
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring the Relationship Between Accent Beliefs and Speaking Anxiety in Moroccan EFL Classrooms

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| ABSTRACT

Speaking anxiety remains one of the most persistent emotional barriers to second language development; however, the specific role of accent beliefs in shaping this anxiety is still underexplored. The present study investigates the relationship between accent-related beliefs and speaking anxiety among Moroccan EFL learners. It examines how concerns about accented speech contribute to anxiety and whether these perceptions vary across proficiency levels. Using a mixed-methods approach with 92 B1-C1 level students at Tangier's American Language Center, we collected questionnaire data on accent perceptions and anxiety levels. While ANOVA showed no significant anxiety differences across proficiency groups, we found a negative correlation between accent confidence and speaking anxiety. Thematic analysis revealed key patterns including fear of judgment, embarrassment about accents, conflicts between native-like ideals and intelligibility, and classroom support's anxiety-reducing effects. Our findings position accent beliefs as a significant affective factor in speaking anxiety. They suggest that pedagogical approaches normalizing non-native accents and fostering accent acceptance could reduce anxiety and promote oral fluency, with implications for creating more inclusive pronunciation instruction environments.

| KEYWORDS

Speaking anxiety; accent beliefs; foreign language anxiety; Moroccan EFL learners; pronunciation confidence; language identity; CEFR levels; non-native English accents; English language teaching.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Within applied linguistics, the psychology of language learning offers vital insight into the cognitive and emotional factors that influence second language acquisition. Recently, many researchers have increasingly turned their attention to individual differences in learning, such as motivation, personality, and emotions (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). This is the belief that EFL learners' emotional state could affect their language proficiency and production throughout all stages of language learning/acquisition. The dimensions discussed have been shown to shape language proficiency as they deeply intertwine with the learner's experience. Among these emotions, a prevalent one that arises is the notion of foreign language anxiety (FLA). The latter has been recognized as a pervasive affective factor that can seriously undermine second language (L2) learning. Horwitz, and Cope (1986) described FLA as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 128). MacIntyre (1999) similarly defined FLA as "the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language" (p. 27). In practice, anxious learners often report feelings of tension and apprehension specifically tied to L2 contexts (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994).

Indeed, research consistently finds that high FLA is associated with poorer performance. It is the premise that anxious students frequently "freeze up" during speech production and avoid risk-taking, which in turn impedes their fluency and proficiency (Arnold & Brown, 1999; MacIntyre, 1999). Meta-analytic evidence confirms a moderate negative correlation between FLA and academic achievement in language courses (Botes, Dewaele, & Greiff, 2020). Thus, FLA is widely viewed as a situation-specific

anxiety that raises the learner's affective filter, blocking input processing and undermining confidence (Krashen, 1982, 2013; Horwitz et al., 1986). This phenomenon is further exacerbated in communicative settings, where learners experience heightened self-monitoring and fear of negative evaluation (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Woodrow, 2006). Neurocognitive studies suggest that anxiety consumes working memory resources, diverting attention from linguistic processing to threat appraisal (Derakshan & Eysenck, 2009), which may explain why anxious learners often struggle with spontaneous speech despite possessing adequate knowledge.

Speaking anxiety, the fear or apprehension of oral performance, is often a particularly salient facet of FLA. Many students report that speaking tasks in the L2 provoke greater anxiety than other skills like reading or listening (Gawi, 2020; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2013; Romero, 2021). For instance, Hewitt and Stephenson (2011) observed that learners who perform poorly in oral evaluations tend to exhibit the highest levels of speaking anxiety, whereas those with little to no fear tend to outperform them. Role-play and impromptu speaking activities are notorious stressors (Yalçın & İnceçay, 2014). Horwitz, through student feedback, explicitly added an FLCAS item regarding "freezing up" during speaking. Research has consistently demonstrated that oral production constitutes one of the most anxiety-provoking aspects of L2 learning (Hewitt & Stephenson, 2011; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2013), with learners' emotional and personality-related individual differences playing a significant role in shaping their language anxiety.

The role of affect in SLA has been another central area of the field. Learners bring traits such as self-esteem, inhibition, and general emotional reactivity into the classroom, which interplay with anxiety (Bao & Liu, 2021). According to the work of Dewaele, (2002 & 2013) and Gregersen & MacIntyre (2014), personality dimensions like tolerance of ambiguity and fear of error correction correlate directly to FLA. Learners are predisposed to a "worry-prone" temperament, also referred to as high neuroticism or perfectionism, that predisposes them to higher FLA, while extroverts or confident personalities tend to report lower anxiety. Likewise, learners with strong social self-consciousness or a "public speaking" anxiety, which is regarded as a subtype of social anxiety, may find classroom speaking especially intimidating (Cohen & Norst, 1989; Zhou, 2016). Dörnyei (2005) argues that traits such as motivation, self-efficacy, and extroversion are as important as aptitude in explaining SLA outcomes; consistent with this, studies report that learners with higher confidence or self-efficacy experience less FLA (Li & Du, 2023; Mouhoubi-Messadhi & Khaldi, 2022; Zhang, 2013). On the flip side, learners who believe they are poor speakers, regardless of actual ability, tend to show elevated speaking anxiety (Subaşı, 2010). Thus, FLA is not uniform but interacts strongly with a learner's emotional makeup, self-beliefs, and attitudes (MacIntyre, 2017; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2012).

