# Chapter 14
# Anxiety in English Language Learning

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## 14.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on anxiety in English language learning (ELL). Anxiety is a complicated subjective feeling including apprehension, nervousness, tension, and worry related to autonomic nervous system reactions (Spielberger, 1983). Previous studies indicate that anxiety can prevent students from understanding and producing good English and can influence their learning process (Abrar et al., 2022; Damayanti & Listyani, 2020). This is because, rather than focusing on the task itself, anxious English learners may be affected by negative self-awareness. For example, Szyszka (2011) found that English as a foreign language (EFL) participants' self-perceived English pronunciation competence was negatively correlated to their language anxiety level. As a result, it is believed that task-irrelevant mental activities will use limited cognitive resources, which leaves insufficient task-relevant resources (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). Language learning is believed to be a mental process that includes encoding, storage, and retrieval activities, and anxiety can influence each of these three activities by distracting the attention of anxious students (He, 2018; MacIntyre, 1995). Less anxious students, in contrast, can focus more on language learning since they have lower instead of exaggerated anxiety levels.

Recent studies on the relationship between anxiety and ELL demonstrated that anxiety may be a primary factor influencing ELL achievement in a negative way (Gopang et al., 2015; He, 2013, 2017; Mouhoubi-Messadh & Khaldi, 2022; Zheng & Cheng, 2018). According to He (2018), anxiety is not always debilitating; it may also facilitate learning by motivating learners to work hard on English learning

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tasks. Facilitating anxiety results in better performance while debilitating anxiety leads to worse performance. Nevertheless, the possibility should not be overlooked that facilitating anxiety and debilitating anxiety are simply the two ends of the same anxiety continuum (Al-Khasawneh, 2016; Dewaele, 2013). Therefore, the relevant stakeholders (e.g., learners, parents, teachers, and teacher educators) must know more about anxiety in ELL. This chapter aims to help these stakeholders by outlining what anxiety is and its relationship with ELL and reviewing recent studies about anxiety and ELL. The chapter also offers a practical discussion of how anxiety can be transformed into a positive resource and incorporated into the ELL process (including examples of activities and strategies). It also includes suggestions for action research in the TESOL classroom, as well as recommendations for language teacher educators and CPD providers.

## 14.2   What Is Anxiety?

Scholars of various theoretical orientations have offered several definitions of anxiety (e.g., Alamer & Almulhim, 2021; Faruq, 2019; Spielberger, 1983; Tobias, 1986). Among them, Chiang (2006) argues that Spielberger's definition (1983) is more widely accepted than the others. Anxiety is often differentiated into different categories, for example, state versus trait anxiety, general versus specific anxiety, and facilitating versus debilitating anxiety (Chiang, 2006; He, 2018). These different categories of anxiety are discussed in turn below.

According to Spielberger (1983), state anxiety refers to an immediate subjective emotion or feeling, including apprehension, nervousness, tension, and worry related to the autonomic nervous system in reaction to a specific stimulus, such as taking a test or giving a presentation. In comparison, trait anxiety refers to a sort of fixed likelihood of becoming nervous in a wide range of dangerous or threatening situations. Compared to students with low trait anxiety, those with high trait anxiety may become more anxious (i.e., experience greater anxiety intensity) during language learning. Simply put, "state anxiety is the reaction, and trait anxiety represents the tendency to react in an anxious manner" (MacIntyre, 1995, p. 93). Although the state versus trait anxiety distinction is essential, researchers (e.g., King et al., 2005) have argued that this distinction is unsatisfactory since these two types of anxiety should be measured against specific occasions. Neither of them describes the complicated human-environment interactions explicitly and comprehensively when human emotions and behaviours are involved. Some researchers have, therefore, argued that the importance of the interaction between the distinct features of a particular situation and personal trait anxiety should be emphasized, which has resulted in the development of situation-specific anxiety inventories such as test anxiety measurements (e.g., Djafri & Wimbarti, 2018; He, 2011; Horwitz et al., 1986; Mouhoubi-Messadh & Khaldi, 2022; Xu, 2013; Yang et al., 2021, 2022). It is also argued that situation-specific constructs "can be seen as trait anxiety measures limited to a given context" (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991, p. 90). Consequently,

anxieties are understood in well-defined and specified situations such as giving public presentations and attending language classes and tests. From a psychological perspective, anxiety can be understood as both a unitary and multidimensional construct. Moreover, anxiety is believed to include three specific constructs: cognitive, physiological, and behavioural reactions (Smith & Smoll, 1990).

