

A Review of Studies on Perfectionism and Foreign Language Anxiety among EFL Learners

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Abstract. Foreign language anxiety (FLA) and perfectionism are two prominent psychological variables that greatly affect English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning achievement. This paper reviews recent empirical and theoretical studies on the relationship between perfectionism and FLA. Specifically, studies published between 2022 and 2025 are of special interest. By referencing Horwitz et al.'s three-dimensional model of FLA and Hewitt and Flett's multidimensional perfectionism framework, this paper reviews current evidence from Asian and global EFL contexts. In general, most studies found a positive correlation between maladaptive perfectionism—especially socially prescribed perfectionism—and higher levels of FLA. However, the magnitude and nature of the correlation may vary depending on individual factors such as self-efficacy, error orientation, and classroom climate. Three general mechanisms are discussed: (1) fear of negative evaluation, (2) maladaptive error orientation and rumination, and (3) reduced self-efficacy reinforced by unsupportive classroom climate. The review concludes that perfectionism can motivate learners to be the best they can be, but its maladaptive form is more likely to increase anxiety and sabotage performance. Implications for language pedagogy include creating a positive and error-tolerant classroom climate and encouraging adaptive goal setting to maintain high standards without compromising emotional health.

Keywords: Foreign Language Anxiety, perfectionism, self-efficacy, classroom climate, EFL learners

1. Introduction

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is a recognized emotional factor that affects second language learning and performance. Some learners report debilitating anxiety in language classes. For instance, as many as one-third of English as a foreign language (EFL) students in some contexts report debilitating anxiety in language classes. Foreign language anxiety is characterized by feelings of tension and apprehension about performing in a second language. Foreign language anxiety is associated with maladaptive perfectionistic strivings. Perfectionism refers to the tendency to set unreasonably high standards and to pursue flawlessness. Perfectionism is prevalent among students. Some students are very hard on themselves, setting impossibly high standards and expecting to be flawless. The tendency to be harshly self-critical or to fear making mistakes or appearing imperfect can increase the stress of speaking or writing in a second language. Interestingly, recent studies

suggested that students with maladaptive perfectionistic strivings (such as fearing mistakes or others' evaluations) tend to report higher levels of language anxiety. This paper aims to review related theoretical studies and empirical findings on the relationship between foreign language anxiety and perfectionism in EFL contexts. The paper discusses general mechanisms linking the two constructs together. Implications for language pedagogy are also highlighted.

2. Related theories

2.1. Foreign Language Anxiety theory

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's pioneering study defined FLA as a type of anxiety that is associated with the process of language learning [1]. They extracted three dimensions from FLA, namely, communication apprehension (being anxious about speaking and listening in real time), test anxiety (being anxious about academic assessment), and fear of negative evaluation (being concerned about how others view one's language ability). These three dimensions reflect both social and performance pressures that language learners encounter. FLA is currently considered a widespread issue among language learners from different cultures at various proficiency levels, and it is evident that FLA has obvious negative impacts on language learning outcomes. Quantitatively demonstrating the wide-ranging impact of FLA on learners, a recent meta-analysis by Zhou et al. synthesized 37 studies with more than 26,000 participants, and revealed a strongly negative correlation between FLA and learners' self-efficacy, i.e., anxious students generally feel much less confident about their language ability [2]. Importantly, the meta-analysis by Zhou et al. reported that the relationship between foreign language anxiety and self-efficacy was stable across learner groups and learning contexts. That is, anxiety is highly related to learners' self-confidence. Beyond self-efficacy, FLA has also been found to be related to learners' poorer language performance and motivation, and even psychosomatic symptoms in class. In total, the theory of FLA holds that anxious learners are fearful of negative evaluation and communication apprehension, which may lead to a vicious circle of avoidance and low achievement.

2.2. Multidimensional perfectionism

Perfectionism is a complex personality trait. According to Hewitt and Flett, there are three dimensions of perfectionism: self-oriented perfectionism (requirements on self to be perfect), other-oriented perfectionism (unrealistically high requirements for others), and socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP) (believe that others expect one to be perfect) [3]. Among the three dimensions of perfectionism, SPP is usually considered to be the most maladaptive because SPP provides continuous external pressure and results in failure and inferiority when perfect performance is not reached. Individuals high in SPP feel constant external pressure to meet others' requirements, and thus feel failure and inferiority when perfect performance is not reached. Hewitt and Flett associated all three dimensions of perfectionism with various psychopathologies, but especially SPP with anxiety and depression. In fact, over the past few decades, a growing number of studies have found that SPP is positively correlated with chronic anxiety, depressive symptoms, and even suicidal ideation.

