

Language Anxiety and Environmental Anxiety: A Comparative Study of Student Narratives

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Abstract

Students today navigate complex emotional pressures influenced both by academic demands and global environmental uncertainty. In English language learning contexts, language anxiety (LA) commonly emerges through fear of judgment, test-related stress, and challenges in communication, while environmental anxiety (EA) arises from concerns about ecological decline and uncertain energy futures. This study investigates how undergraduate students articulate these two forms of anxiety through reflective journals and semi-structured interviews, offering a comparative understanding of their emotional experiences. Using a narrative inquiry approach, the research identifies shared patterns such as self-doubt, avoidance behaviours, and a perceived lack of control, while also highlighting the unique triggers that distinguish LA from EA. Language anxiety tends to stem from performance pressures, linguistic insecurity, and classroom dynamics, whereas environmental anxiety is shaped by large-scale ecological concerns, media messaging, and feelings of individual powerlessness. By examining the intersections and divergences in these student narratives, the study emphasizes the need for pedagogical approaches that support emotional well-being, encourage confidence in communication, and foster ecological awareness. The findings suggest that integrating empathetic teaching practices with climate-focused educational strategies can contribute to more holistic, responsive learning environments. This research adds to emerging interdisciplinary conversations linking language education, emotional affect, and energy humanities by foregrounding student voices at the centre of academic and ecological stress.

Keywords: Language Anxiety, Environmental Anxiety, Climate Anxiety, Student Narratives, Affective Factors, Communication Apprehension, Eco-Pedagogy, Environmental Literacy, Narrative Inquiry, Emotional Well-Being

1. Introduction

Undergraduate life today is shaped by pressures that are both personal and planetary. Students are expected to participate actively, perform consistently, and compete within academic systems that reward visible confidence. In English language classrooms, this pressure often becomes intensified because language performance is public: students speak in front of peers, respond under time constraints, and receive feedback that may feel evaluative even when supportive. Such conditions frequently give rise to language anxiety, a well-documented affective barrier that influences classroom engagement and willingness to communicate (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Students who experience anxiety often describe it not simply as nervousness but as a moment where confidence collapses—where they know what they want to say but hesitate, forget, or choose silence.

At the same time, many students carry a different kind of anxiety that is less visible inside the classroom but strongly present in their everyday thinking: growing distress about environmental breakdown, climate change, and uncertain futures. Environmental anxiety is shaped through repeated exposure to climate news, awareness of ecological decline, and the fear that the future may hold instability beyond their control (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020; Hickman et al., 2021). Unlike language anxiety, which emerges within specific classroom interactions, environmental anxiety is not confined to one physical setting. It can appear while scrolling through social media, reading headlines, or thinking about what kind of world awaits them.

Although language anxiety and environmental anxiety have been studied separately, placing them in conversation offers a richer understanding of student emotional life. Both anxieties operate through uncertainty, perceived judgment, and

a sense of limited agency. Yet they differ in important ways: one is shaped by immediate interpersonal performance and the other by long-term systemic uncertainty. A comparative perspective can therefore highlight how students respond to anxiety across both micro-level academic contexts and macro-level global concerns. In higher education—where students are developing identity, planning futures, and facing increasing environmental awareness—understanding this emotional overlap becomes particularly urgent. This study responds to that need by exploring how undergraduate students narrate these experiences through reflective journals and interviews, and by considering what their narratives suggest for emotionally responsive pedagogy.

2. Literature Review

Research on language anxiety has consistently shown that emotional barriers can significantly shape language learning outcomes, classroom participation, and learners' sense of identity. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) positioned foreign language classroom anxiety as a distinct form of anxiety closely tied to performance and evaluation within instructional settings, helping to establish language anxiety as a central concept in applied linguistics research. Their work also contributed to the development of tools that enabled scholars to examine anxiety systematically (Horwitz, 1986). Later scholarship built on this foundation by showing that anxiety is not only an emotional experience but also a cognitive one, affecting attention, memory, and processing capacity during language tasks (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). In practical terms, this means anxiety often interferes with the very mental resources students need to speak fluently or respond accurately, creating a cycle where fear of failure leads to reduced performance and reduced performance reinforces fear.

The classroom context is particularly important in language anxiety research because communication is social and public. Learners often judge themselves against peers or feel exposed when speaking in a non-native language, and even small errors can feel amplified under observation. Studies on emotions in language learning further suggest that classroom atmosphere, teacher behaviour, and student attitudes interact to shape willingness to communicate (Dewaele, 2019). Anxiety therefore cannot be understood only as an individual weakness; it emerges through social dynamics, classroom interaction patterns, and perceived expectations about "correctness" and fluency. Similarly, research connecting language learning with perfectionism highlights that anxious learners may be especially vulnerable to self-criticism and fear of imperfection, which increases hesitation and avoidance (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). Over time, such anxiety may influence not only performance but also students' relationship with the language itself, shaping what they feel capable of becoming as English users (Norton, 2013; Pavlenko, 2008).

