

## The impact of anxiety-management strategies on EFL students' anxiety levels and vocabulary acquisition

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### ABSTRACT

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) remains a significant barrier to vocabulary acquisition in English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom, particularly among young learners who fear negative evaluation, public speaking, and academic failure. Although the relationship between anxiety and poor lexical performance is well established, limited research has examined how coordinated classroom-based anxiety-management strategies influence both vocabulary development and students' emotional experiences within regular instructional practice. This mixed-methods study examined the impact of six anxiety-management strategies implemented over six weeks with 50 A1-level secondary EFL students in Ecuador. The intervention integrated lengthened wait time, improved questioning techniques, acceptance of varied responses, peer collaboration, content-focused instruction, and positive teacher-student relationships into vocabulary lessons. Data were collected through an adapted anxiety scale, pre- and post-tests, questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations. Results revealed a statistically significant improvement in vocabulary scores, with a large effect size, alongside increased confidence, participation, and engagement. Strategies fostering psychological safety, particularly content-focused instruction, peer collaboration, and strong teacher-student rapport, were perceived as most effective. The findings suggest that integrating affective support with cognitive scaffolding is associated with reduced anxiety-related behaviors and enhanced vocabulary development, positioning anxiety management as a central component of effective EFL pedagogy rather than a supplementary practice.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The acquisition of vocabulary is fundamental when achieving proficiency in English as a foreign language (EFL), critically influencing reading comprehension, communicative competence, and overall academic success [1], [2]. However, this foundational aspect of language learning is often impeded by significant affective barriers, among which foreign language anxiety (FLA) is one of the most pervasive and debilitating. FLA is defined as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors related to classroom language learning, characterized by feelings of tension, apprehension, and nervousness [3]. This anxiety, particularly the fear of negative evaluation, can consume valuable cognitive resources, impair memory, and lead to the avoidance of speaking, thereby creating a major obstacle to effective vocabulary acquisition and use [4], [5].

In response to this challenge, a variety of anxiety-management strategies have been proposed and explored within EFL pedagogy. These range from cognitive and social strategies to specific pedagogical interventions such as creating supportive learning environments, incorporating collaborative group work, and modifying questioning techniques to reduce pressure [6], [7]. Previous research has established a clear correlation between anxiety and poorer language performance, and studies have demonstrated that interventions such as using online simulation games or structured vocabulary training can alleviate anxiety and improve learning outcomes [8], [9]. Nevertheless, despite the expanding literature, some notable gaps persist.

Although previous research confirms that FLA negatively affects vocabulary acquisition and limits learners' use of effective strategies [4], [5], few studies have examined which classroom-based anxiety-management practices students perceive as most effective for supporting vocabulary learning. Much of the existing research emphasizes correlational findings or technology-based interventions [8], [10], rather than coordinated instructional strategies embedded in everyday classroom practice. As a result, there is limited practical guidance for teachers regarding which approaches to prioritize. This issue is particularly relevant in the Ecuadorian context, where fear of negative evaluation and speaking anxiety frequently discourage students from practicing newly learned vocabulary. In many secondary classrooms, learners avoid oral participation due to fear of making mistakes or being judged by peers, thereby limiting opportunities for lexical rehearsal and communicative development [11].

To address this gap, the present study applies a structured framework of classroom-based strategies, including lengthened wait time, improved questioning techniques, peer collaboration, content-focused instruction, and the promotion of positive teacher–student relationships [6], to examine their impact and perceived effectiveness in supporting vocabulary acquisition. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- What is the effect of anxiety management strategies on the levels of anxiety and vocabulary learning in EFL students?
- What are EFL students' attitudes toward anxiety-management strategies in relation to their vocabulary learning?

The contribution of this study lies in opening new avenues for research in Ecuador by adopting a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative vocabulary pre- and post-testing with qualitative analysis of students' perceptions and classroom experiences. By integrating performance data with emotional and behavioral insights, the study offers a holistic understanding of how anxiety-management strategies influence both vocabulary outcomes and students' affective engagement in EFL classrooms. Furthermore, it provides empirical evidence on the benefits of embedding structured affective support into vocabulary instruction, offering practical, evidence-based guidance for teachers seeking to reduce classroom anxiety while promoting meaningful vocabulary growth.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Learning vocabulary in EFL contexts

Vocabulary is a fundamental component of EFL learning, playing a crucial role in reading comprehension and overall language proficiency. Research highlights that vocabulary knowledge significantly impacts reading ability, as learners struggle with word recall and meaning comprehension, which are essential for text interpretation [1]. Additionally, vocabulary mastery facilitates communication, allowing learners to express ideas effectively in both written and spoken forms. Research highlights that vocabulary knowledge significantly contributes to language proficiency, particularly in reading comprehension and spoken fluency. Different types of vocabulary, such as high-frequency words, academic words, and technical terms, should be systematically taught to ensure comprehensive language development [2]. Furthermore, research indicates that sustainable vocabulary acquisition depends on multiple linguistic factors, including cognateness and word frequency [12].

Despite its importance, EFL learners face multiple challenges in vocabulary acquisition. One major issue is the lack of effective teaching strategies and instructional materials that adequately address vocabulary learning [13]. Additionally, learners often struggle with retention due to insufficient exposure and practice. Research suggests that the absence of context in vocabulary instruction further complicates learning, making it difficult for students to apply newly acquired words in meaningful ways [14]. Moreover, factors such as motivation, individual learning styles, and prior linguistic knowledge significantly influence vocabulary acquisition and retention rates [15]. In addition to these learner-related variables, the way vocabulary knowledge is presented in EFL textbooks also plays a crucial role, as variations across learning materials can affect how students process and internalize new words [16].