Anxiety is additionally classified into facilitating and debilitating anxiety in line with whether it enhances or interferes with performance (He, 2018). Facilitating anxiety "motivates the learner to 'fight' the new learning task; it gears the learner emotionally for approach behavior" (Scovel, 1978, p. 139), while debilitating anxiety may lead to the learner's avoidance of the task. Hence, the relationship between anxiety and ELL in this chapter (and between anxiety and performance in general) may be well illustrated with a sort of inverted "U" (Fig. 14.1), that is, "when anxiety is low, performance is also low. When anxiety is optimal, performance is high, but beyond an optimal level of anxiety, performance deteriorates" (Walker, 1997, p. 17). Above all, if these two kinds of anxieties can be better understood, language teachers will find it much easier to cope with learners' undesirable high levels of learning anxiety. This theory has been tested by research investigating the hypothesis that students with higher anxiety levels usually cannot do well in their language learning (Horwitz, 2012). Furthermore, it is argued that whether a task is difficult will influence the dual effect between performance and anxiety (Smith et al., 1986). When a task is easy, anxiety will not negatively affect and will even improve performance due to extra effort being made. However, anxiety will impair performance when the task difficulty increases and requires more from the cognitive system. In such cases,
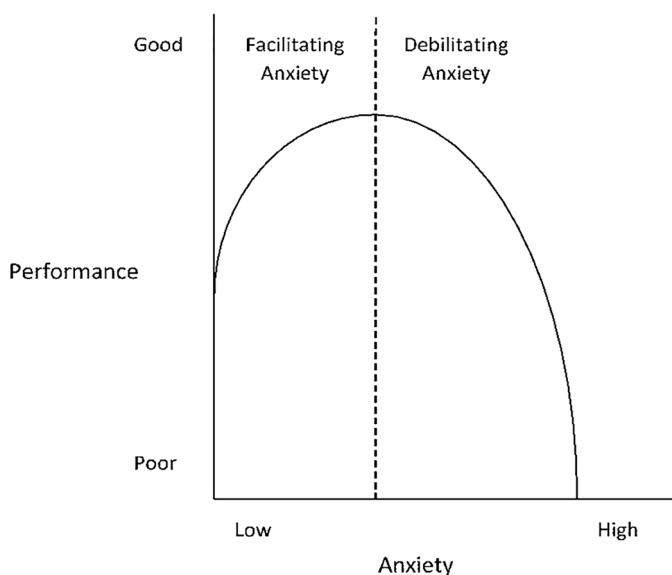


**Fig. 14.1** Inverted "U" relationship between anxiety and performance. (Adapted from MacIntyre, 1995, p. 92)

the increased effort cannot compensate for the undesirable influence of anxiety. Consequently, learners with lower or optimal levels of anxiety may learn a language more efficiently than their counterparts experiencing higher levels of anxiety, who are negatively influenced by cognitive activities irrelevant to the task.

## 14.3 Anxiety and English Language Learning

Language anxiety is "the feelings of worry and negative, fear-related emotions associated with learning or using a language that is not an individual's mother tongue" (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012, p. 103). Anxiety, especially language anxiety, has an important role in ELL and influences ELL in different ways (Zheng, 2008). On the one hand, anxiety impairs language learners' "performance in many ways, both indirectly through worry and self-doubt and directly by reducing class participation and creating overt avoidance of the language" (Xiang, 2004, p. 116). Some other studies (e.g., Mouhoubi-Messadh & Khaldi, 2022; von Wörde, 2004; Xu, 2013; Young, 1990) echo these findings that anxiety may harm language learning in different ways and that decreasing anxiety might improve language learning as well as learner motivation. On the other hand, we should also bear in mind that learners may learn efficiently when they experience some facilitating anxiety (He, 2018). It is argued that "language anxiety is a pervasive and prominent force in the language learning context, and any theoretical model that seeks to understand and interpret the language learning process must consider its effect" (Gardner, 1991, p. vii). Moreover, there is a need to introduce the concept of *self-perception* because it is believed to be closely related to language anxiety (Abrar et al., 2022). Self-perception is a superordinate construct that "includes self-descriptions (self-concept) as well as self-evaluations (self-esteem); the importance of each self-description and self-evaluation; and also, how all the self-descriptions and evaluations are organized to produce something recognizable as 'self'" (Walker, 1997, p. 21). For example, "as the learner progresses through schooling, changes in self-perception are thought to be involved in increasing levels of anxiety" (Walker, 1997, p. 3). To better understand the place, role, and influence of anxiety in ELL, it is helpful to consider the following quotes from Elaine Kolker Horwitz—one of the most well-established scholars in the study of language anxiety:

> When we wear clothing that is unbecoming or have a "bad hair day," we feel uncomfortable because not only do we not feel like ourselves, we feel that we are presenting a less positive version of ourselves to the world than we normally do. In an analogous way, few people can appear equally intelligent, sensitive, witty, and so on when speaking a second language as when speaking their first; this disparity between how we see ourselves and how we think others see us has been my consistent explanation for language learners' anxieties. (Horwitz, 2000, p. 258)

Horwitz's analogy quoted here illustrates ELL anxiety vividly. Therefore, English as a second language (ESL) or EFL learners may need to be reminded, most probably by English teachers, that it is natural to experience some anxiety while learning

a target language, and they do not need to be afraid of it or avoid it. It should be mentioned that ELL achievement is negatively correlated to anxiety (Quvanch & Si Na, 2022; Yan & Horwitz, 2008). The reasons adult learners are anxious in ELL classes have been well-documented. For example, Horwitz et al. (1986, p. 128) argued that:

> Adults typically perceive themselves as reasonably intelligent, socially-adept individuals, sensitive to different socio-cultural mores. These assumptions are rarely challenged when communicating in a native language as it is usually not difficult to understand others or to make oneself understood. However, the situation when learning a foreign language stands in marked contrast. Because individual communication attempts will be evaluated according to uncertain or even unknown linguistic and socio-cultural standards, second language communication entails risk taking and is necessarily problematic. Because complex and non-spontaneous mental operations are required in order to communicate at all, any performance in the L2 is likely to challenge an individual's self-concept as a competent communicator and lead to reticence, self-consciousness, fear, or even panic.

Given this and other arguments, Horwitz et al. (1986) suggest that adult ESL/EFL learners have well-developed ideas and thoughts but are underdeveloped in the necessary English linguistic system to voice them. They also believe that these learners are anxious about negative evaluation since they are unsure what they must say in English. In addition, Horwitz et al. (1986) argue that one more source of learners' anxiety is the necessary language assessment since they have to be assessed on the proficiency of a foreign/second language they are not proficient in yet. More studies on sources of ELL anxiety can be found in He (2018). Anxiety's place, role, and influence in ELL have been widely researched for decades (e.g., Dewaele, 2013; Diep et al., 2022; Horwitz et al., 1986). Some recent research has investigated the effects of anxiety on ELL (e.g., Alindao et al., 2022; Cirocki & Canh, 2018; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Toyama & Yamazaki, 2022), while others have studied the reasons for learners' ELL anxiety (e.g., Alrabai, 2014; He, 2018; Shabani, 2012; Yan & Horwitz, 2008). Some studies on ELL anxiety coping strategies can also be found. For instance, teachers are encouraged to "advocate the mode of group learning and peer cooperation, strengthen the timeliness and diversity of tests, increase the richness of extracurricular activities, and increase teachers' and students' quality of online teaching and learning" to decrease students' online English learning anxiety (Wang & Zhang, 2021, p. 1).

## 14.4  What Does Recent Research Reveal?

Since the turn of this century, ELL anxiety research has shifted towards investigating the various levels of anxiety depending on the specific language skills being learnt, that is, listening, speaking, reading, and writing (e.g., Faruq, 2019; He, 2018; Liu & Xu, 2021; Mouhoubi-Messadh & Khaldi, 2022). A summary of some of these recent studies is presented below.

**Summary of Major Research Findings**

**EFL Listening Anxiety**

It has been argued that the following sources may lead to students' English listening anxiety (Liu & Xu, 2021):

- Students' worries concerning English listening activity;
- Poor English listening proficiency;
- Lack of skills to decode what they hear;
- Less-than positive attitudes towards English listening; and
- Lack of necessary English culture to understand what they heard.

Knowing the reasons for learners' English listening anxiety is essential since this knowledge enables practical suggestions for dealing with it to be developed.