While language anxiety is primarily situated in educational settings, environmental anxiety has emerged as a growing area of concern across psychology and environmental education research. Scholars describe a wide range of emotional responses to environmental change, from worry and fear to grief and anger. The distress caused by environmental transformation has been discussed through concepts such as solastalgia, which frames ecological loss as something felt intimately in relation to place and lived experience (Albrecht, 2007). Other researchers discuss ecological grief as a mental health response to climate-related losses, suggesting that environmental distress is not irrational but grounded in real experiences of disruption and threat (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018). Clayton and colleagues (2017) also underline the psychological impact of climate change and the need for guidance and support strategies, positioning environmental distress as a legitimate dimension of well-being.

A major feature of environmental anxiety is that it is shaped by scale. Climate change operates at a planetary level, yet individuals are often encouraged to respond through personal actions, which can create emotional tension between responsibility and helplessness. Lorenzoni, Nicholson-Cole, and Whitmarsh (2007) show that engagement with climate issues is influenced by perceived barriers, including distance, denial, and feelings of inefficacy. For many students, environmental anxiety is intensified through media exposure, which frequently frames the climate crisis as urgent and catastrophic, sometimes creating emotional overload rather than constructive engagement. The global survey by Hickman et al. (2021) also demonstrates that climate anxiety among young people is linked not only to environmental fear but also to how they perceive governmental response, reinforcing the idea that ecological distress is inseparable from social trust and political confidence.

Importantly, the emotional patterns seen in language anxiety and environmental anxiety reveal meaningful overlaps. Both can involve worry, avoidance, self-blame, and reduced agency. Yet they also differ: language anxiety is often tied to immediate performance, public judgment, and time-bound events, whereas environmental anxiety unfolds as a long-

term emotional condition shaped by uncertainty about the future. This paper therefore uses narrative inquiry as a method suited to capturing how students connect emotion with meaning over time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). Rather than treating anxiety as a fixed trait, narrative inquiry attends to how students describe turning points, coping strategies, and the emotional logic behind silence, withdrawal, or disengagement. In this sense, student narratives offer insight not only into what anxieties students experience, but into how those anxieties shape the ways they learn, interact, and imagine what lies ahead.

3. Method and Data

This study adopted a narrative inquiry approach because it allows emotions to be understood through lived experience rather than isolated variables. The participants were undergraduate students enrolled in English language learning courses, a context where anxiety is often observable because speaking tasks require visibility and interaction. Students were invited to reflect on their experiences of language anxiety within classroom settings and environmental anxiety in their everyday thoughts and media engagement.

Data were collected through reflective journals and semi-structured interviews. Journals allowed students to record experiences close to the moment of anxiety, including physical sensations, triggers, and avoidance behaviours. Interviews provided space for elaboration and interpretation, enabling participants to clarify what language anxiety and environmental anxiety meant to them personally and how they connected these emotions to identity and future thinking. The data were analysed using qualitative thematic coding, with attention to recurring narrative patterns such as triggers, emotional responses, coping strategies, and perceived consequences. Ethical consent was obtained, pseudonyms were used, and confidentiality was maintained throughout.

4. Findings

Across narratives, students described language anxiety and environmental anxiety as emotionally distinct yet structurally similar. One of the strongest common patterns was self-doubt. In language anxiety narratives, self-doubt often centred on the belief that one's English was "not good enough," and that speaking would expose incompetence. This uncertainty was rarely only about grammar; it was tied to self-image and social confidence. Students feared that hesitation might be misread as ignorance, and that mistakes might lead to embarrassment. Environmental anxiety showed a different kind of self-doubt—less about linguistic skill and more about comprehension and agency. Students frequently felt overwhelmed by environmental information and uncertain about how much they truly understood. Many expressed confusion about what was credible, what was exaggerated, and what action was meaningful.

Avoidance appeared as another shared emotional strategy, though it manifested differently. In language anxiety, avoidance was immediate and behavioural: students withheld answers, avoided eye contact, and reduced participation even when they had prepared. Students described physically feeling blocked, where the desire to speak existed but anxiety restrained them. Environmental anxiety avoidance tended to appear as emotional distancing: skipping climate news, disengaging from sustainability discussions, or avoiding content that felt too heavy. In both cases, avoidance functioned as short-term relief, but it also sustained anxiety by preventing students from building either communicative confidence or ecological agency.