To address these challenges, educators must implement diverse and engaging vocabulary learning strategies. Studies show that incorporating multisensory approaches, such as visual aids, storytelling, and

interactive activities, enhances vocabulary retention and use. Research indicates that a multisensory approach, which engages multiple sensory channels simultaneously, significantly improves vocabulary acquisition and retention in young learners [17]. Additionally, contextual learning through reading and conversational practice fosters deeper understanding and long-term retention of words [18]. Research also supports the use of digital tools and corpora-based methods to provide learners with real-world vocabulary exposure and application opportunities [19]. By adopting these evidence-based strategies, educators can facilitate more effective vocabulary learning experiences in EFL contexts.

## 2.2. The effect of anxiety on EFL vocabulary acquisition

Language anxiety can be defined as a mix of self-awareness, emotions, beliefs, and actions that emerge in the context of classroom language learning, influenced by the distinctive nature of language acquisition. This phenomenon, manifested as feelings of tension, apprehension, and nervousness, is particularly prevalent among EFL learners and can manifest in various forms, affecting their ability to learn and use vocabulary effectively. Research identifies three main types of anxiety in EFL contexts: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension arises when learners feel anxious about speaking in English, often due to a lack of confidence in their linguistic skills. Test anxiety is associated with the fear of performing poorly in assessments, while fear of negative evaluation stems from concerns about being judged by peers or instructors. These anxieties can create barriers to effective vocabulary acquisition and use [3].

As students learn a language, their mental and physical well-being should be supported. Nevertheless, feelings of apprehension and anxiety may create obstacles in their learning process [20]. For instance, verbal communication can trigger distressing emotions in many individuals, with these feelings varying in nature and origin. Learners who feel embarrassed about using a foreign language may experience intensified anxiety, making the learning process even more challenging, especially in the classroom [21].

Anxiety can have a profound impact on vocabulary learning in EFL contexts. Research indicates that the effects of anxiety can adversely affect a person's use of vocabulary learning strategies [4]. Likewise, when there is an increase in anxiety, vocabulary learning strategy use decreases to a significant extent. This means that anxiety can impair cognitive processes such as memory and attention, making it difficult for learners to retain new words. This can lead to a cycle of frustration and decreased motivation, further exacerbating the problem. In other words, anxiety tends to be negatively related to achievement in vocabulary [5].

## 2.3. Managing anxiety to develop learners' vocabulary

Anxiety is a prevalent issue in EFL learning, affecting students' confidence and overall performance. Students' anxiety may increase when they are forced to participate in class, lack sufficient practice, or fear making mistakes. Additionally, negative teacher behaviors, such as negative feedback, discouraging comments, and ineffective teaching methods, can further contribute to their anxiety [22]. In this respect, effective anxiety management strategies can play a crucial role in improving vocabulary retention and use. Techniques such as mindfulness, relaxation exercises, and positive reinforcement have been shown to reduce anxiety levels in EFL learners [7]. By creating a supportive learning environment, instructors can help learners feel more comfortable and confident, thereby enhancing their ability to acquire and use new vocabulary.

Research highlights various strategies that learners can use to mitigate anxiety, including cognitive, social, and pedagogical approaches. For instance, cognitive strategies such as positive self-talk, visualization, and reframing anxious thoughts help students regulate their emotions and build confidence in language learning [23]. Creating a low-anxiety classroom environment through interactive activities such as games, storytelling, and songs has also been shown to make learning more engaging and enjoyable for students [6]. In addition, the use of scaffolded tasks allows learners to develop confidence gradually before participating in more demanding speaking or writing activities. Additionally, preparation and practice, combined with relaxation techniques, significantly reduce speaking anxiety and improve performance in the classroom [24].

### 2.3.1. Cognitive strategies

Cognitive strategies focus on the learner's internal thought processes to manage anxiety. Research suggests that cognitive restructuring techniques, such as reinterpreting negative thoughts and focusing on progress rather than perfection, enhance language acquisition. Moreover, organizational strategies, such as structured study plans and the use of mnemonic devices, help students overcome anxiety-related learning obstacles [25]. These strategies also mediate the negative effects of anxiety on language proficiency by promoting self-regulation and reducing fear of failure.

In line with this, the importance of metacognitive strategies, such as setting learning goals, monitoring progress, and reflecting on performance, has been emphasized as a means of supporting learners in managing anxiety. Cognitive-based classroom techniques, including lengthening wait time, allowing

students extra moments to think before responding, and improving questioning techniques, in which learners can write down their answers before speaking, have also been shown to be effective [6]. These methods give learners more control over their thought processes, helping them feel more prepared and less pressured. By encouraging students to take ownership of their learning and reflect on their progress, teachers not only promote cognitive engagement but also reduce anxiety and enhance motivation [26].

### 2.3.2. Social and pedagogical strategies

Beyond individual cognitive approaches, social and pedagogical strategies play a crucial role in alleviating EFL anxiety. Studies show that teachers' efforts to create a supportive classroom environment, through communicative language teaching (CLT), task-based learning (TBL), role-plays, and debates, significantly reduce anxiety by fostering engagement and confidence in oral communication [27]. Social strategies, such as seeking help from peers and engaging in group discussions, provide students with emotional support and increase their willingness to communicate.

Consistent with these findings, several classroom-based strategies have been identified as effective in enhancing social interaction and learner comfort. These strategies include accepting a variety of answers, which reassures learners that there is not always a single "correct" response; peer support and group work, which allow students to check answers collaboratively before speaking in front of the class; and focusing on content over form, where teachers encourage expression without interrupting to correct every grammatical mistake, thus lowering anxiety and fostering a sense of safety. Additionally, establishing good relationships between teachers and students helps create a positive classroom atmosphere that reduces fear and promotes participation [6]. Furthermore, pedagogical strategies that incorporate technology, gamification, and interactive exercises also contribute to a relaxed and engaging learning environment [28]. Combining these social and pedagogical approaches enables teachers to address the emotional dimensions of language learning effectively, leading to significant reductions in EFL anxiety and improvements in learners' communicative competence.