**EFL Speaking Anxiety**

Mouhoubi-Messadh and Khaldi (2022) reported that the following six factors might lead to students' EFL speaking anxiety:

- Students' lack of self-expression ability;
- Students' low self-esteem and self-confidence;
- Students' worries about speaking in class;
- Students' habit of help-seeking;
- Instructors' intolerance of silence; and
- Peer pressure from other students.

These findings reveal that teachers play a significant role in minimizing learners' speaking anxiety in EFL settings, especially when they intersect with learners' concerns.

**EFL Reading Anxiety**

Based on some questionnaire data, the following factors were found to lead to Indonesian EFL students' reading anxiety (Faruq, 2019):

- Unfamiliar vocabulary;
- Worry about whether they have understood what has been read;
- Fear of making errors;
- Unfamiliar culture; and
- Unfamiliar topic.

Similar findings can also be found in Ahmad et al. (2013).

(continued)

**EFL Writing Anxiety**

With questionnaire data from 133 Afghanistan undergraduates, the following ten sources were associated with EFL learners' writing anxiety (Quvanch & Si Na, 2022):

- Language deficiencies (e.g., insufficient vocabulary, grammar mistakes);
- Lack of time for writing;
- Pressure to be perfect;
- Fear of teachers' negative evaluation;
- Lack of writing practice;
- Insufficient writing skills;
- Too many writing tasks;
- Lack of confidence in writing;
- Fear of writing tests; and
- Unfamiliarity with writing topics.

The knowledge of these sources of writing anxiety may help EFL students to deal with such anxiety.

**Longitudinal Studies on Language Learner Anxiety**

Results from longitudinal studies on language learner anxiety greatly enhance understanding of the construct. With questionnaire data from 189 middle school pupils (aged 12–18) learning foreign languages, Dewaele and Dewaele (2017) reported:

- Higher levels of foreign language enjoyment (FLE) seemed to be negatively related to foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) in pupils aged 14–15.
- Pupils' FLE started quite high at the ages of 12–13, dropped at ages 14–15, and then rose to its highest level at ages 16–18; however, FLCA was stable across age groups.
- The 12–13-year-old pupils' emotions were unrelated to their attitudes towards the foreign language, their teachers, or their classroom behaviour.
- The FLE of the 14–15-year-old pupils depended mainly on their internal characteristics, the characteristics of the teacher, and the characteristics of the foreign language.
- With regard to gender differences, only females aged 12–13 reported more FLE and females aged 16–18 reported more FLCA.

## 14.5   Anxiety and Classroom Instruction

It is essential to acknowledge that some ELL anxiety may be unavoidable, and it is even more important to find the sources leading to such anxiety, but what matters most is how to reduce it. For example, it is argued that EFL teachers should "optimize their curriculum planning and make their lesson delivery a more enjoyable and interesting experience to students" rather than focusing too much on reducing students' English learning anxiety (Li & Li, 2022, p. 13). Similarly, Liu and Hong (2021) also found that fostering enjoyable emotions helps reduce ELL anxiety and facilitates English learning. Therefore, it is essential to familiarize teachers with useful strategies for reducing students' English language anxiety to convert debilitating anxiety into facilitating anxiety. These include strategies such as using humour, songs and music, movies, games, and role-plays.

It is argued that a humorous teacher may be one of the best solutions to decrease learners' high levels of English-speaking anxiety (He, 2018; Tzoannopoulou, 2016), and humour is believed to be a significant part of classroom teaching (Neuliep, 1991; White, 2001). Nevertheless, most educational studies "tend to discuss humor in pedagogical terms by highlighting its purposes (e.g., increasing student learning and participation) rather than by focusing on its social functions (creating social order, building rapport, enhancing the speaker's positive face)" (Tzoannopoulou, 2016, p. 79). In a study on humour in academic lectures, Tzoannopoulou (2016) reported seven types of humour and offered a breakdown of every kind related to its functions, as shown in Table 14.1 below. Three broad categories of functions were further identified based on Table 14.1, namely, using humour to (1) build support, (2) handle anxiety, and (3) keep the classroom in good social order (Tzoannopoulou, 2016).