Flett et al. extended the concept of perfectionism to the language-learning field. They proposed an extended model in which trait perfectionism leads to a chain of cognitions and behaviors: perfectionist cognitions (automatic self-critical thoughts), a perfectionist self-presentation style (trying to appear perfect to others), reduced self-efficacy, and intense concern over mistakes.

Ultimately, these factors lead to heightened language anxiety [4]. According to Flett et al., perfectionistic students may work hard for excellence but always feel that they are not measuring up, lowering their confidence and causing them to be excessively concerned about making errors.

In total, perfectionism may be a major vulnerability factor for anxiety because it increases emotional distress (i.e., anxiety and depression).

3. Review of empirical studies

3.1. Overview of recent research

In the past few years, there have been many empirical studies into the perfectionism-FLA relationship. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most studies are quantitative survey studies sampling EFL learners in high school or college in Asia (especially in China and Iran) or in other parts of the world, measuring perfectionism using well-known scales such as Hewitt & Flett's Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale alongside EFL learners' language anxiety using well-known scales such as Horwit's Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale or skill-specific anxiety inventories. For example, Khosravi et al. surveyed 68 Iranian university students using the Hewitt & Flett perfectionism scale and Cheng's Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory, and then correlated these with the students' IELTS writing exam performance [5]. Other studies have focused on speaking anxiety or classroom anxiety in general. Sample sizes range from a handful of students in qualitative studies to a few hundred students in quantitative studies, and methods range from simple correlational analyses to structural equation modeling.

It should be noted that many quantitative studies take a cultural perspective when investigating the relationship between foreign language anxiety and perfectionism (especially when exploring the extent to which cultural background influences learners' emotional and behavioral characteristics). Research from China stresses the high external expectations placed on students to do well in English and how this might lead to socially prescribed perfectionism. Middle Eastern context (e.g. Iran) studies have been curious whether perfectistic tendencies impede language skills under exam conditions. Undoubtedly, interest in this topic stems from the observation that many EFL learners in different parts of the world seem to exhibit both high perfectionism and high language anxiety, to the possible detriment of their learning.

3.2. Relationship between perfectionism and FLA

3.2.1. Positive correlations (maladaptive perfectionism→higher anxiety)

Most empirical work has found that perfectionism (and specifically, maladaptive perfectionism) is positively correlated with more FLA. Farjadnasab and Ghorbandordinejad's study of Iranian high school EFL students found that students who scored highly on measures of maladaptive perfectionism (i.e., who were concerned about making mistakes and living up to others' expectations) reported significantly more foreign language classroom anxiety than "adaptive" perfectionists or non-perfectionists. Chiang found small but positive correlations of overall perfectionism with writing anxiety for Taiwanese EFL students ($r \approx 0.18$ overall). I have argued elsewhere that the cognitive component of anxiety (i.e., worry about performance) has stronger correlations (up to $r \approx 0.24$), so that anxiety in particular tends to be focused on perceived inadequacies in language tasks.

Several Chinese studies support this. Yu and Zhou, whose study involved both quantitative and qualitative methods with Chinese undergraduates, noted that students who identified themselves as "real perfectionists" reported intense anxiety about the quality of their English writing and tended to self-criticize "trivial" defects [6]. Quantitatively, the anxious students reported higher levels of somatic and cognitive anxiety than the other students. These results reinforce Dewaele's earlier finding that more perfectionist learners are more anxious language learners.

3.2.2. Null or mixed findings

A few studies have found null relationships or context-dependent results. Khosravi et al., for instance, found no significant correlation between Iranian students' overall perfectionism scores and their IELTS writing performance (perfectionistic strivings did not necessarily translate into better/worse writing scores). While that study did not measure anxiety directly, it suggests that the relationship between perfectionism and outcomes is not always straightforward, possibly mediated by other variables such as anxiety rather than a simple effect on performance.

Similarly, as mentioned earlier, some earlier work noted that self-oriented perfectionism (focused on personal standards) did not necessarily lead to an increase in language anxiety, and could even co-occur with productive achievement behaviors. That is, adaptive perfectionists who set high goals for themselves but with some flexibility reported anxiety levels not significantly different from non-perfectionists in some studies. In contrast, those high in evaluative concerns (often measured by socially prescribed perfectionism or the discrepancy subscale of various instruments) consistently report the highest anxiety. When researchers differentiate "positive" vs. "negative" perfectionism (or adaptive vs. maladaptive), it is the maladaptive form—associated with fear of failure, harsh self-critique, and unattainable standards—that tends to correlate with more FLA, whereas positive personal standards alone do not necessarily lead to anxiety and may even co-occur with confidence in some cases.