Alongside the current rapid shifts in learning modes, learners' beliefs about accentedness have drawn growing attention. Indeed, beliefs about one's own or others' accents are a psychological construct tied to identity, confidence, and perceived intelligibility. Lan et al. (2023) have defined L2 accent beliefs as listeners' stereotypes and prejudices about accented speech. Accordingly, Lippi-Green (2012) had observed that listeners often believe they cannot understand a speaker solely because of an accent, even when the speech is perfectly intelligible. In everyday terms, many L2 learners hold the ideology of "native-speakerism". This view favors inner-circle English accents and may cause learners to feel that having a foreign accent is inherently negative (Kang & Rubin, 2009). These beliefs matter to a great extent. When accent prejudices translate into social discrimination, these beliefs can lead to decreased self-esteem, stress, or even depression in L2 speakers (Lan et al., 2023; Munro, 2003). From this, we can assume that the way learners perceive and value accents is closely entwined with their willingness to speak. Although accent has traditionally been treated as a purely linguistic feature, the current paper highlights that learners' attitudes toward accentedness may influence their speaking confidence.

These strands converge in the Moroccan EFL context. Morocco's multilingual environment, with Arabic and French as dominant languages and English as a foreign language, presents a unique setting. Learners often strive to master English, but with limited yet rising exposure to native-English communities. Preliminary data suggest that Moroccan EFL students experience high speaking anxiety, partly because they feel self-conscious about their accent and fear negative evaluation (Dewaele, Botes, & Meftah, 2023). Their findings indicate that within higher education, FLA emerges as the strongest negative predictor of English test performance, even stronger than boredom or enjoyment for non-native speakers. This underscores that anxiety is a major hidden inhibitor of success in Moroccan EFL settings. Nonetheless, there is scant research on how Moroccan learners' accentedness beliefs fit into this picture. Do students believe they "must" sound like native speakers to be credible? Do negative accent beliefs feed into their speaking anxiety? These questions remain largely unexplored in Moroccan research, especially after the upheaval of the pandemic.

Foreign language classroom anxiety, especially speaking anxiety, has been well documented as a complex, trait-like phenomenon tied to affective factors and learning conditions. Individual traits modulate anxiety, and the COVID-19 shift to online learning has introduced new patterns of stress and engagement (Resnik et al., 2023; Trenta et al., 2024). Meanwhile, learners' beliefs about accentedness represent a psychologically significant but understudied dimension. Accentedness beliefs involve listeners' biases and learners' self-assessments, and they have important social-emotional effects (Lippi-Green, 2012; Lan et al., 2023). Yet most studies treat accent as a linguistic outcome rather than a belief system connected to anxiety. To address this gap, our study will aim to examine Moroccan EFL learners' beliefs about accentedness and how these beliefs relate to speaking and pronunciation anxiety in the post-pandemic context. This study is an attempt to shed light on how accent-related attitudes might amplify or mitigate FLA, particularly in a context like Morocco where learners juggle multiple languages and ideals of "native-like" speech.

The study also takes into account the variable of language proficiency. By integrating insights from affective SLA, we aim to illuminate an unexplored interaction of variables that has important pedagogical and psychological implications for EFL education.

2. Review of literature

Early theories of second language acquisition emphasized the importance of the learner's emotional state. Among these works, Krashen's influential Affective Filter Hypothesis posits that negative emotions, such as anxiety, raise an internal "filter" that blocks comprehensible input from reaching the language acquisition mechanism. In effect, a high affective filter means that even when learners understand input, their anxiety prevents it from contributing to learning. In Krashen's work, learners with suboptimal attitudes tend to seek less input and have a "high or strong" filter through which input fails to reach the brain's acquisition device. This foundational framework implied that anxiety is not merely a by-product but a crucial barrier to language acquisition, setting the stage for later work on FLA.

Following this theoretical trajectory, Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) formally conceptualized FLA, also referred to as Foreign Language classroom Anxiety, as a distinct, situational type of anxiety experienced during language learning. They described FLA as a "complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors" unique to the language classroom context. This construct goes beyond general shyness or test anxiety and acknowledges the special challenges of communicating in a partially known language. Horwitz work also identified communication apprehension, which is also referred to as the fear of speaking, as test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation as the "building blocks" of FLA. However, they cautioned that FLA is not simply the sum of these factors; it arises from the uniqueness of language learning. In other words, it is the sum of the accumulation of beliefs related to uncertainty about linguistic norms and the risk of misunderstandings. Based on these arguments, it is evident that FLA affects learners' sense of competence. This is particularly evident in Horwitz et al.'s (1986) observation that even usually talkative students may become silent in a foreign language class due to the combination of performance pressure and limited language proficiency. MacIntyre's (1995) work further supports this claim by asserting that the learner's "propensity to reach one's full potential" in language is heavily influenced by affective variables like anxiety. His work also highlights the importance of FLA as a predictor of language achievement. The concept of FLA Scale was first introduced by Horwitz et al. It is in form of a 33-item, 5-point Likert questionnaire designed to tap language-learning anxiety specifically. Taken together, Horwitz et al.'s framework (1986) situates FLA at the intersection of cognitive factors (language knowledge) and affective factors (anxiety), describing a state anxiety that occurs "whenever the learner is confronted with language learning."

Since 1986, the FLAS has become the standard tool in the field. Its items cover various classroom situations, especially speaking and listening, and it has been adapted into many languages. Psychometrically, the FLAS is robust; Horwitz et al. reported an internal consistency of $\alpha \approx .93$ and a test-retest reliability of $r \approx .83$. Subsequent studies repeatedly found $\alpha > .90$ in diverse samples. At the same time, some scholars have noted criticisms. For instance, Sparks and Ganschow (2007) observed that FLAS items sometimes tap general attitudes about the language or class rather than pure anxiety. Factor analyses have yielded mixed results, with some evidence of multiple underlying dimensions (Aida, 1994; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Tóth, 2008) depending on sample and analytic method. Nonetheless, the FLAS's wide use has standardized FLA research, allowing comparisons across studies that were not possible before 1986.