### 2.4. Previous studies

Recent research has examined the complex relationship between FLA, motivation, and vocabulary learning outcomes in EFL contexts. These studies consistently underscore that affective factors such as anxiety and enjoyment play a pivotal role in shaping learners' language performance and learning strategies. Empirical studies have shown that foreign language classroom anxiety can hinder language learning outcomes, while positive emotions such as enjoyment may offset its negative effects and contribute to improved self-perceived proficiency [29]. Systematic reviews have further demonstrated that anxiety does not always function uniformly as a negative variable; in some cases, moderate levels of anxiety may enhance performance, particularly in productive skills such as speaking [30]. These findings highlight the importance of managing anxiety to support optimal language learning experiences.

Other studies have explored the relationship between anxiety, vocabulary acquisition, and learning strategies. Research indicates that language anxiety and self-efficacy significantly influence vocabulary learning, whereas motivation may play a comparatively smaller role [31]. Additional evidence confirms a negative correlation between anxiety and the use of vocabulary learning strategies, showing that learners with lower anxiety levels tend to employ a wider range of strategies, particularly those related to social interaction and memory [4]. Related findings suggest that vocabulary-focused approaches, such as the use of translation-based strategies, can reduce speaking anxiety and function as effective affective support mechanisms [32].

Several investigations have focused on contextual and learner-specific variables that moderate the relationship between anxiety and language learning outcomes. Research involving learners with language-related difficulties has demonstrated that anxiety negatively affects both grammar and vocabulary development, while instructional timing and learner motivation also play significant roles [5]. Other studies emphasize that out-of-class speaking anxiety is influenced by factors such as fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary knowledge, and low confidence, but can be reduced through peer support and the use of digital tools that promote communication beyond formal classroom settings [11], [33].

The role of technology-enhanced learning environments in reducing anxiety has also received increasing attention. Studies indicate that interactive digital assessment tools can improve vocabulary achievement and motivation while simultaneously lowering anxiety levels [10]. Similarly, evidence suggests that online simulation games are effective in reducing FLA and enhancing vocabulary learning, particularly among learners with moderate to high anxiety levels [8]. In addition, research on instructional models that integrate vocabulary training, media-based communication, and reflective activities shows that insufficient vocabulary knowledge is a major source of stress for learners. However, targeted interventions that combine technology use with interactive learning have been found to significantly improve learner confidence and reduce anxiety [9].

Overall, previous studies reveal that FLA remains one of the most influential affective variables in language learning, affecting vocabulary development and speaking performance. They also demonstrate that enjoyment, self-efficacy, and technology integration can serve as powerful mediators to alleviate anxiety and enhance learning outcomes. Despite this growing evidence, there remains a need for more research exploring the combined influence and comparison of anxiety-management strategies on learners' vocabulary acquisition among younger learners.

### 3. METHOD

#### 3.1. Research design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to address the research questions comprehensively. Quantitative data were collected through an anxiety scale, vocabulary pre- and post-tests using a one-group pre-test and post-test quasi-experimental design, and a student perception questionnaire. Qualitative data were obtained through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. The procedures included surveys, testing, systematic observation, interviews, and an instructional intervention phase.

A control group was not included due to institutional and scheduling constraints. Consequently, improvements observed in vocabulary performance cannot be attributed exclusively to the anxiety-management strategies, as other instructional or contextual variables may have contributed. The findings should therefore be interpreted as associative rather than strictly causal. Because no comparison group was included, potential threats to internal validity cannot be fully ruled out.

#### 3.2. Setting and participants

The research was conducted at a public educational institution located in the province of Zamora Chinchipe, in southern Ecuador. The school serves approximately 165 students across elementary, middle, and high school levels, with each classroom comprising 15 to 25 students. A total of 50 EFL students participated in the study, including 26 from 8th grade and 24 from 9th grade, aged between 12 and 14 years. The participants were recruited through convenience sampling, as the researchers had access to these intact classes during the academic term. All students registered in the two groups were invited to participate. This non-probability sampling method was considered suitable due to institutional and scheduling limitations, as well as the classroom-based implementation of the intervention.

All participants demonstrated an A1 level of English proficiency according to the Common European framework of reference for languages (CEFR) and received three hours of English instruction per week. Additionally, their English teacher participated in the study. She is 33 years old, holds a bachelor's degree in education with a specialization in ICT and innovation, and has more than five years of teaching experience.

#### 3.3. Instruments

The following instruments were used to collect data. The foreign language classroom anxiety scale (FLCAS) was adapted to measure anxiety specifically related to vocabulary learning [3]. From the original 33 items, 16 statements were selected based on their relevance to vocabulary-related anxiety, such as fear of forgetting words, making lexical errors, and performing vocabulary tasks. The responses were rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The neutral option was excluded to prevent younger students from overusing it as a default choice when uncertain or disengaged, thereby encouraging them to reflect more carefully and provide more meaningful responses about their actual anxiety levels. This adapted version was reviewed by two experts in applied linguistics and piloted with a group of 10 students who shared similar characteristics with the study participants. Minor revisions were made to ensure clarity and contextual relevance. The internal consistency of the instrument, verified through Cronbach's alpha, was 0.85, indicating high reliability.

Pre- and post-tests were designed to assess vocabulary knowledge before and after the intervention. Each test consisted of 10 items using various question types (multiple-choice, true/false, matching, and sentence completion), targeting A1-level vocabulary. The test items were aligned with CEFR descriptors and reviewed by two TEFL specialists to ensure content validity. A pilot test was conducted with 10 students, and items were refined based on item difficulty.