Students also repeatedly framed anxiety through a sense of limited control. In language anxiety, this loss of control was often described as a real-time collapse—forgetting familiar vocabulary, losing fluency, or feeling mentally "blank" when called upon. The classroom became an unpredictable space where students felt exposed and pressured to perform without adequate time to recover. In environmental anxiety, the lack of control was larger and structural. Climate problems were described as too widespread, too complex, and too dependent on political decisions or corporate change. Many students felt trapped between awareness and powerlessness, unable to resolve the tension between caring deeply and feeling ineffective.

At the same time, the triggers for each anxiety were clearly distinct. Language anxiety was intensified through performance-based tasks, especially speaking assessments, public presentations, and situations where students believed they were being watched or judged. Fear of negative evaluation—by teachers and peers—was deeply embedded in their classroom stories. Environmental anxiety, in contrast, was strongly tied to media exposure, ecological uncertainty, and the persistent idea that the future is unstable. Students described climate headlines and recurring

disaster narratives as emotionally exhausting and sometimes paralysing. The “scale problem” also appeared repeatedly: many believed that personal actions were too small compared to systemic forces, intensifying frustration and helplessness.

5. Discussion

The comparison between language anxiety and environmental anxiety shows that student distress cannot be treated as belonging only to one domain. Anxiety is layered. Students who already feel insecure and judged in classroom environments may be more vulnerable to other anxieties that involve uncertainty and low agency. Language anxiety and environmental anxiety share emotional dynamics—self-doubt, avoidance, and loss of control—that reflect how anxiety works across contexts: it narrows action, reduces engagement, and reinforces the belief that participation will lead to harm or failure. This pattern aligns with the broader literature on language anxiety, which emphasises how anxiety can interrupt cognitive processing and decrease willingness to communicate (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Dewaele, 2019).

However, this study also suggests that LA and EA differ in what resolution might look like. In language anxiety, students can often point to a “better future self”: with practice, supportive feedback, and safer speaking environments, they can imagine improvement. Environmental anxiety is more difficult because the object of fear is not a classroom task but the future of the world, shaped by systems beyond the student’s immediate influence. The emotional strain here is existential rather than performative, and it is sustained by the perception that the crisis is ongoing and intensifying (Clayton et al., 2017; Hickman et al., 2021). This difference matters for pedagogy. A teacher can redesign classroom interaction, but they cannot remove the reality of climate uncertainty. What they *can* do is help students develop emotional literacy, critical engagement, and realistic agency, so that environmental awareness does not become paralysing despair.

The most important insight emerging from student narratives is that university classrooms are not emotionally sealed spaces. Students bring global stressors into academic life, and academic stress can shape how they cope with global issues. Recognising this intersection does not mean turning every class into a therapy session. It means acknowledging that emotionally responsive teaching is part of ethical education and that learners’ voices offer valuable insight into how anxiety disrupts participation and hope.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings suggest that language classrooms can become spaces where students not only develop English competence but also rebuild confidence and emotional safety. For language anxiety, teachers can reduce unnecessary stress by shifting from high-pressure performance to low-stakes communication. Students benefit when speaking is scaffolded, predictable, and encouraged without public embarrassment. Pair work, structured discussion prompts, and supportive feedback help students participate without feeling exposed. Normalising mistakes as part of learning is crucial because anxiety thrives when errors are treated as failures rather than growth.

Environmental anxiety requires a different kind of response. Students need support to process climate-related information without becoming overwhelmed, and they need learning environments that translate fear into grounded engagement. Educators can help by incorporating critical media literacy—guiding students to read climate content analytically, identify emotionally manipulative framing, and distinguish information from overload. Importantly, agency-building matters: when students can connect global problems to local examples, small-scale action, or community practices, they are more likely to experience hope rather than helplessness (Ojala, 2012). Language learning can integrate environmental themes carefully, not as a burden but as meaningful content for communication tasks that build both linguistic voice and ecological awareness.

6. Conclusion

This study explored how undergraduate students describe and interpret language anxiety and environmental anxiety through narrative inquiry using reflective journals and interviews. Both anxieties shared emotional structures—self-doubt, avoidance, and limited control—yet differed in their triggers and time-scales. Language anxiety was shaped by classroom visibility, fear of negative evaluation, and performance pressures, while environmental anxiety emerged from ecological uncertainty, media exposure, and systemic helplessness.

The findings reinforce the importance of emotionally responsive pedagogy in higher education and suggest that anxiety must be understood as part of the lived reality of contemporary students. Although limited by context and self-report, the study points toward the value of integrating supportive language teaching practices with climate-aware educational approaches that help students engage with environmental concerns without emotional shutdown.

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