By the 2000s, researchers had also examined how FLA relates to other forms of anxiety. Horwitz et al. (1986) themselves linked FLA to social forms of anxiety. MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) argued that language anxiety is essentially a kind of social anxiety, since it is specifically triggered by communicative interaction in a foreign language. Likewise, Horwitz et al. observed that even students who are normally outgoing in their first language can feel incapacitated by anxiety in the foreign language setting, due to real or imagined judgment by peers and instructors. Further literature often distinguishes FLA, perceived as a state anxiety tied to language use, from trait anxiety, which is a personality characteristic or from test anxiety, often manifested as fear of exams. In language classrooms, these anxieties often overlap. The situations involving public performance of speaking or evaluation and testing each contribute to the overall anxiety learners feel (Horwitz et al. 1986).

Nevertheless, FLA transcends simple constructs of communication apprehension plus test anxiety. In other words, FLA is a specific blend of anxieties unique to the language learning context, not merely an aggregate of general anxieties. Anxiety related to speaking, in particular, has been a focal point. Horwitz and colleagues noted early on that communication apprehension, essentially, fear of speaking, plays a large role in foreign language anxiety. Activities like speaking in dyads or acting are especially anxiety-provoking in L2 learning because students lack automatic fluency. As a result, typically fluent speakers in their first language often become inhibited in the L2 classroom. This observation ties FLA closely to what is often called speaking anxiety or oral communication anxiety. Over time, researchers have studied speaking anxiety both as part of FLA and on its own. Some have used the FLA speaking subscale as a proxy, while others have developed separate measures. For instance, Woodrow (2006) created the Second Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (SLSAS) and demonstrated that speaking anxiety, as measured by this scale, significantly predicted learners' oral performance. In her study of advanced ESL students, Woodrow found that the largest sources of speaking anxiety were interactions with native speakers and concern over one's own retrieval or perceived skill deficits. This suggests a dual nature of speaking anxiety; one dimension involves oral communication in classroom versus outside settings, and the other involves internal factors. Namely, confidence in language retrieval.

More recently, researchers have examined L2 speaking anxiety with a focus on specific predictors and dynamics. Gao's (2022) review highlights that L2 speaking anxiety is typically conceptualized as a state anxiety tied to situational demands. She further asserts that speaking anxiety has been measured either as an isolated construct or as part of broader FLA scales. Other studies have identified various factors influencing speaking anxiety; for example, Sun and Teng (2021) found that learners' speaking strategies, self-efficacy, and willingness-to-communicate were significant predictors of Chinese L2 learners' speech anxiety, while socio-cultural attitudes influenced anxiety indirectly through willingness-to-communicate. Other work emphasizes the dynamic interplay of factors: MacIntyre's (2017) "dynamic" perspective argues that anxiety interacts continuously with linguistic ability, motivation, classroom tasks, and context. Collectively, the speaking anxiety literature suggests that while closely related to FLA, speaking anxiety deserves attention in its own right, especially given its direct impact on oral proficiency and learners' communicative confidence.

A relatively new thread of research concerns accentedness beliefs, learners' attitudes about accents, and how these beliefs influence speaking confidence and anxiety. Sociolinguists have long documented accent bias; people commonly evaluate non-native accents negatively (Lippi-Green, 1997) and may perceive strongly accented speech as unintelligible even when it is comprehensible. Coppinger and Sheridan (2022) examined this issue in the EFL context, coining accent anxiety to describe speaking anxiety arising specifically from concern over one's non-native accent. In their study of French university students of English, the majority reported that a native-like accent was not essential for communication; they valued comprehensibility. However, many still aspired to sound more native-like, and most had felt embarrassed or worried about their accent at some point. Coppinger and Sheridan (2022) found that fear of negative evaluation and fear of future miscommunication were the primary drivers of this accent anxiety. In effect, learners' beliefs about the social importance of accent and the stigma of being strongly accented directly contributed to their speaking anxiety. This perspective aligns with broader findings on accent stigma and identity. Accent is a highly salient marker of foreignness, and speakers with non-native accents often feel stigmatized or alienated. International students who perceived discrimination based on their accents reported lower self-efficacy and a sense of not fully belonging in the host community. When listeners hold negative beliefs about accented speech, they may underestimate the speaker's intelligibility or competence. In a striking phrase, Lippi-Green (2012) calls accent discrimination "the last, socially acceptable prejudice". Learners who internalize such beliefs can suffer lowered language self-esteem. One study found that learners whose English accent was closer to a native norm reported higher L2 self-esteem than those with a more pronounced foreign accent. Although that study did not focus on Moroccan learners specifically, it suggests that belief in the need for a native accent can erode confidence.

Xue and Noels (2024) provide a recent, psychometrically grounded account of accent-related anxiety. They developed the Accent Anxiety Scale (AAS) for adult learners of English, identifying three anxiety sources, the first is related to 'worry about others' negative evaluations of one's distinct accent. The second is concern about social rejection due to one's "foreign" pronunciation. And the third is regarding anxiety about communication breakdowns attributed to intelligibility issues. Their scale highlights how social-psychological factors, namely peer judgment and group acceptance, and communicative factors, being understood, combine in accent anxiety. In practice, this means that learners who strongly believe that only a native-like accent will earn respect or clear communication is at risk of greater speaking anxiety. Conversely, if a learner views accent diversity more positively or focuses on intelligibility over nativeness, their speaking confidence may remain higher and anxiety lower. Across these topics, research has increasingly moved toward multifactor, dynamic models of anxiety. Work over the last decade has emphasized that FLA and its subtypes like speaking anxiety interact with motivation, self-efficacy, willingness-to-communicate, classroom environment, and individual differences such as personality or mindset. For instance, some studies now analyze how online and in-person contexts affect anxiety, or how the transition back to face-to-face instruction after COVID-19 influences learners' attitudes and stress. However, notable gaps remain.