As a topic that attracted considerable attention for decades in language teaching research (e.g., Bell, 2009; Norrick, 1993; Tzoannopoulou, 2016), humour is significant in English classroom teaching for several reasons. Firstly, Krashen (1985)

**Table 14.1** Types of humour and their classroom functions. (Adapted from Tzoannopoulou, 2016, p. 81)

| Types of humor | Functions of humor |
|---|---|
| Lecturer-student teasing | Ice breaker, support builder, anxiety/tension releaser, classroom order maintainer |
| Sarcasm or irony | Anxiety/tension releaser, showing individualism, critiquing |
| Wordplay or register | Support builder, ice breaker, helping remember content |
| Anecdotes or jokes | Showing spontaneity, ice breaker, support builder, helping remember content |
| Lecturer self-deprecation | Support builder |
| Exaggeration or hyperbole | Support builder, ice breaker |
| Black humor | Anxiety/tension releaser |

argues that learners may naturally experience a somewhat high level of anxiety when learning a new language because of the discrepancy between their linguistic skills and their cognitive ability, while humour (especially the instructor's humour) will decrease their anxiety level and encourage them to take part in classroom speaking activities (He, 2018; Krashen, 1982; Tzoannopoulou, 2016). Secondly, humour can help learners to acquire a new language by providing an "instrument for cultural and social transmission" (Alexander, 1997, p. 7), which can encourage learners to speak more in the target language (Li & Li, 2022). The more the learners learn this new language, the better they may use it and the less anxious they may become. In other words, both instructors and learners are encouraged to use more humour in their everyday English teaching and learning to decrease these learners' anxiety levels. Some ideas and suggestions for classroom activities on using humour in ELL are given below. These ideas and suggestions illustrate why a humorous instructor may help decrease learners' ELL anxiety. A sample questionnaire is also provided to evaluate the use of humour as an anxiety-coping strategy in language teaching.

Humour may also be used effectively in classroom English teaching to create a relaxing atmosphere and decrease classroom anxiety. In addition, lecturers may employ humour to improve self-image, deal with the potential loss of face, release tension, and increase rapport with learners (Nesi, 2012; Wang, 2014), all of which will make learners feel less anxious in the language classroom. Humour is considered generally as "anything done or said, purposely or inadvertently, that is found comical or amusing" (Long & Graesser, 1988, p. 37), including these related but different constructs: cracks, gags, jests, jokes, one-liners, puns, quips, retorts, riddles, sallies, and witticisms (e.g., Schmitz, 2002).

Humour has primary social and informative functions and can be applied well in English class (Attardo, 1994). For instance, an instructor can correct language learners' mistakes through humour. Corrections may thus be more readily accepted because humour functions as a face-saver in such situations. Humour can even help in the case of socially undesirable situations such as criticizing a language learner because a humorous criticism may be understood differently if necessary (for instance, when the teacher says "just kidding"). Wagner and Urios-Aparisi (2008) argue that humour has an informative function since humour applied in language teaching carries information concerning behaviours, cultures, and feelings. Humour enables language instructors and learners to relax from the formal classroom teaching situation set by textbooks and documents, which are often not particularly humorous. Instructors may make use of humour "as a way of putting students at ease, as an attention getter, as a way of showing that the teacher is human, as a way to keep the class less formal, and to make learning more fun" (Neuliep, 1991, p. 354).

The following four issues should be taken into consideration while making use of humour in English classroom teaching. First of all, it is self-evident that not all jokes are fit for classroom teaching. For example, jokes on nonsense, philosophy, and social satire are suitable for a language classroom, but those that demean women or men, target ethnicity or sex, or express hostility are not appropriate. Instructors

need to make their own judgements. Secondly, language instructors need to plan their use of humour well in classrooms to give learners the impression that humour is a natural and necessary part of teaching to improve their ELL skills (He, 2018; Schmitz, 2002). Thirdly, teachers do not need to feel discouraged if students do not laugh at humour since "not all humor elicits laughter" (Tzoannopoulou, 2016, p. 81), and the incomprehension of humour by some students may be unavoidable. Moreover, it has been pointed out that laughter and humour do not necessarily go hand in hand. Tzoannopoulou (2016, p. 81) states, "laughter and humor are related but are not co-extensive. Indeed, laughter does not necessarily indicate a reaction to humor as laughter can be instigated by anxiety or relief". Last but not least, attitudes towards humour can be culture-specific and even vary individually (e.g., people enjoy a sense of humour to various degrees), that is, a humorous way of teaching can be well-accepted in one culture but may also be unrecognizable or even inappropriate in another culture (Nesi, 2012). Good humour may be understood somewhat differently by people from different cultures due to the fact that "even native speakers of the same language coming from different cultural backgrounds (e.g., British and American) are prone to misunderstandings when cultural references are made" (Tzoannopoulou, 2016, p. 84). Zhang (2005) even went so far as to claim that humour could be inappropriate in academic lectures in Chinese classrooms because the lecturers' use of humour may increase learners' classroom communication apprehension.