3.2.3. Negative correlations (perfectionism → lower anxiety)

Almost no studies have found that perfectionism lowers FLA; at best, some aspects of perfectionism are anxiety-neutral or have an indirect positive effect through better preparation. One could argue that a self-oriented perfectionist sometimes feels facilitative anxiety, some amount of tension that compels her to study hard (as opposed to facilitative vs. debilitating anxiety). However, few empirical evidence exists for perfectionism actually lowering language anxiety. Instead, the general trend is that even highly achieving perfectionists typically feel more anxious inside, even if they appear calm on the outside. For instance, in a case study of a top student in Yu and Zhou, despite writing an excellent essay by objective criteria, the student reported some anxiety and dissatisfaction because she is perfectionistic and wants to "write perfect articles".

Hence, even when perfectionism shows up in successful language outcomes, it still occurs with the downside of greater anxiety. No study in our review recently reported a significant negative correlation between any dimension of perfectionism and FLA; at best, some studies found non-significant relations for self-oriented or other-oriented dimensions when controlling for more general factors.

3.3. Factors influencing the perfectionism–FLA relationship

Researchers have started to identify moderators and mediators that influence how perfectionism leads to anxiety. Some important factors have been identified.

3.3.1. Self-efficacy

Belief in one's own language ability can moderate or exacerbate the impact of perfectionism. Perfectionists typically have low self-efficacy (because they feel they never live up to their own standards), and this in turn predicts more anxiety. In a recent Iranian study employing structural equation modeling, listening self-efficacy emerged as a significant mediating variable between perfectionism and listening anxiety [7]. In a sample of 350 EFL learners, this study found that compared to the general students, perfectionism was associated with lower self-efficacy of listening, and this in turn significantly raised anxiety during listening comprehension; that is, these students felt less anxious when listening even if they were perfectionists, because they had higher self-efficacy. These findings suggest that raising learners' confidence can reduce the perfectionism–anxiety link. Some studies have also found that among perfectionistic students, those who can maintain relatively high self-efficacy (that is, believing in improvement through effort) feel lower anxiety than those who doubt their own abilities. In summary, self-efficacy is the key. Perfectionism is least damaging when it occurs in students who believe in their ability to improve.

3.3.2. Classroom climate and feedback

The learning environment and teacher/peer behavior have great impacts on anxious perfectionists. A positive and non-judgmental classroom climate can reduce fear of making mistakes, and a very pressurized and punitive learning climate can amplify it. Indeed, several qualitative accounts can be found in the literature. For instance, in Khosravi et al.'s interviews, Iranian students reported that teachers' ways of correcting errors had different impacts on their anxiety. Instructors who corrected only grammatical mistakes and drew students' attention to their errors in front of the class increased the students' stress and perfectionistic worry and induced more "avoidance behavior" in their writing. On the other hand, when teachers emphasized content over form and gave useful and private feedback, they helped to create a safer atmosphere and decrease students' anxiety, although the latter were perfectionistically driven to be perfect.

Cultural expectations can also play a role. As Jiang and Konorova noted, in the Chinese context, the weight of strong collectivist culture and school context increases socially prescribed perfectionism, and, consequently, students feel very heavy pressure to live up to their family and school expectations [8]. This situation increases fear of being negatively evaluated by teachers and peers, which may worsen FLA. Cross-cultural comparisons suggest that in more individualist contexts, students may not feel ashamed of making mistakes and, as a result, the correlation between perfectionism and anxiety may weaken. To sum up, a positive classroom climate (encouragement + tolerance + errors + focus on individual improvement) can act as a buffer against perfectionistic students' severe anxiety, and, conversely, a high-pressure climate (evaluation + constant social comparison + criticism) can act as a kind of gasoline that feeds the fire.