In the Moroccan setting, few studies focus specifically on Moroccan EFL learners, marking a clear gap in the literature. Existing Moroccan studies (mostly survey-based) consistently report high levels of speaking anxiety among students. For instance, Bouddage and Elfatihi (2018) found that second-year Moroccan high schoolers had only moderate general foreign-language anxiety but very high speaking anxiety, citing pronunciation difficulty, limited vocabulary, and lack of English exposure as chief causes. At the university level, Baissane (2023) similarly showed that anxious Moroccan learners tend to underperform in oral proficiency – their foreign-language anxiety had a demonstrably negative impact on speaking abilities. From the teachers' side, Khoudri (2024) reports that Moroccan EFL instructors observe learners' anxiety stemming from linguistic issues. She noted that language anxiety arises mainly from limited vocab, grammar challenges, poor fluency, as well as affective factors such as motivation, and the lack of confidence. Notably, all these Moroccan-focused studies identify correlates of anxiety, both causes and consequences, but do not probe students' own beliefs or examine how anxiety varies across proficiency levels. Overall, while some recent papers examine general FLA levels in Moroccan universities, few address speaking-specific anxiety or accentedness beliefs in this context. Moroccan learners often navigate a multilingual environment and may hold complex attitudes toward accent, but empirical data on this are scarce. Furthermore, Moroccan EFL learners' perspectives on accent, self-efficacy, and proficiency remain largely unexplored despite these studies' insights.

In summary, the literature identifies FLA as a situational, multifaceted anxiety construct rooted in early theories like Krashen's affective filter and elaborated by Horwitz et al. (1986) through the FLCAS framework. FLCA overlaps with other anxieties (test

anxiety, social anxiety, communication apprehension) but is distinct to the language learning context. Speaking anxiety, as a core component of FLA, has been examined both through general measures (like FLA) and specific scales (Woodrow's SLSAS, Gao's review of various scales). More recently, researchers have turned to accentedness beliefs, showing that learners' concerns about their accent can independently fuel speaking anxiety. Social attitudes toward accent can undermine confidence and exacerbate anxiety. In practice, this means that a learner's perceptions about how their accent is judged – and their own ideals for pronunciation – become psychological factors in their willingness to speak up and their sense of self-efficacy. This body of research has matured significantly, but still exhibits gaps. There is a need for further research in diverse contexts to examine how the local linguistic environments shape FLA and accent attitudes. Likewise, in the post-pandemic era, we must understand how changes in teaching modality (online, hybrid) have shifted the balance of anxiety-provoking factors. Addressing these gaps will require integrating the rich theoretical frameworks of FLA and communication anxiety with fresh empirical work that captures learners' beliefs about accent and confidence.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to investigate the relationship between learners' speaking anxiety, language proficiency, and beliefs about accent among Moroccan EFL students. The aim is both to quantify anxiety levels across different learner groups and to explore underlying beliefs through qualitative inquiry. The combination of structured data and open responses allows for a deeper understanding of why certain learners experience more anxiety, and how their perceptions of accent may contribute to it.

The study, thus, is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How does students' language proficiency affect FLA?

RQ2: What is the nature of L2 learners' beliefs regarding accentedness?

RQ3: How do these beliefs interact with existing speaking and pronunciation anxiety constructs?

3.2 Population

The target population consists of EFL students enrolled at the American Language Center (ALC). This context was chosen due to its heterogeneous student body, structured level system, and emphasis on spoken communication, which aligns well with the focus of this study. 92 participants will be recruited using convenience sampling – that is, learners who are readily accessible and willing to participate. While this limits generalizability, it ensures feasibility and allows the study to capture a range of levels and learner backgrounds. Language level, categorized into B1, B2, and C1 based on ALC's internal placement system, is the main concern in this study. This variable will be used in subsequent analysis to detect patterns or group differences in speaking anxiety and accent beliefs.

3.3 Instruments

The study utilizes the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale as a primary instrument for measuring students' speaking anxiety level (Horwitz and Cope, 1986). As discussed before, it is a 33-item Likert-scale questionnaire which dimensions such as fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and test anxiety in foreign language settings. In this study, the FLA will be adapted to better fit the ALC context where relevant.

To assess beliefs about accent and intelligibility, closed-ended items will be added, asking learners to indicate agreement or opinions regarding various areas (Appendix A). These items are designed to quantify students' attitudes toward pronunciation and self-perceived speaking competence. Furthermore, a series of open-ended follow-up questions will be included in order to contextualize the quantitative findings. These allow participants to elaborate on their personal beliefs about their accent, their experiences in class, and their perceptions of speaking anxiety. For example, participants are asked to describe situations where they felt anxious speaking English, and to reflect on how they feel about their pronunciation in comparison to their peers. These open responses aim to provide a rationale behind the reported anxiety levels and beliefs, which in turn could help to answer the qualitative research question of "why" learners feel the way they do.

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data will be analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. First, an ANOVA will be used to test for statistically significant differences in beliefs and anxiety levels across the three language proficiency groups (B1, B2, and C1). Then, correlational tests, namely Pearson Correlation Coefficient, will examine whether learners' anxiety levels decrease with rising proficiency. The analyses aim to determine if higher-level learners indeed report lower anxiety and more confidence in their accent, as previous studies suggest. Additionally, general trends in anxiety and accent beliefs will be summarized across the entire sample.

The open-ended responses will be analyzed through thematic analysis. Responses will be coded inductively to identify recurring patterns and categories related to speaking anxiety, classroom experiences, peer comparison, and accent self-perception. Themes will be compared across levels and gender where possible, and special attention will be paid to how learners explain the causes of their anxiety and what beliefs they hold about "sounding native-like." This analysis will help interpret the statistical findings and provide insights into learners' internal beliefs, motivations, and fears.