A student perception questionnaire was developed by the researchers to gather students' perceptions of the anxiety-management strategies implemented during the intervention. It included 24 Likert-scale items divided into six sections, each corresponding to one of the six strategies. Students rated their agreement on a four-point scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, and totally disagree). The questionnaire was created by the researchers because no existing instrument specifically addressed students' perceptions of anxiety-management strategies in the context of vocabulary learning. Developing a new instrument allowed the items to be closely aligned with the instructional strategies applied and the study's specific objectives. A Spanish

version of this questionnaire was used with the participants to ensure clarity due to their low English proficiency level. The questionnaire was validated through expert judgment and revised to ensure clarity and age-appropriateness. A pilot study confirmed its reliability, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.83, which indicates acceptable internal consistency.

One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with the English teacher and 10 randomly selected students. The interviews were conducted in Spanish to obtain more detailed responses from the participants and avoid misunderstandings. These interviews were focused on participants' opinions and experiences with each strategy used during the intervention. Interview protocols were developed based on the literature and reviewed by two qualitative research specialists. A pilot interview ensured clarity and relevance of the questions.

The observation sheet was used during classroom visits to gather qualitative insights into how the strategies were implemented and how students engaged with them. It included six open-ended descriptors that guided observers in documenting students' behaviors and their interaction with anxiety-management strategies. This observation sheet was validated by two experienced educators and piloted in one EFL classroom. The inter-rater agreement during pilot observations was above 90%, confirming reliability.

### 3.4. Procedure

The study began with the administration of the adapted FLCAS to establish a baseline of students' anxiety levels related to vocabulary learning. This was followed by a vocabulary pre-test designed to assess students' initial lexical knowledge and identify specific learning needs. The baseline measurements provided essential information to guide the instructional strategies applied during the intervention.

The intervention phase lasted six weeks and involved the implementation of six anxiety-management strategies: lengthened wait time, improved questioning techniques, acceptance of varied responses, promotion of peer support and group work, content-focused instruction, and the development of positive teacher–student relationships. Each strategy was implemented for one week and integrated into two classroom sessions, resulting in a total of 12 sessions. During this phase, the teacher embedded the strategies into vocabulary-focused lessons through interactive and communicative activities such as word games, sentence-completion tasks, matching exercises, and collaborative problem-solving activities.

Each strategy was operationalized through specific classroom practices. For lengthening wait time, the teacher deliberately paused for 5–7 seconds after asking questions, allowing students to think before responding. For improving questioning techniques, students were given time to write brief responses before speaking aloud. Accepting a variety of answers was implemented by validating partially correct responses and encouraging alternative ideas without immediate correction. Peer collaboration involved students working in pairs to complete vocabulary-matching and sentence-construction tasks before sharing answers with the whole class, thereby reducing individual pressure. Content-focused instruction was applied by prioritizing meaning and communication over immediate grammatical correction during speaking tasks. Finally, positive teacher–student relationships were fostered through personalized feedback, encouragement, and consistent use of supportive language.

A total of 12 classroom observations were conducted throughout the intervention to monitor students' engagement, interaction patterns, and emotional responses. These observations also allowed the researchers to document how the strategies were implemented in practice and how students responded to them in the classroom environment. Observation sheets were used to collect qualitative data on indicators of reduced anxiety, such as increased participation, willingness to answer questions, and positive peer collaboration.

After completing the six-week intervention, the post-test was administered to measure improvements in vocabulary acquisition and compare results with pre-test performance. Students then completed the perception questionnaire, which gathered their views on the effectiveness of Nunan's six anxiety-management strategies in reducing anxiety and enhancing vocabulary learning. This stage provided additional insight into how students experienced the instructional strategies during the intervention.

Semi-structured interviews were then carried out with the teacher and a selected group of students to gain deeper insights into their perceptions of the intervention. The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy in the analysis. The transcripts were analyzed thematically to identify emerging patterns related to the influence of anxiety-management strategies on students' vocabulary development and emotional comfort in the classroom.

Quantitative data from the anxiety scale and perception questionnaire were tabulated and analyzed using Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics were used to examine trends and patterns in students' responses. The anxiety scale was not re-administered at the end of the intervention, as the study focused primarily on students' immediate perceptions of how each strategy influenced their anxiety rather than on measuring post-intervention changes. Additionally, time constraints within the academic term and the need to avoid over-assessment limited the inclusion of a post-intervention scale.

Pre- and post-test vocabulary scores were analyzed using a paired-samples t-test to determine whether statistically significant differences occurred. Qualitative data from observations and interviews were analyzed through thematic coding, enabling the identification of recurring themes related to engagement and perceptions of anxiety management. Finally, quantitative and qualitative findings were triangulated to strengthen the discussion and conclusions. The convergence of statistical improvement and consistent qualitative patterns enhanced the credibility of the findings.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Effects of anxiety-management strategies on vocabulary learning and anxiety levels

Considering the means obtained from the anxiety scale applied before the intervention, the students' anxiety levels can be categorized as shown in Table 1. First, the items indicating the highest anxiety levels (mean >2.9) are 7, 10, 12, and 13. These represent the most significant sources of stress. Item 7, concerning giving a speech in front of the class, is the most fear-inducing specific activity, highlighting the intense pressure of formal public speaking. The results from item 10 suggest that for many students, this anxiety is a persistent issue rooted in past negative experiences. Furthermore, item 12 indicates a general tendency towards worry that directly impacts the language learning experience. Notably, item 13 is the strongest anxiety trigger, showing that the fear of academic failure is a powerful concern that intensifies language anxiety.