3.3.3. Error orientation and mindset

How learners construe and use their mistakes – their "error orientation" – is crucial. Perfectionistic learners display a maladaptive orientation toward errors: they regard each mistake as a sign of their

personal failure and an opportunity for learning. As a result, they ruminate, i.e. they cannot help thinking about their errors and shortcomings. Recently, it has been shown that rumination mediates the relationship between perfectionism and anxiety. For example, Barabadi et al. investigated perfectionistic cognitions (such as "I must not make mistakes") in EFL learners and found that the more frequent their perfectionistic thoughts, the higher their language anxiety, which in turn negatively influenced their class participation and course achievement [9]. This corresponds to the model of Flett et al.: perfectionists experience automatic self-critical thoughts which raise anxiety levels. Moreover, perfectionistic students typically have a fixed mindset about language ability (believing that language proficiency reflects their ability in general and hence errors show a lack of talent). This belief increases anxiety because every mistake causes a disproportionate worry about one's aptitude. By contrast, students with a growth mindset (mistakes are considered part of learning) may have low anxiety even if they are perfectionistic and demand a lot from themselves. In sum, when the expression of perfectionism includes an unhealthy concern about errors and a tendency to ruminate about or catastrophize over them, the result is high FLA. Interventions that focus on students' perception of their errors – for instance, training in adaptive error management and reflection – could thus weaken the perfectionism–anxiety connection.

3.3.4. Learner-intrinsic factors

Other individual differences can modulate how perfectionism contributes to FLA. For example, high self-esteem or psychological resilience could play a protective role – a perfectionist with high self-esteem is less likely to be shaken by language mistakes. In addition, trait anxiety proneness or neuroticism can render a perfectionist particularly susceptible to language anxiety. Because these personality traits are outside the scope of this review, studies controlling for them are often found. In any case, the unique contribution of maladaptive perfectionism to FLA remains significant even after controlling for general trait anxiety or neuroticism. This means that it is not general dispositional anxiety or neuroticism that leads to the increased FLA but that it is the specific interaction of perfectionistic expectations with language stressors such as speaking in front of others or being graded that causes it.

In sum, the perfectionism–FLA relationship is not the same for all learners; it is mediated by factors such as self-efficacy and rumination, moderated by context and climate. The recent studies using more sophisticated analyses (moderation/mediation models) give us a more comprehensive picture and make it easier to understand what we can do for anxious perfectionists.

4. Summary: theoretical integration of key mechanisms

Several mechanisms have been proposed to explain why and how perfectionism can give rise to foreign language anxiety. In this section, the author integrates the findings into three key explanatory paths.

4.1. Fear of negative evaluation path mediation model

Perfect-10s are afraid of appearing negative in the eyes of others for making language mistakes [10]. This fear of negative evaluation (FNE) is part of FLA and is mediated by this fear of negative evaluation that perfectionists show that anxiety appears. Masunag et al. offer strong evidence for this mediation model. They found that foreign language anxiety of Filipino college students partially is mediated by fear of negative evaluation. That is, students who score higher on perfectionism also

reported higher levels of foreign language anxiety. And, the mediation analysis revealed that a considerable proportion of this effect (about 35 - 40%) was mediated by their fear of negative evaluation.

In other words, perfectionists get anxious because they can't stand the thought of appearing stupid or "imperfect in front of others. qualitative data support this. For instance, in Yu and Zhou's study, Chinese EFL students reported that the biggest concern of using foreign language was would they lose face and be "looked down upon" in front of others. lose face: lose social respect or dignity in front of others. Cognitive anxiety component of FLA (worry about performance) is usually the highest for perfectionists which is consistent with fear of negative evaluation. This path helps to explain why socially prescribed perfectionism (which is basically concern about others' expectations) is the dimension most strongly related to FLA.

Perfect- 10s → fear of negative evaluation → FLA is established. So, to help perfection- ists, focus on reducing their exaggerated worry about what others think of you advised that helping learners reframe feedback from peers and teachers in a more positive way would reduce the mediating effect of FNE on anxiety.

4.2. Error orientation and rumination path

A second pathway focuses on how perfectionists react to errors. Perfectionistic error orientation is typically maladaptive: an error is viewed as catastrophic, and this leads to self-criticism and rumination (persistent, repetitive thoughts about the error). In this way, the psychological impact of the error can extend long after the actual mistake. Khosravi et al. observed that many anxious EFL writers in their Iranian sample reported being unable to 'move on' from making small errors - they would "keep checking" and agonise over their wording choices, which in turn made them more nervous and slowed their performance. Barabadi et al. likewise found that students high in perfectionistic cognitions reported more frequent anxious thoughts during language tasks, which in turn harmed their overall performance (through distraction and lowered confidence). These anxious thoughts include the following: being preoccupied with the idea of making mistakes, and over-critical about one's own performance. The theoretical model by Flett et al. relates to this: they identified perfectionist cognitions (e.g. "I should have said that without any grammar mistakes) and concern over mistakes as proximal causes of language anxiety. Empirically, Flett et al. observed that students who constantly evaluate their own language production for errors experience surges of anxiety in real time. This rumination path also relates to the idea of "linguistic rumination" – obsessing about things like pronunciation or word choice after a conversation, which has been linked to communication apprehension.