4. Results and discussion

The one-way ANOVA (Table 1) on speaking anxiety by proficiency level showed no significant group differences ($F(2,89) = 0.27$, $p = .767$). The mean anxiety scores were nearly identical (B1: $M = 30.53$, $SD = 6.53$; B2: $M = 30.71$, $SD = 6.32$; C1: $M = 29.50$, $SD =$

6.47), indicating that students at beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels reported similar levels of speaking anxiety. This null finding suggests that, in our sample of Moroccan EFL learners, higher proficiency did not automatically confer lower anxiety. One explanation is that anxiety is not determined solely by ability: as MacIntyre (2017) emphasizes, anxiety is a multifaceted, dynamic phenomenon influenced by many interacting factors (e.g., self-appraisals, context, interpersonal dynamics).

Language Level	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	F(2,89)	p
B1	40	30.53	6.53	20	48	0.27	.767
B2	28	30.71	6.32	23	49		
C1	24	29.50	6.47	18	45		

Table 1: One-Way ANOVA Results for Speaking Anxiety Scores by Language Level

In practical terms, even advanced learners may continue to worry about speaking if they hold critical self-views or face social pressure. Indeed, research shows that anxiety can persist regardless of proficiency: for example, Cheng et al. (2021) note that “even students with a high level of English proficiency can experience public speaking anxiety”. Similarly, we found that common triggers of speaking anxiety—such as fear of making errors or of peer evaluation—are likely active at all levels. Studies have long identified fear of verbal or pronunciation errors and negative evaluation by classmates or teachers as key sources of speaking anxiety.

In other words, learners at every level may dread being judged for their accent or mistakes, which could keep anxiety elevated even as competence grows. Our results dovetail with recent longitudinal findings on Moroccan learners. Dewaele and Meftah (2023) followed 502 Moroccan EFL students across the same skill levels and found that motivation remained high and stable, while positive emotions increased and negative emotions (including anxiety) decreased slowly over time. In their study, higher-level learners showed modest gains in emotional well-being but did not experience a sharp drop in anxiety. This suggests that proficiency improvements may only gradually lower anxiety, or that classroom dynamics (e.g. less engaging materials or higher expectations at higher levels) might counterbalance it. In any case, our cross-sectional snapshot likely captured this complex picture: advanced learners were somewhat less anxious on average, but not significantly so in ANOVA. This pattern is consistent with the view that proficiency alone does not automatically eliminate anxiety. With that being said, it is also important to acknowledge that factors like teaching style, test-focused curricula, and persistent perfectionistic beliefs (Young, 1991; Price, 1991) can keep anxiety levels relatively constant across levels.

	r	t	df	n	p
SA and accent confidence	-0.297	2.954	90	92	.0039

Table 2: Pearson correlation between speaking anxiety scores and accent confidence

Notably, we did find a significant relationship between accent self-beliefs and anxiety (table 2). The Pearson correlation between accent confidence and speaking anxiety was weak but statistically significant and negative ($r(90) = -0.297$, $p = .0039$). In other words, learners who reported greater confidence in their own accent tended to report lower language anxiety. This finding suggests that accent confidence – a specific aspect of learners’ self-efficacy – may serve as a buffer against speaking anxiety. The effect is modest (only about 9% shared variance) but meaningful. It aligns with research linking self-efficacy to anxiety in language learning: for example, Okyar (2023) found a similar negative correlation between EFL speaking self-efficacy and anxiety.

In both cases, a positive self-appraisal (“I can speak in this language reasonably well / I am okay with my accent”) is associated with less anxious affect. The importance of accent confidence can be understood via the lens of social evaluation. Horwitz et al. (1986) identified fear of negative evaluation as a core component of foreign language anxiety, and Coppinger and Sheridan (2022) highlight accent as a focal point of that fear. In their study, many learners felt embarrassed or worried about their non-native accent, primarily because of the fear that peers or others would judge them negatively.

Thus, lacking confidence in one’s accent can amplify anxiety: if students believe their accent is “bad,” they may dread speaking and dread how they will be evaluated. Conversely, learners who are confident – or at least unfazed – about their accent have one less worry to cope with, which may explain the lower anxiety scores. This interpretation is consistent with MacIntyre’s dynamic view of anxiety: self-related appraisals (like believing in one’s accent) continuously interact with emotions.

Learners who appraise their accent positively effectively insulate themselves from one source of threat, leading to more positive emotional states. Our data therefore underscore the role of accent beliefs in speaking anxiety. Even though the difference in anxiety across proficiency levels was nil, the linkage between accent confidence and anxiety suggests that what learners believe about their speech matters. Many Moroccan EFL learners, like those in Coppinger and Sheridan’s study, may cognitively endorse the value of a native-like accent yet simultaneously feel personal pressure to approximate it.

These mixed beliefs can create internal conflict: students want to be understandable (comprehensible) – which they acknowledge is sufficient – but also secretly hope to sound native. That hope can heighten anxiety when it is not met. Our finding implies that alleviating accent-related concerns (for example, by emphasizing intelligibility and communicative success rather than nativeness) could reduce anxiety. Empathetically, instructors and peers should recognize that accent insecurity is a common emotional burden. Addressing it – perhaps by providing positive feedback on accented speech and normalizing diverse accents – may help lower speaking anxiety. In sum, the results point to two main conclusions. First, proficiency level alone did not predict anxiety. This challenges any assumption that advanced learners simply “grow out” of speaking anxiety. Instead, anxiety appears entrenched across stages, likely influenced by enduring beliefs and classroom factors.