Table 1. Anxiety scale results

Item	Mean
1. I don't dare to talk to the teacher.	2.40
2. I don't dare to talk to my classmates.	2.62
3. I am so afraid or shy that I don't speak at all.	2.14
4. I am afraid of doing something embarrassing.	2.80
5. I am afraid of not being able to express the words.	2.64
6. I am afraid of being a victim of bullying.	2.68
7. I am afraid of giving a speech in front of the class.	2.96
8. If I meet someone I don't know well, I don't dare to say anything.	2.48
9. If I meet someone who wants to talk to me, I don't respond.	2.36
10. In the past, I didn't dare to say anything at school.	2.94
11. I think a lot about what could go wrong.	2.86
12. I worry about many things.	2.96
13. I worry a lot about not performing well in school.	3.10
14. I worry about making mistakes in English because I fear being judged.	2.74
15. I feel nervous speaking English in front of my classmates.	2.76
16. I avoid speaking English because I feel anxious about how I sound.	2.70
Overall mean	2.70

Other items indicating high anxiety (mean 2.70-2.89) are 4, 11, 14, 15, and 16. These are all connected to the fear of negative evaluation. Students reported being afraid of embarrassment, feeling nervous speaking in front of peers, worrying about being judged for mistakes, and consequently avoiding speaking. This cluster also relates to the cognitive aspect of anxiety, represented by item 11, where unfavorable thinking can paralyze students.

Finally, items showing moderate to lower anxiety (mean <2.7) are 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, and 8. While anxiety about talking to teachers and classmates (items 1, 2, and 8) is present, it is less extreme than performance-based anxiety. A critical insight comes from item 3, which was the least endorsed statement. This reveals that while students are anxious about speaking, they do not see themselves as completely silent. Their anxiety is situational, triggered specifically by performance and evaluation, rather than being a general state of mutism. The overall mean of 2.70 confirms a moderate to high level of FLA within the group. The analysis of individual items reveals a clear pattern: the primary sources of anxiety are not general shyness, but rather performance-based fears and worries about being judged.

Table 2 shows that, before the implementation of anxiety-management strategies, students' mean score on the vocabulary test was  $M=5.00$ ,  $SD=1.48$ . Following the intervention, a post-test was administered, revealing a substantial increase in the mean vocabulary score to  $M=6.50$ ,  $SD=2.20$ . These results indicate a positive mean gain of 1.50 points from pre-test to post-test, suggesting an improvement in vocabulary acquisition.

To determine whether this observed improvement was statistically significant, a paired-samples t-test was conducted. There was a statistically significant increase in vocabulary test scores from the pre-test to the post-test ( $p=0.0004$ ). The p-value of 0.0004 is well below the conventional alpha level of 0.05. This

indicates that the probability of observing such a large mean difference by random chance alone is extremely low. In addition to statistical significance, Cohen's *d* was calculated to determine the magnitude of the improvement. The analysis revealed a large effect size ( $d=0.80$ ), indicating that the intervention had a practically meaningful impact on students' vocabulary performance.

It is noteworthy that the standard deviation increased in the post-test. This could indicate that the intervention was more effective for some students than for others. This differential impact is a common phenomenon in educational research and suggests that individual differences, such as personality, learning styles, or initial anxiety levels, may moderate the effectiveness of these strategies. Overall, the mean improvement of 1.50 points represents a substantial gain, evidencing a positive effect of the implemented strategies on students' vocabulary learning outcomes. This implies that the anxiety-management strategies did not just lead to a statistically detectable change, but to a meaningful and educationally relevant improvement in vocabulary learning.

Table 2. Results of pre and post-test

Statistics	Pre-test	Post-test
Mean	5.001	6.496
SD	1.481	2.197
N	50	50

The two-tailed P value equals 0.0004

#### 4.2. Student attitudes toward anxiety-management strategies

The data in Table 3 indicate a highly positive reception to the anxiety-management strategies overall, with a grand mean of 3.11 on a 4-point scale leaning toward "agree" to "strongly agree." Students clearly perceive these strategies as effective in reducing their anxiety and supporting their learning. However, the effectiveness varies across different types of strategies. Among the most effective strategies, we have the following: focus on content (average mean: 3.21), establishing good relationships (average mean: 3.20), peer support and group work (average mean: 3.18). These strategies resonated most strongly with students, receiving the highest levels of agreement.

Table 3. Average perception of anxiety-management strategies

Strategy	Average mean
Focus on content	3.21
Establishing good relationships	3.20
Peer support and group work	3.18
Lengthening wait time	3.09
Improving questioning techniques	3.08
Accepting a variety of answers	2.89
Overall average	3.11

With respect to focus on content (mean: 3.21), students are highly responsive to a learning environment that prioritizes deep understanding over performance metrics such as perfection and memorization. The highest-rated statement in this category, "the teacher focuses on helping us understand concepts rather than just memorizing answers" (3.36), tied for the highest score in the entire survey. This is closely followed by "I enjoy learning more when the teacher focuses on the content rather than mistakes" (3.30). This suggests that rather than fostering a classroom culture focused solely on "right" or "wrong" answers, teachers should create an environment that reduces anxiety by emphasizing understanding, progress, and learning from mistakes.

In regard to establishing good relationships (mean: 3.20), the teacher's personal role as a supportive and respectful figure is fundamental to student comfort. The strongest statement here, "the teacher listens to students and respects our ideas" (3.34), highlights the critical importance of teacher-student rapport. Students also feel significantly less anxious when they perceive the teacher as "supportive and approachable" (3.24).