The following activities may help English teachers to teach their students with higher anxiety levels more efficiently:

1. Invite students to make natural use of humour in their English learning experience.
2. Invite students to discuss using humour in different ELL situations.

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Please rate the following statements on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree):
1) I am often nervous when speaking English.

        1        2        3        4        5

2) I will be less anxious if I have a humorous English teacher in class.

        1        2        3        4        5

3) A humorous teacher will often create a relaxing learning atmosphere.

        1        2        3        4        5

4) My English teacher has become more humorous in the classroom recently.

        1        2        3        4        5

5) I have become less anxious since my teacher began to be more humorous in class.

        1        2        3        4        5

6) Please make some suggestions to reduce learners' ELL anxiety. Your suggestions can focus on strategies for coping with anxiety through humour or on some other strategies to deal with your ELL anxiety.

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**Fig. 14.2** A sample questionnaire

3. When considering selected content of classroom language teaching, ask the students to discuss in groups what kind of humorous activities may be appropriate for the instructor to use, for instance, explaining cultural misconceptions about some vocabulary, playing an exciting language learning game such as hangman, telling a funny story, and telling a joke about the topic.
4. Ask the students to teach some new vocabulary humorously to their peers after group discussion on how to do so.
5. Ask the students to discuss humorously how to correct their peers' written assignment mistakes.

At the end of the suggested activities on the use of humour in coping with students' ELL anxiety, a short sample questionnaire can be given to the students to encourage them to cope with anxiety through humour and to evaluate the effectiveness of humour in the teaching-learning process (Fig. 14.2).

In addition to humour, learners' English language learning anxiety could be reduced by integrating songs and games into the teaching and learning process. For example, based on the empirical findings from 161 tenth grade EFL learners in Türkiye, Asmali and Sayin (2020) argued that teaching these learners four songs of their choice in four weeks helped them to reduce their ELL anxiety levels. They found that this was especially effective for those with high anxiety levels and was also associated with improved EFL exam performance. Similarly, another study from Malaysia also reported that teaching English songs to Year 4 pupils not only helped them to learn the target language and focus more on English lessons, but also decreased their English-speaking anxiety since they became more confident and motivated in speaking (Ejeng et al., 2020).

One more strategy that can decrease learners' EFL learning anxiety is to watch English movies. According to Krashen (1982), EFL learners' language learning efficiency may be blocked by the Affective Filter and language learning anxiety. Therefore, effective strategies should be employed to lower this filter and related anxiety. One of these strategies is watching English movies (Chan, 2016; Nath et al., 2017). On the basis of qualitative data (namely, group discussion, reflective notes, and interviews) from six university students, Nath et al. (2017) found that, as a learning tool, watching English movies is less anxiety-provoking than other traditional classroom teaching activities and hence improves English learning efficiency. Watching movies is especially helpful in improving learners' English vocabulary and pronunciation skills. As a result, EFL teachers are encouraged to make use of movie-watching as a teaching tool. Language learners are also recommended to utilize outside-classroom activities (e.g., watching movies) to decrease their ELL anxiety and, therefore, increase their learning efficiency. Similar findings can also be found in other studies (e.g., Chan, 2016; Lin, 2008).

Another means of reducing ELL anxiety is by using games (Hikmawan et al., 2023; Ünlü & Aydin, 2023). Based on their study of 175 middle school EFL students from Türkiye, Ünlü and Aydin (2023) reported that most of their participants enjoyed playing online games in English, and their EFL anxiety levels were significantly reduced while doing so. As a result, they suggested that teachers may

encourage their EFL learners to play games involving English to decrease their EFL-speaking anxiety and increase their English-speaking confidence. Through engaging Indonesian Year-5 pupils in traditional games in EFL classes, Hikmawan et al. (2023) also found that these young learners' English learning motivation and English-speaking confidence increased, while their EFL speaking anxiety was reduced due to the conducive English learning atmosphere engendered by the game playing.