Second, accent confidence is related to anxiety, suggesting that learners’ beliefs about their accent are an important part of the emotional equation. This finding is consistent with emerging scholarship: recent work (e.g., Dewaele & Meftah, 2023) emphasizes that positive emotions and attitudes buffer motivation and anxiety in language learning. Our results imply that fostering positive beliefs (like accent confidence) could serve a similar function. By reframing accent perceptions and building self-efficacy, teachers may help students feel less anxious. Taken together, these insights have practical implications. Interventions to reduce speaking anxiety should go beyond language drills and incorporate affective support. For instance, Horwitz’s framework reminds us that reducing fear of negative evaluation is crucial. In line with Coppinger and Sheridan (2022), this may involve creating a classroom culture that values intelligibility over native-like accent and celebrates linguistic diversity. MacIntyre’s (2017) dynamic perspective suggests that such changes in belief can ripple through many levels of emotion and motivation.

In short, while we did not find proficiency differences, we did uncover a meaningful link between how learners feel about their accent and how anxious they are. Addressing accent beliefs – in an understanding, empathetic way – might therefore help Moroccan EFL learners speak more confidently and with less fear.

Open-Ended Question	Identified Theme(s)	Example Participant Response
Do you enjoy speaking and speaking activities in class?	Classroom Environment; Practice Comfort	“Yes, because my teacher gives us lots of fun speaking activities and I feel more confident now.” (P07)
Is sounding like a native speaker one of your language learning goals?	Accent Confidence & Identity; Social Comparison	“Yes, I want to sound more American so people don’t laugh at my pronunciation.” (P28)
Do you think having a native-like accent is an essential part of learning a language?	Beliefs about Pronunciation Standards	“No, the most important thing is to be understood, not to sound native.” (P14)
How would you rate your English accent?	Self-Appraisal; Perceptions of Proficiency	“I think my accent is okay, but not very clear sometimes when I speak fast.” (P19)
How do you feel about your English accent?	Accent Confidence & Identity	“I used to be embarrassed, but now I’m proud of how far I’ve come.” (P34)
Do you ever worry about what other people think of your accent when speaking English?	Fear of Negative Evaluation	“Yes, especially in front of native speakers or classmates who speak better.” (P05)
Have you ever felt embarrassed about your accent when speaking English?	Embarrassment; Public Speaking Anxiety	“Yes, many times in class when I made a pronunciation mistake.” (P11)
Has your accent ever caused problems with communicating in English?	Intelligibility Concerns; Self-Efficacy	“Sometimes people ask me to repeat what I said because of my accent.” (P21)

Table 3: Themes Identified from Open-Ended Responses on Speaking Anxiety

Moving to the qualitative findings, we conducted a thematic analysis of students’ open-ended responses about speaking anxiety, accent confidence, and pronunciation beliefs. Several interrelated emotional and cognitive themes emerged. Fear of negative evaluation. Across all proficiency levels, learners repeatedly expressed worry about how others would judge their spoken English. For example, one student admitted, “Yeah, sometimes if I’m speaking to a teacher or a native person” they worry about being judged, and another commented that “some people in my age judge others a lot.” These remarks reflect the classic “fear of negative evaluation” that underlies foreign language anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986), and help explain why anxiety did not differ by CEFR level: learners at every level shared similar apprehensions.

In many comments, the focus was on making mistakes or not being understood rather than on linguistic ability *per se*. For example, one respondent said she only worries “if they didn’t understand what I mean or say,” suggesting anxiety is driven by communication concerns. This pervasive social-evaluative fear likely keeps anxiety high even in more advanced learners. Embarrassment and self-consciousness. Feelings of embarrassment about one’s accent or pronunciation were frequently mentioned. Several students noted that they felt ashamed early in their learning, but gradually became more confident. One respondent recalled that she was embarrassed “in the past when I started learning English,” while another explained that “before

learning English... now I'm not embarrassed to speak English." These comments show a common trajectory: initial self-consciousness gives way to acceptance with practice and experience.

However, anxiety persisted in specific communicative situations, as evidenced by learners' self-reported experiences. One participant's revealing statement - "Yes, my accent sounds like an Indian scammer on YouTube" - demonstrates the profound self-criticism and discomfort that can accompany speaking in an L2. These candid reflections highlight how deeply personal insecurities about pronunciation and accent can exacerbate speaking anxiety. Importantly, while such anxieties were present, classroom dynamics and peer support systems appeared to serve as mitigating factors in many cases. The social environment of the language classroom thus emerges as a potentially crucial element in either amplifying or alleviating these accent-related anxieties.

The classroom environment played a strong role in shaping students' feelings. Many respondents mentioned supportive teachers and activities that made speaking enjoyable rather than intimidating. One student praised the "good atmosphere, good teacher, amusing people," while another noted that their teacher "did a lot of activities and we often work with [a] partner." These positive dynamics seem to alleviate anxiety: students who reported enjoying speaking activities often described practicing without fear. For example, a learner explained that speaking practice "helps me to improve my skills, and to feel more comfortable and less shy when I speak with others." In contrast, only few students said they disliked speaking tasks, usually without citing fear; one simply said, "I don't like speaking that much. These findings collectively indicate that a supportive classroom environment can effectively reduce speaking anxiety by offering low-stakes practice opportunities. This may help explain why anxiety levels remained consistently elevated—and remarkably similar—across different proficiency groups. Regarding accent identity, students demonstrated markedly varied perceptions that reflected distinct confidence levels. Some exhibited positive self-assessments, with one learner asserting, "I have a very good accent," and another reporting feeling "good [about it]—most people understand me." These confident individuals reported minimal embarrassment and correspondingly low anxiety levels. In contrast, other participants expressed pronounced self-criticism, with one student jokingly acknowledging that peers compare his accent to stereotypical portrayals ("an Indian scammer on YouTube"), while another confessed their pronunciation "get[s] worse when I am nervous." Such candid disclosures highlight how acute accent-related self-consciousness may directly contribute to speaking anxiety.