Peer support and group work (mean: 3.18) is a strategy that contributes to collaborative learning environments and serves as a crucial scaffold for anxious students. The highest-rated statement of this strategy is "I feel more comfortable participating when I work with my classmates" (3.38). This indicates that peer interaction provides a psychological safety net. Before speaking in front of the whole class and the teacher, students value the opportunity to test ideas with peers, which reduces the perceived risk of being wrong.

Lengthening wait time and improving questioning techniques could be considered moderately effective strategies, with means between 3.00 and 3.15. Although these strategies are viewed positively, they receive slightly lower levels of agreement than the previously discussed strategies. This suggests that students recognize their usefulness but may perceive them as less influential in reducing anxiety compared to relational or collaborative approaches.

Students recognize the cognitive benefit of lengthening wait time (mean: 3.09) more than its direct impact on anxiety. There is a notable difference between statements. Students strongly agree that “the extra wait time helps me give better and more thoughtful answers” (3.36). However, the direct statement about anxiety, “I feel less anxious when I am given extra time to respond” (2.84), received the lowest score in this category. This suggests that students appreciate having extra time to think before answering, but they may still feel nervous about being called on. Even though the anxiety remains, they are able to use the additional time in a productive way, which helps them prepare better responses.

Regarding improving questioning techniques (mean: 3.08), having time to prepare answers and organize ideas before speaking serves as an important support that helps students build confidence. Students strongly “prefer having time to write” before speaking (3.18) and confirm it helps them “organize thoughts better” (3.14). However, the statement “I feel less anxious about speaking in class when I can prepare my response in writing first” (2.88) is the lowest in the category. Similar to wait time, this indicates that while the technique is helpful, it does not fully eliminate the anxiety associated with oral performance.

Accepting a variety of answers (mean: 2.89) is the only strategy with an average mean below 3.00, indicating a neutral to agreeable perception, but with significant room for improvement. This is a critical insight since all four statements in this category cluster around 2.90. The lowest score overall is “I feel comfortable sharing my opinion in class” (2.82). This suggests that although students may understand that the teacher claims to accept different answers, they might not fully believe it or feel safe enough to respond freely. In other words, there can be a gap between what the teacher intends to communicate and how students actually experience the classroom environment.

The interviews reveal that the implementation of the six strategies resulted in significant gains in students’ confidence and a noticeable reduction in anxiety, as shown in Table 4. Students consistently highlighted that receiving additional time to think allowed them to feel more secure, participate without fear of being judged, and express their ideas more freely. This additional time promoted a calmer learning environment in which students were better able to contribute and engage with the activities.

Table 4. Summary of themes and sub-themes from the interviews

Main theme	Sub-themes
1. Increased confidence and reduced anxiety	– Extra time reduces pressure and fear of mistakes – Increased willingness to participate
2. Improved understanding through scaffolding	– Writing before responding improves comprehension – Teacher support clarifies questions and pronunciation
3. Validation through acceptance of varied responses	– Students feel valued and respected – Safe environment to share ideas
4. Collaboration builds knowledge and social connection	– Peer support strengthens learning – Group work increases comfort and engagement
5. Relevance and clarity of content strengthen learning	– Content perceived as appropriate and useful – Pronunciation correction enhances accuracy – Interactive activities maintain interest
6. Positive teacher–student relationships enhance learning	– Trust and emotional support from teachers – Improved classroom climate – Students suggest more activities to strengthen rapport

Understanding was also notably enhanced through the scaffolding strategies used in class. Students emphasized that writing their responses before sharing them aloud helped them verify their ideas, improve their pronunciation, and process the content more clearly. Teacher support played an essential role in reinforcing comprehension, as students frequently mentioned how explanations and clarifications aided their understanding of questions, pronunciation, and vocabulary.

A strong sense of validation emerged from the strategy of accepting a variety of answers. Students expressed that being allowed to share any response, whether correct or not, made them feel respected and included. This acceptance created a supportive environment in which they could participate without fear of being wrong. They also emphasized that sharing different perspectives enriched classroom discussions and contributed to their learning.

Collaboration also stood out as a key element in students’ positive experiences. Working in pairs or groups helped them exchange ideas, compare answers, and learn from one another. Students described

feeling comfortable, respected, and motivated when collaborating, as peer support provided opportunities to clarify doubts and strengthen their understanding. The teacher confirmed that group work is particularly beneficial in English classes because it encourages hesitant learners to participate more confidently.

Students also responded positively to the content-based activities implemented in class. They reported that the topics and exercises were appropriate for their level, easy to understand, and useful for reinforcing previous knowledge. Pronunciation correction was received positively, as students felt it helped them avoid mistakes and apply English more accurately. The teacher's comments aligned with this, noting the importance of balancing pronunciation, vocabulary, and content to maintain student engagement.

Finally, the interviews highlight the importance of strong teacher–student relationships in facilitating learning. Students repeatedly mentioned feeling supported, guided, and encouraged by teachers, which strengthened their willingness to participate and ask questions. They valued the trust and empathy shown by teachers, noting that it contributed to a positive classroom climate. Both students and the teacher emphasized that mutual respect, patience, and consistent communication are essential for building meaningful relationships that enhance learning.

Analysis of the observation sheets revealed several consistent patterns in students' behavior during the implementation of the six instructional strategies, as shown in Table 5. Overall, the observations indicated that students responded positively to practices that reduced pressure, supported thoughtful participation, and fostered a collaborative learning environment. One of the clearest tendencies noted by observers was that students appeared noticeably calmer and more confident when they were given additional time to think before answering. They used this wait time to organize their ideas, reread prompts, or rehearse their responses quietly. As a result, students showed fewer signs of hesitation and participated with greater ease, suggesting that the extra time lowered anxiety and contributed to more well-thought-out answers.