In summary, perfectionism leads to FLA when it causes an unhealthy focus on errors and endless self-reproach, which raises anxiety levels.

Overcoming this type of FLA may involve training students in mindfulness or cognitive-behavioural techniques to manage perfectionistic thoughts (as some recent pedagogical studies on mindfulness and anxiety suggest). That is, learners can be taught to interpret mistakes as feedback rather than as failures, and in this way reduce the anxious rumination that perfectionism would otherwise cause.

4.3. Self-efficacy and classroom climate path

This path explores how internal states and external conditions interact. Perfectionism reduces self-efficacy about our ability to perform up to our standards, as we've seen. When self-efficacy is low,

students are more anxious because they believe they can't live up to their own expectations. Movafagh Ardestani et al. found this mediation: despite working hard to prepare for listening tasks, perfectionistic listening students with low self-efficacy were still very anxious about listening, whereas perfectionists who felt more self-efficacy were less anxious. So one part of this path runs perfectionism → reduced self-efficacy → higher FLA.

The other part involves classroom climate as a multiple-level moderator. If the teacher or class climate is mean, harsh, or competitive (say, an exam-focused class where students are always picked on for making errors), the effects of perfectionism on anxiety are exacerbated, because they validate the student's fears of failing. If the climate is instead positive or supportive, it can moderate the impact of perfectionism. For example, Jiang and Konorova found that in East Asian classes, the strong extrinsic motivation typical of East Asian education fuels the development of socially prescribed perfectionism, which in turn correlates with more negative emotions (including anxiety) in class. But if teachers create a more supportive, low-anxiety class (say, by encouraging mistakes, giving private feedback, and focusing on effort rather than grades), anxiety is greatly reduced for perfectionist students. Indeed, some evidence for this can be seen in pedagogical interventions. In China, when teachers created a positive climate (high teacher support, low criticism from teachers) students' FLA levels dropped, and they exhibited significantly less learned helplessness (an extreme outcome of anxiety). After all, learned helplessness occurs when students give up because they believe nothing they do will change outcomes; it's an extremely low self-efficacy response to anxiety.

So the self-efficacy/climate path says that perfectionism shows up as anxiety in classes where students feel unsupported and personally incompetent. Improving one or both of those conditions (raising student self-efficacy and improving the classroom climate) will break the link. One concrete example of that: Khosravi et al. recommend that instructors balance praise for content and performance rather than just pointing out flaws and weaknesses, and avoid publicly pointing out errors made by students. These practices help maintain students' self-efficacy and signal that making mistakes won't provoke harsh criticism from the teacher, which in turn helps break the connection between perfectionism and FLA.

5. Conclusion

In other words, the 2022-2025 studies converge in concluding that maladaptive perfectionism is positively correlated with FLA among EFL students. The perfectionistic correlation is strongest for socially prescribed perfectionism - students who feel that they must live up to others' expectations of perfection tend to score higher on communication apprehension, test anxiety, and particularly fear of negative evaluation in language use.

Three interrelated causal mechanisms explain why socially prescribed perfectionism is positively correlated with FLA: (1) fear of negative evaluation also predicts anxiety about speaking up and making errors; (2) ruminative self-criticism arising from the maladaptive error orientation of perfectionists fuels ongoing anxiety; and (3) lowered self-efficacy (and some high-pressure classroom climates) turn challenges into anxieties, depleting students' chances to succeed.

On the positive side, the review also identifies factors that can alleviate the above problems. A growth mindset around mistakes, enhanced self-efficacy achieved through incremental successes, and a positive classroom climate can all decouple perfectionism from debilitating anxiety. In practical terms, this means that language instructors and curriculum designers should recognize that the highest-achieving students in their classes may also be the highest anxiety-prone - due to their perfectionist traits.

Pedagogical implications include: giving balanced feedback (combining critique with encouragement), explicitly teaching that errors are an expected part of learning, involving students in peer support rather than competition, and perhaps offering anxiety management workshops for perfectionist learners.

By using these strategies, educators can help perfectionist students maintain their high standards without developing high anxiety, which in turn may lead to better language performance and a more satisfying learning experience. Overall, this research can help us better support the emotional well-being of EFL students as they pursue language proficiency.

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