Role-plays are also believed to be effective in decreasing learners' ELL anxiety (e.g., Tashi, 2018; Toyib & Syafi'i, 2018). One example comes from a study on English language teaching in Bhutan. In spite of English being the main medium of instruction, the low English-speaking proficiency caused by ELL anxiety still remains a challenge in Bhutan. To search for a solution to this challenge, Tashi (2018) endeavoured to explore whether role-play could help reduce learners' English-speaking anxiety. Using mixed research methods (i.e., questionnaire, group discussion, and classroom observation) with 30 Year-6 Bhutanese pupils, Tashi (2018) found that role-playing could significantly reduce these pupils' EFL learning anxiety and hence help improve their English learning interest and efficiency. Based on these findings, Tashi (2018) recommended that English teachers make use of role-plays to decrease their students' ELL anxiety and eventually increase their learning efficiency. While employing role-plays, teachers should be flexible and friendly rather than rigid, or role-playing may not be an effective tool to decrease students' anxiety. It is also important that teachers allow students enough speaking time in a relaxing way. Moreover, Tashi (2018) suggested that role-plays are used with familiar topics and comparatively easy language when teaching young learners such as primary pupils. Other studies have also found that role-playing can reduce students' ELL anxiety and improve their learning performance (e.g., Da Costa et al., 2017; Toyib & Syafi'i, 2018).

## 14.6 Suggestions for Action Research in the TESOL Classroom

Once pre/in-service teachers have become familiar with some common theories concerning ELL anxiety and common sources of anxiety, as well as strategies for coping with such anxiety, it is time for them to conduct some action research to tackle ELL anxiety in their own TESOL classrooms. As discussed above, solutions to language learning anxiety can be culture-specific so the strategies introduced earlier in this chapter may not apply to all ELL anxieties in different classrooms. Consequently, the following four suggestions for classroom-based research focusing on ELL anxiety are worth bearing in mind.

1. Teachers are encouraged to remind themselves and their students that anxiety is inevitable in ELL, so anxious students do not need to be afraid of it or seek to avoid it completely.

2. Teachers need to help learners with high anxiety levels to identify whether their anxiety is trait anxiety, state anxiety, facilitating anxiety, or debilitating anxiety.
3. With teachers' help, these students may try to find the causes of their ELL anxiety.
4. With some knowledge of the features and sources of students' ELL anxiety, teachers and students can work together to decrease such anxiety or harness it by turning it into facilitating anxiety.

**Investigating Students' EFL Speaking Anxiety**

**Research Questions**

- What levels of speaking anxiety do EFL students demonstrate?
- What factors contribute to EFL students' speaking anxiety?
- What strategies would EFL students find helpful in reducing their speaking anxiety?
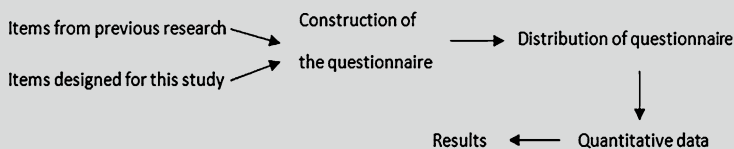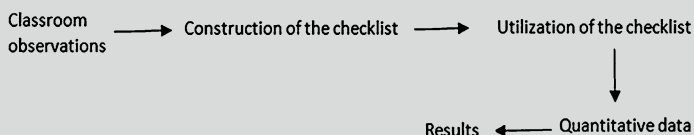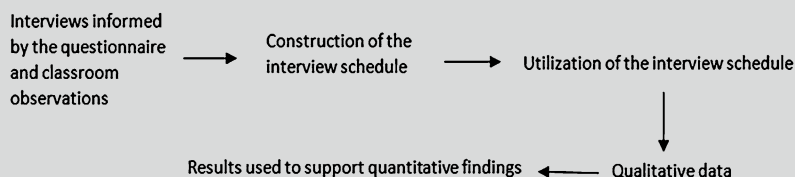
**Research Design**

This action research starts with the planning stage. The actions to be taken include considering how data will be collected. Three instruments (i.e., a questionnaire, a semi-structured interview, and a classroom observation using a checklist) are used to answer the above research questions. These instruments seek to collect two types of data: quantitative (phase one: the questionnaire and the checklist) and qualitative (phase two: the interview), thus determining a sequential explanatory design. These three instruments also contribute to data triangulation and ensure that the findings of this action research project are more reliable and valid. Such cross-validated research design is commonly used in anxiety studies (e.g., He, 2013, 2018; Yan & Horwitz, 2008). The suggested procedure for the proposed project is shown in Fig. 14.3.