In general, students who perceived their accent positively (e.g. "No, I'm fine with it because I know that I have a good accent") tended to report less worry, whereas those with low accent confidence often demonstrated fear of speaking. This pattern is consistent with the small negative correlation we found: higher accent confidence generally went along with lower speaking anxiety in the quantitative data. Social comparison and communicative goals. Learners also compared themselves to native speakers or peers in different ways. Many expressed a desire to sound like a native speaker for social or professional reasons. One respondent said she aimed to "sound like a professional in English," and another reasoned that "it makes it easier for other people to understand me" if she sounds American. Some even mentioned future plans as motivation – for example, a student planning to study in the U.S. admitted she wouldn't like to be "embarrassed" by her accent abroad. In contrast, several students took a more pragmatic stance, emphasizing intelligibility over nativeness. One wrote bluntly, "No... as long as people can understand me, I don't care what my accent sounds like." Another echoed this by saying her goal is simply "to communicate... I don't care if I sound like a native speaker as long as they understand me."

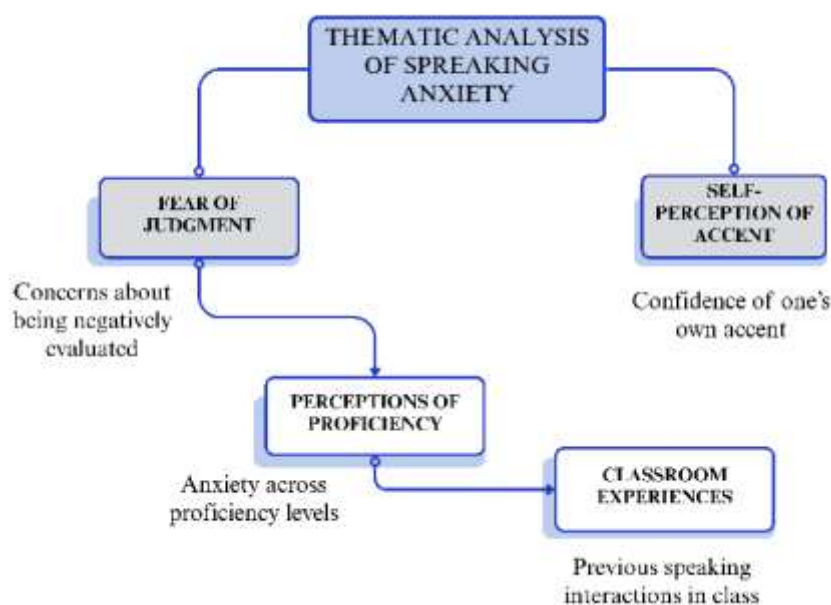


Figure 1: Summary of the thematic finding

As described in Figure 1, the findings highlight contrastive beliefs that explain survey response variations, particularly between valuing native-like pronunciation versus prioritizing communicative effectiveness. For instance, a native-like accent is regarded as the ideal versus communicative effectiveness as the priority. These pronunciation beliefs significantly influence both confidence and anxiety levels; those who focus on meaning over form tend to be less self-conscious and less anxious. These beliefs manifest in coping strategies and resilience. Respondents reported various anxiety management approaches, including adopting growth mindsets that frame mistakes as learning opportunities. For example, one student stated she never feels embarrassed by errors: 'Never, because even if I get it wrong I will learn from my mistakes.' Others relied on practice and positive outcomes: several reported that regular speaking activities gradually made them more comfortable. Phrases like 'practice and practice' and descriptions of improvement over time recurred. This resilience - learning from errors, seeking more speaking practice, and focusing on progress - likely helps explain why some students maintained moderate anxiety despite their insecurities.

In line with the patterns observed, the survey's yes/no results paint a nuanced picture of enthusiasm intertwined with anxiety. As displayed in Figure 2, a strong majority (81.5%) of learners reported that they genuinely enjoy speaking activities, indicating an inherent eagerness to communicate. Yet this positive outlook is tempered by pronounced insecurities: 71.7% admitted worrying about how others judge their accent, and 63.0% have experienced embarrassment because of it. These figures point to what Horwitz et al. (1986) termed a fear of negative evaluation – many learners dread being judged or even mocked for sounding “non-native,” a concern that strongly underlies their accent anxiety. Indeed, over half of respondents (56.5%) believed that attaining a *native-like* accent is essential, reflecting the influence of *native-speakerism* – the pervasive notion that “real” English proficiency means sounding like a native speaker. Such an ideal can easily heighten perfectionism and pressure; research has noted that unrealistic expectations of natelikeness often generate anxiety and shame, leading learners to fall silent despite their ability. However, just over half (53.3%) felt positively about their own accent, hinting at a resilient sense of self-acceptance. Rather than viewing their Moroccan accent as a deficit, these learners may see it as part of their linguistic identity, echoing calls for learners to embrace their accents with pride. Taken together, these results offer a humanizing glimpse into students' lived reality: they take joy in speaking and *want* to use English, yet carry the emotional weight of accent-related worry. One can empathize with how such fear of judgment can raise their affective filter, making them self-conscious and hesitant to speak up even as they are eager to participate.