Table 5. Main findings from classroom observation

Main themes	Observed aspects
Increased calmness/confidence with wait time	Students more relaxed, thoughtful, less pressured
Better response quality through written preparation	More organized, clearer, better-structured oral answers
Greater participation when multiple answers are accepted	Students shared more ideas, less fear of being wrong
Strong peer collaboration	Students supported each other and participated more in groups
Higher engagement when the focus was on understanding	Students asked more questions and felt less pressure
Positive teacher–student relationships	Friendly environment encouraged comfort and participation

Students also demonstrated higher clarity and structure in their oral responses when they were first allowed to prepare their ideas in written form. Observation notes described instances in which students reviewed vocabulary, corrected spelling, or revised their sentences before speaking. This process appeared to help them participate with greater accuracy and confidence. Their oral responses tended to be longer, more coherent, and better organized, indicating that the opportunity to write before speaking functioned as an effective scaffold for deeper thinking.

Another noticeable pattern was the way students engaged more freely when the teacher accepted a range of possible answers rather than only focusing on one correct response. The observations frequently highlighted that students felt comfortable sharing their opinions, attempted answers even when they lacked full confidence, and were more inclined to engage in classroom tasks. This shift suggested that validating diverse answers reduced the emotional risks associated with speaking in class and encouraged more student involvement.

Collaboration among peers also played a significant role in shaping students' behavior. During group and pair activities, students supported each other by sharing vocabulary, exchanging ideas, and helping clarify instructions. It was noted that students seemed more relaxed during group tasks, and participation increased as they worked collectively. The supportive peer environment contributed to lowering anxiety and promoting more active engagement.

Across the observations, students were more responsive and attentive when the emphasis of the lesson was on understanding the content rather than on avoiding mistakes. When the teacher encouraged effort, clarified meaning, and responded supportively to errors, students demonstrated greater participation and were more willing to ask questions. They appeared less tense and more focused on expressing their ideas than on achieving perfect accuracy, which contributed to a more comfortable learning atmosphere.

Finally, a positive teacher–student rapport was evident throughout the observed sessions. Students responded well to the teacher's supportive and approachable attitude, frequently seeking clarification and interacting confidently. There was also a classroom environment in which students felt respected, comfortable, and safe to express their thoughts. This friendly and trusting climate strengthened student participation and reduced visible signs of anxiety during the activities.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The findings provide a clear answer to the first research question regarding the effect of anxiety-management strategies on students' anxiety levels and vocabulary learning. The results indicate that implementing these strategies contributed to observable reductions in anxiety-related behaviors and statistically significant improvements in vocabulary performance. Structured anxiety-management practices, therefore, appear to positively influence both the affective and cognitive dimensions of foreign language learning.

Before the intervention, students reported moderate to high levels of FLA, particularly in situations involving public speaking, fear of academic failure, and concern about making mistakes. This pattern aligns with foundational research identifying fear of negative evaluation as a central component of FLA [3], [21]. Pre-intervention classroom observations similarly revealed hesitation, limited voluntary participation, and visible discomfort. Following implementation, students showed greater willingness to participate and fewer visible signs of tension. Interview data confirmed that learners felt calmer and more confident when given time to think, collaborate with peers, and receive support from a responsive teacher. These findings align with research emphasizing teacher–student rapport and emotionally supportive classroom environments in mitigating anxiety and fostering engagement [20], [28].

Vocabulary test gains further support the effectiveness of the intervention. The improvement suggests that lowering anxiety may have facilitated deeper processing and more efficient retrieval of new vocabulary. In this respect, previous research indicates that heightened anxiety interferes with working memory, reduces strategic learning behavior, and negatively affects lexical performance [4], [5]. The present findings reinforce these aspects, showing that when affective barriers are reduced, students engage more meaningfully with vocabulary tasks. Data revealed more coherent and accurate responses when students were allowed to write before speaking or discuss ideas collaboratively, reflecting the benefits of cognitive scaffolding [6], [25].

Regarding the second research question, students evaluated the intervention positively, particularly strategies addressing emotional needs. Focusing on content rather than errors, fostering respectful teacher–student relationships, and promoting peer collaboration were consistently rated as most effective. Learners emphasized feeling respected, listened to, and supported, and reported that content-focused instruction reduced pressure and allowed them to concentrate on meaning rather than correctness. These findings align with research highlighting supportive environments and collaborative learning in reducing anxiety and enhancing participation [29], [30].

These perceptions suggest that strategies fostering psychological safety played a central role in shaping students' emotional experiences. Peer collaboration, for example, likely reduced anxiety by distributing responsibility and lowering perceived performance risk, consistent with social constructivist perspectives that emphasize shared cognitive processing and emotional support. Similarly, content-focused instruction may have been effective because it redirected attention from error avoidance to meaning-making, thereby reducing fear of immediate negative evaluation and facilitating lexical retrieval.

In contrast, strategies such as lengthening wait time and improving questioning techniques were valued mainly for cognitive benefits rather than anxiety reduction. Although additional preparation time was appreciated, it was not consistently associated with reduced emotional discomfort. This suggests that cognitive scaffolding alone may not alleviate anxiety without relational and affective support, consistent with research indicating that cognitive preparedness does not automatically remove emotional barriers [7], [24]. These findings reinforce the interdependence of affective and cognitive processes in language learning.

A more nuanced finding concerns the strategy of accepting a variety of answers, which received comparatively lower ratings. Although intended to reduce fear of being wrong, students did not always perceive diverse responses as fully welcomed. Some learners continued to hesitate when uncertain about correctness. This suggests that stating that multiple answers are acceptable is insufficient; classroom norms around risk-taking must be consistently enacted. The gap between teacher intention and student perception confirms research indicating that error tolerance must be systematically reinforced to become internalized [9], [18].

