Over time, this dynamic began to take a toll on their physical well-being within the classroom environment. These findings underscore the complex interplay between language anxiety, peer dynamics, and the resultant impact on students' overall well-being. The findings implied a need for critical discussions that center language learners' feelings in NES-dominant classrooms so that NES students can be more inviting, respectful, and less judgmental in their interactions with international students. Russell (2020) suggested support teams in classrooms where students with higher levels of fear of negative evaluation can learn from peers and get encouraged in their language productions. A study group composed of NES students can also develop relations between international and NES students.

## Conclusion

The findings of this research indicate a prevalent occurrence of the fear of negative evaluation among graduate-level international learners. This study sought to elucidate the experiences of international students who exhibited heightened levels of this fear in response to the presence of native speakers in the classroom. It is noteworthy to acknowledge that native speakers themselves may also experience a fear of negative evaluation, potentially stemming from various factors. This apprehension could impede their active participation and verbal communication. Given this phenomenon's complexity and substantial impact on students' inclination to engage in classroom activities and oral expression, further investigation is warranted.

The findings suggest that the apprehension of international graduate students towards negative evaluation was shaped by their interactions with native speakers, as well as the perfectionist tendencies of either native speakers or international learners, along with classroom methodologies, as also found by Ozdemir and Papi (2022). Additionally, the study demonstrated that, apart from the fear of negative evaluation, personal traits like personality, perfectionism, and readiness had an adverse impact on L2 learners' classroom engagement. Lastly, it was proposed that a heightened fear of negative evaluation impeded the accuracy of oral language expression.

The findings imply that creating a safe environment where linguistic and cultural diversity are valued, international students' home languages can be used, and linguistic mistakes are perceived as opportunities to learn is important in graduate schools that involve international students (Aptoula, 2022). Academic staff need to adopt more inclusive approaches in their interactions with their NES and international students and determine the

discussion topics (Fattahi-Marnani & Cuocci, 2022). They can also provide international students with corrective and positive feedback or language learning tips to decrease their anxiety (Giray et al., 2022; Patra et al., 2022). Finally, since NES peers' attitudes had an essential role in provoking international students' fear of negative evaluation, it is crucial to open discussions in the classrooms in which international students' feelings can be negotiated, and NES students' awareness can be increased (Seltzer & de los Rios, 2018). Creating a support group composed of NES students can also build connections among NES and international students and decrease fear of negative evaluation (Russell, 2020).

To sum up, this research enriches the existing literature by shedding light on the experiences of international learners in classrooms predominantly occupied by native English-speaking (NES) students. The study underscores that the presence of NES students may trigger a heightened fear of negative evaluation among international learners, leading to more adverse consequences compared to classrooms primarily comprised of international students. Considering these findings, educators in such settings need to be cognizant of the potential negative impacts of NES presence and take proactive measures to mitigate the influence of fear of negative evaluation arising from their presence.

### **Future Research**

Although this study revealed significant findings regarding the learning environments and peer interactions in classrooms, predominantly NES students, it had limitations. Future research studies can involve more students with high levels of anxiety, not only at the graduate level but also at the undergraduate level. Moreover, involving international students with low-level anxiety can be an essential contribution as it can highlight exemplary practices that comfort international students. Lastly, studies that involved international students in other countries where English is spoken as the international language can reveal essential findings to understand dynamics in the classrooms where the power relations differ from graduate schools in the U.S.A.

This research specifically addresses the adverse impact of native speaker presence on classroom involvement and the proficiency of language expression, relying solely on individual interviews. The information gleaned from these interviews solely represents the viewpoints and conjectures of the participants. To address this limitation, subsequent studies could explore the same issue through additional data collection methods. This approach would offer researchers a variety of vantage points to analyze the situation and enable a comparison of students' perspectives with their actual experiences. It also opens the door to incorporating the perspective of educators, potentially yielding more robust and reliable findings.

Finally, further investigation into the fear of negative evaluation arising from the presence of native speakers is crucial to supporting international learners in ESL environments. This phenomenon has also been indicated by numerous studies, including the current one, to affect the classroom behaviors of international learners adversely (Aydin, 2008; Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Horwitz et al., 1986; Kitano, 2001; Pappamihel, 2002). Additionally, various elements such as teachers' attitudes, learners' perfectionist tendencies, personality traits, preparedness, and the attitudes of native speakers can impact the levels of fear of negative evaluation experienced by international learners (Shabani, 2012; Kitano, 2001; Pappamihel, 2002). Researching any of these factors further could substantially contribute to the existing body of literature.

### **Code of Ethics**

This research study was approved to be ethically appropriate with the decision of the Behavioral/NonMedical Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Florida, dated on August 28, 2013, and numbered IRB201700418.

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### **Ana Dili İngilizce Olan Öğrencilerin, Uluslararası Öğrencilerin Hissettikleri Olumsuz Değerlendirilme Korkusu ve Dil Kaygısındaki Rolü**

#### **Öz**

*Bu araştırma, lisansüstü düzeydeki uluslararası öğrencilerin, ana dili İngilizce olan öğrencilerin ağırlıkta olduğu sınıflardaki dil ve öğrenme deneyimlerini araştırmıştır. Çalışmanın amacı, ana dili İngilizce olan öğrencilerin varlığının, bir Amerikan üniversitesinde İngilizceyi ikinci dil olarak konuşan uluslararası öğrencilerin hissettikleri olumsuz değerlendirilme korkusu üzerindeki etkisini ortaya çıkarmaktır. Öncelikle 22 lisansüstü düzeydeki uluslararası öğrenciye bir anket uygulanmış ve ağırlıklı olarak ana dili İngilizce olan öğrencilerin bulunduğu sınıflarda olumsuz değerlendirilmeyle ilişkili yüksek kaygı düzeyleriyle öne çıkan beş uluslararası öğrenciyle röportaj yapılmıştır. Röportaj verileri içerik analizi ile analiz edilmiştir. Bulgular, uluslararası öğrencilerin olumsuz değerlendirilme korkusunun temel olarak eğitmenlerin uygulamalarına ve uluslararası öğrencilerin ana dili İngilizce olan akranlarının tutumlarına ilişkin algılarına bağlı olduğunu ortaya koymuştur. Dahası, artan olumsuz değerlendirilme korkusu, dil kullanımlarla ve derse genel katılımlarını olumsuz yönde etkilemiştir. Bulgular, lisansüstü programlarda daha kapsayıcı ve güvenli öğrenme ortamlarına ihtiyaç duyulduğunu göstermiştir.*

*Anahtar kelimeler:* olumsuz değerlendirilme korkusu, ana dili İngilizce olan öğrenciler, dil kaygısı, dil kullanımı, derse katılım