Since ELL anxiety is a context-specific construct, teachers are encouraged to carefully consider their own context while designing any instruments such as questionnaires. Interesting examples of anxiety questionnaires include the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz et al., 1986) and the Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (He, 2018). Teachers can modify and use these in measuring student anxiety in their classrooms.

Regarding semi-structured interviews, teachers need interview schedules revolving around reasons behind student anxiety and/or preferred strategies for decreasing anxiety in the classroom. Open-ended questions are necessary to trigger participants' descriptions and accounts of learning experiences.

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*Questionnaire*

Items from previous research → Construction of the questionnaire → Distribution of questionnaire

Items designed for this study →

Results ← Quantitative data

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*Classroom observations*

Classroom observations → Construction of the checklist → Utilization of the checklist

Results ← Quantitative data

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*Semi-structured interviews*

Interviews informed by the questionnaire and classroom observations → Construction of the interview schedule → Utilization of the interview schedule

Results used to support quantitative findings ← Qualitative data

**Fig. 14.3** Research procedure

Semi-structured interviews are particularly useful as they enable researchers to explore themes of interest and participants' responses in detail. While planning interviews, teacher-researchers should refer to Cohen et al. (2018) for guidelines.

Classroom observations, in turn, help teacher-researchers to observe and better understand ELL anxiety in action in the teaching-learning process. Observations can be challenging and various ethical issues must be considered. Teachers are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the following sources in preparation for classroom observations: He (2018) and Hopkins (2008).

When the instruments for data collection are ready, teacher-researchers put the action research plan into effect. Data are gathered systematically, and the construct of anxiety is examined from various angles in the classroom context. Finally, findings are shared with colleagues at school and ideally outside school. Teacher-researchers also reflect on the implemented project and the

(continued)

current situation in the classroom in terms of student anxiety and plan engaging scenarios to reduce it—a new action research cycle.

**Data Analysis**

Quantitative data (questionnaire and classroom observations) are analyzed using SPSS (e.g., Dewaele & Dewaele, 2017; He, 2018) or Excel. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and means are used to determine anxiety levels among students. Qualitative data can be analyzed using thematic coding. Such qualitative analysis enables teacher-researchers to find themes in participants' utterances by analyzing the meanings of their comments and looking for patterns and commonalities.

**Project Duration**

The action research project lasts about 12 weeks, assuming students have three classes per week. More extended options can also be planned. The quantitative phase should be relatively easy to conduct as students can complete questionnaires while in class so these data can be collected in one sitting. The qualitative phase is likely to be more time-consuming because arranging, transcribing, and analyzing interviews requires time, energy, and patience.

## 14.7   Conclusion

This chapter has briefly introduced ELL anxiety for EFL teachers and stakeholders such as students, parents, and language teacher educators. Based on recent studies, all these stakeholders are reminded that ELL anxiety is unavoidable, and students do not need to worry about it. Instead, after adopting effective strategies, students may decrease it to an appropriate level and turn it into facilitating anxiety. This chapter has also demonstrated how to help students to manage their ELL anxiety through some ideas for using humour, games, songs, and role-plays in the classroom and some suggestions for action research in the TESOL classroom. To help convert debilitating anxiety into facilitating anxiety in students' ELL, language teacher educators and CPD providers should also be aware of the potential reasons for ELL anxiety as well as coping strategies and ways to convert it into facilitating anxiety.

**Recommended Reading**

**He, D. (2018).** *Foreign language learning anxiety in China: Theories and applications in English language teaching*. **Springer.**

This is an updated book on ELL anxiety literature. It reports on possible causes of and verified strategies for tackling English-speaking anxiety. It also provides practical suggestions for action research concerning ELL anxiety.

**Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety.** *The Modern Language Journal, 70*(2), 125–132. **https://doi.org/10.2307/327317**

This is a classic study on language anxiety (although not specifically on EFL). The findings on classroom language anxiety laid a solid foundation for many later language anxiety studies. For instance, for the first time, they treated foreign language anxiety as a distinct type of anxiety unique to language learning rooted in three performance anxieties: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation.

**Gkonou, C., Daubney, M., & Dewaele, J-M. (Eds.). (2017).** *New insights into language anxiety: Theory, research and educational implications.* **De Gruyter.**

This is a seminal edited book for all researchers interested in language anxiety. It comprehensively discusses language anxiety for teachers, students, and researchers. It is also a landmark text on what teachers and programme directors can do to decrease classroom language anxiety.

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