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that the intervention was effective because it simultaneously addressed emotional security and cognitive structure. By reducing fear of negative evaluation, strengthening interpersonal trust, encouraging collaboration, and providing scaffolding, the strategies created conditions for more confident participation and improved vocabulary performance. The study, therefore, contributes empirical evidence that coordinated anxiety-management strategies can facilitate both emotional regulation and lexical development in beginning EFL learners.

The findings of this study have important practical implications. Strategies such as peer collaboration, content-focused instruction, and positive teacher–student relationships can be integrated into routine vocabulary lessons without major curricular changes. For teachers, reducing anxiety does not require separate programs but can be embedded within daily practice. For school leaders and policymakers, the results highlight the importance of incorporating affective-dimension training into teacher preparation and professional development.

In the Ecuadorian EFL context, where large classes and limited resources are common, teacher training programs should include explicit modules on anxiety management. Embedding affective strategies into pre-service and in-service training may equip educators with tools to address emotional barriers that hinder vocabulary development and oral participation. Given the emphasis on communicative competence in Ecuadorian curricula, integrating affective scaffolding may strengthen policy implementation by aligning emotional support with lexical development goals.

This study contributes to research on FLA by providing classroom-based empirical evidence from the Ecuadorian secondary education context. The findings demonstrate that systematically integrating anxiety-management strategies into everyday vocabulary instruction is associated with measurable lexical gains and improved emotional engagement. In doing so, the study advances research that has frequently examined anxiety as an individual affective variable rather than as a pedagogically modifiable classroom condition. Unlike investigations centered primarily on digital tools or isolated interventions [8], [10], the present findings highlight how structured, low-cost instructional adjustments can meaningfully reduce anxiety and support vocabulary development without reliance on additional technological resources.

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. It was conducted in a single institution with A1-level learners and without a control group, which limits generalizability and restricts causal inference. Anxiety was measured quantitatively only prior to the intervention; post-intervention levels were inferred from perceptions and observations rather than statistically tested. Moreover, the six-week duration limits conclusions regarding long-term sustainability. It remains unclear whether vocabulary gains and reductions in anxiety-related behaviors would persist over time.

Because only two naturally formed groups from one institution were included, the findings should be interpreted cautiously. The results may not extend to other proficiency levels, regions, or educational contexts in Ecuador. Replication with larger and more diverse samples would enhance external validity and strengthen the robustness of the conclusions.

Future research should incorporate pre- and post-intervention administrations of validated anxiety scales and employ experimental or quasi-experimental designs with control groups to support stronger causal claims. Longitudinal studies could examine the durability of vocabulary gains and affective changes over extended periods. Further research may also explore how these strategies function across different proficiency levels, age groups, or cultural contexts, and whether individual differences moderate their effectiveness.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study examined the effect of anxiety-management strategies on students' anxiety levels, vocabulary learning, and attitudes toward these strategies in relation to vocabulary development. Regarding the first research question, the findings indicate that the coordinated implementation of classroom-based anxiety-management strategies was associated with observable reductions in anxiety-related behaviors and statistically significant improvements in vocabulary performance. Although post-intervention anxiety was not measured quantitatively, qualitative evidence suggests that students experienced greater emotional comfort and increased willingness to participate. The observed gains in vocabulary outcomes support the interpretation that reducing affective barriers creates conditions conducive to deeper lexical processing and more effective retrieval.

With respect to the second research question, students reported predominantly positive attitudes toward the strategies, particularly those addressing emotional safety and peer collaboration. Respectful teacher–student relationships, content-focused instruction, and collaborative learning were consistently perceived as central to reducing stress and facilitating vocabulary engagement. These perceptions reinforce the interdependence between emotional security and cognitive engagement in EFL classrooms.

The study carries important pedagogical implications. It emphasizes the value of integrating affective support into vocabulary instruction rather than relegating anxiety to a secondary issue. Teachers can embed strategies such as normalizing mistakes, fostering collaboration, and providing structured cognitive scaffolding into routine lessons without major curricular adjustments. At the institutional level, teacher education and professional development programs should incorporate explicit training on recognizing anxiety indicators and implementing classroom-based affective interventions, particularly in contexts characterized by large classes and limited resources.

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations. It was conducted with A1-level learners in a single institution, which restricts generalizability. The absence of a control group limits causal inference, and anxiety levels were not quantitatively reassessed following the intervention. Additionally, the relatively small sample size warrants cautious interpretation of the results.

Future research should employ experimental or quasi-experimental designs, including control groups, to strengthen causal claims. The use of validated pre- and post-intervention anxiety scales would allow more precise measurement of affective change. Longitudinal studies could examine the durability of vocabulary gains and reductions in anxiety-related behaviors over time. Further investigation across different proficiency levels, age groups, and educational contexts would enhance the broader applicability of the findings.

Overall, the study provides classroom-based evidence that coordinated anxiety-management strategies can function as facilitators of both emotional regulation and vocabulary development in beginning EFL learners. By intentionally addressing affective and cognitive dimensions simultaneously, educators can cultivate classroom environments that promote confidence, sustained engagement, and more effective language learning. These findings highlight the importance of considering students' emotional experiences as an integral component of successful language instruction.

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C : **C**onceptualization

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E: Writing - Review & **E**ditng

Vi : **V**isualization

Su : **S**upervision

P : **P**roject administration

Fu : **F**unding acquisition

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors state no conflict of interest.

### INFORMED CONSENT

We have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

### ETHICAL APPROVAL

The research complied with national and institutional ethical guidelines and adhered to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Because the study involved only regular educational activities, formal ethical approval was deemed unnecessary by our institution. However, strict ethical procedures were followed to ensure confidentiality, integrity, and respect for participants.

### DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [EP-T], upon reasonable request.




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