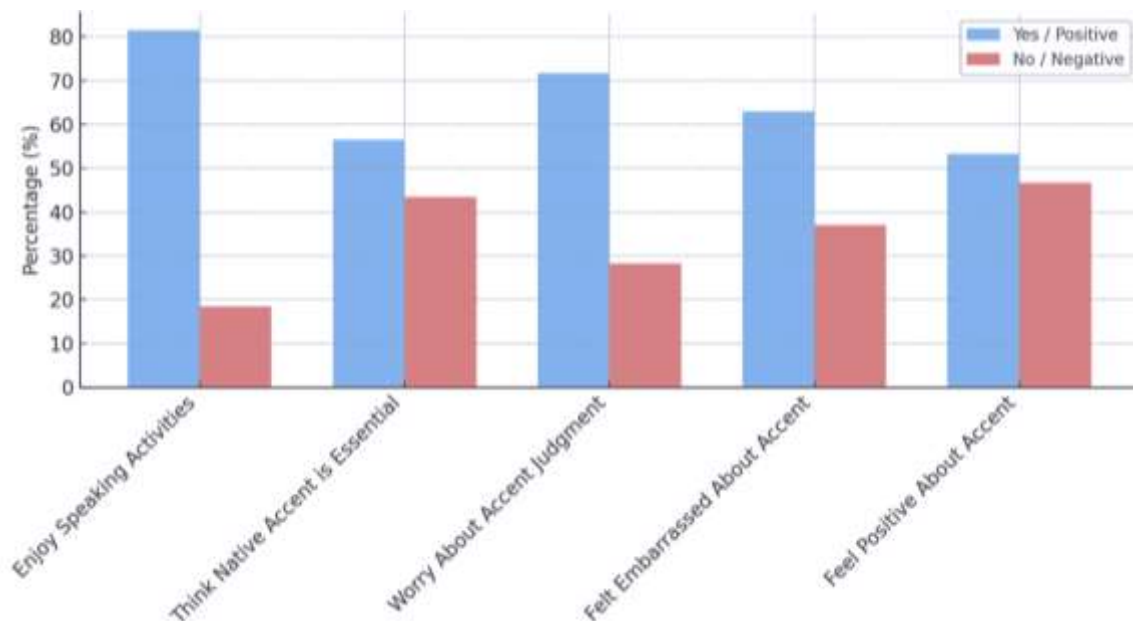


Figure 2: Responses to closed-ended questions about speech anxiety

In brief, the qualitative themes enrich and clarify the quantitative picture. Students at all levels reported similar fears (fear of negative evaluation, embarrassment, worries about misunderstanding), which aligns with our finding of no proficiency-based difference in anxiety. The themes also elucidate the modest inverse link between accent confidence and anxiety: learners who expressed confidence or pride in their accent generally felt less worried, whereas those who were self-conscious or who strongly compared themselves to native norms reported more anxiety. Supportive classroom environments and adaptive coping attitudes emerged as important buffers, suggesting that even anxious students can grow more confident over time. By integrating these thematic insights, we gain a more complete understanding of why accent confidence and speaking anxiety relate as they do – and why proficiency alone does not fully determine anxiety levels – in our study. References Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70(2), 125–132.

5. Conclusion

This study explored how Moroccan EFL learners' beliefs about their accents intersect with speaking anxiety and whether proficiency level influences this experience. The results were telling: proficiency level made little difference; students across B1, B2, and C1 levels reported similar levels of speaking anxiety. This challenges the assumption that anxiety fades as skill increases. Instead, it suggests that the emotional nature of language learning, and how deep-rooted beliefs, especially those tied to self-image and social perception, can persist regardless of actual ability. What did matter, however, was accent confidence. Learners who reported feeling comfortable with their accent were less likely to experience anxiety when speaking. This insight was echoed in the qualitative responses. Many students expressed a genuine desire to communicate, but also confessed to worrying about being judged or sounding "wrong." Some shared feelings of embarrassment; others, the quiet pressure to sound native-like. A few had moved beyond these worries, learning to value their accent as part of their identity. Their stories point to a common thread: the fear of negative evaluation, particularly related to how one sounds, is a powerful force shaping classroom experience and confidence.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings highlight the need for more holistic approaches that extend beyond traditional language drills or fluency practice. Learners benefit most from psychologically safe spaces where they can develop both linguistic competence and communicative confidence simultaneously. Teachers play a pivotal role in cultivating such environments by explicitly affirming the legitimacy of diverse accents, consistently modeling acceptance through their feedback practices, and reframing pronunciation goals around intelligibility rather than native-like imitation. This supportive framework should be complemented by structured opportunities for low-stakes practice, where mistakes are normalized as natural steps in the learning process. Additionally, incorporating reflective activities that help students recognize their progress and challenge negative self-perceptions can further reduce anxiety. By intentionally creating classroom cultures where students feel heard rather than judged, educators can lower affective filters, thereby enabling more meaningful participation and authentic communication. Such an approach not only addresses the immediate challenges of speaking anxiety but also fosters the development of resilient, self-regulated learners who are better equipped to navigate real-world communication beyond the classroom.

While this study offers valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. The relatively small participant sample drawn from a single language center necessarily restricts the generalizability of the findings. Besides, the reliance on self-reported data means the results reflect participants' perceptions rather than objectively measured behaviors. Future research could address these limitations by employing larger, more diverse samples across multiple institutions. Longitudinal designs tracking the evolution of accent-related beliefs and anxiety over time would be particularly valuable, as would experimental studies testing targeted classroom interventions designed to mitigate accent-related fears. Such approaches could help establish causal relationships and more robustly validate the patterns observed in this study.

Nevertheless, the patterns emerging from this study reveal fundamental truths about language learning. Moroccan EFL learners, like their counterparts globally, engage in far more than vocabulary and grammar acquisition—they navigate complex negotiations of identity, self-worth, and belonging. Their accents serve as audible markers of this personal journey. Recognizing the profound emotional significance embedded in pronunciation represents a crucial step toward creating inclusive language classrooms. Such spaces would honor all voices, not merely hearing them despite their accents, but actively valuing the linguistic diversity and personal histories those accents represent. This shift in perspective could transform language education from a pursuit of conformity to a celebration of authentic communication and multicultural identity.

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