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High Achievement, Low Confidence: Linguistic Insecurity among Advanced EFL Learners

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Abstract. *Research reveals that university students learning EFL demonstrate linguistic insecurity. The current study was conducted with the objective of exploring the nature and causes of linguistic insecurity in high-achieving EFL students of a state university in Uzbekistan. In this qualitative study, based on a multiple case study design, the data were collected with the help of individual in-depth interviews and short written reflections from 15 criterion-purposively selected participants, all of whom demonstrated high academic achievements in the use of EFL and linguistic insecurity in EFL use. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Five themes were found to dominate the data. These themes were fluency without confidence, a contradictory linguistic self-concept; perfectionism and fear of sounding unintelligent; social comparison and peer gaze; accent anxiety and politics of pronunciation; and strategic silence. The findings of the current study reveal that academic achievements do not alleviate, and may even enhance, linguistic insecurity in EFL use.*

Keywords: *linguistic insecurity, EFL learners, foreign language anxiety, high achievement, perfectionism, Uzbekistan*

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Yüksək nailiyyət, aşağı özünəinam: İnkişaf etmiş EFL öyrənənlərində dil qeyri-müəyyənliyi

Abdullajon Nematov

Xülasə. *Tədqiqatlar göstərir ki, universitet səviyyəsində İngilis dili (EFL) öyrənən tələbələr dil qeyri-müəyyənliyi yaşayırlar. Bu tədqiqatın məqsədi Özbəkistanda yerləşən bir dövlət universitetində yüksək akademik göstəricilərə malik EFL tələbələri arasında dil qeyri-müəyyənliyinin mahiyyətini və səbəblərini araşdırmaqdır. Bu keyfiyyət tədqiqatında çoxsaylı hal (multiple case study) dizaynına əsaslanaraq məlumatlar fərdi dərin müsahibələr və qısa yazılı refleksiyalar vasitəsilə toplanmışdır. İştirakçılar məqsədli seçim üsulu ilə seçilmiş 15 nəfər tələbədən ibarət olmuşdur və onların hamısı həm yüksək akademik nailiyyətlər göstərmiş, həm də EFL istifadəsində dil qeyri-müəyyənliyi yaşadıqlarını bildirmişlər. Məlumatların təhlili Braun və Clarke (2006) çərçivəsinə əsaslanan refleksiv tematik analiz vasitəsilə aparılmışdır.*

Təhlil nəticəsində beş əsas tema müəyyən edilmişdir: özünəinam olmadan səlislik — ziddiyyətli dil özünüdərkı; mükəmməlliyyətçilik və ağılsız səslənmək qorxusu; sosial müqayisə və "peer gaze"; aksent narahatlığı və tələffüz siyasəti; həmçinin özünü qoruma strategiyası kimi səssizlik. Tədqiqatın nəticələri göstərir ki, akademik nailiyyətlər dil qeyri-müəyyənliyini azaltmır, əksinə, bəzi hallarda onu daha da gücləndirə bilər.

Açar sözlər: *dil qeyri-müəyyənliyi, EFL öyrənənləri, xarici dil narahatlığı, yüksək nailiyyət, mükəmməlliyyətçilik, Özbəkistan*

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Introduction

However, the relationship between language proficiency and learner confidence is rarely as simple as this. The assumptions that underlie second language acquisition theory suggest that as language levels increase, anxiety levels fall and confidence in language use grows. Yet another phenomenon that is commonly reported by EFL teachers and researchers is that many learners who achieve high levels of language proficiency in terms of formal assessment and other criteria continue to suffer from high levels of anxiety. The phenomenon of linguistic insecurity is a productive area of research that has yet to be fully explored. Linguistic insecurity was first coined as a term by Labov (1966). It is characterized by speakers who recognize that their language does not conform to the prestige model of that language. In EFL contexts, linguistic insecurity is closely related to foreign language anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986). The key difference is that linguistic insecurity is characterized by the perception of incompetence that does not diminish as language levels increase.

The apparent paradox of the high-achieving, yet linguistically insecure, learner is a phenomenon that has garnered scant direct attention in applied linguistic studies. The bulk of existing language anxiety studies either focuses on low-achieving or beginner learners or views language anxiety as a hindrance to learning, rather than a construct that is maintained in conjunction with learning success. In this study, I hope to provide a more nuanced understanding of what linguistic insecurity might look like when paired with demonstrable learning success, and what such a construct might mean for high-achieving learners.

Research

This study is based on a case study undertaken in Fergana State University in Uzbekistan. The context in which I carried out my study adds a further layer of conceptual interest. In Uzbekistan, there is a national imperative for education reform. In all higher education institutions across the country, English is taught as a compulsory foreign language. Moreover, proficiency in English is directly correlated to professional aspiration, academic opportunity, and national modernization discourse. In such a context, high-achieving EFL learners are subject to not only the normal pressures of language acquisition but are also embedded in a social construct that increases feelings of inadequacy when they do not perform to external expectations.

In examining a group of high-achieving students who are yet linguistically insecure, I hope to shed light on a more subjective, affective dimension of language learning that is not adequately reflected in examination or grade success.

Literature Review

2.1 Linguistic Insecurity: Conceptual Foundations

Labov's (1966) groundbreaking research on social stratification and varieties of English in New York City first proposed linguistic insecurity as a sociolinguistic construct, where it was defined as "a speaker's awareness of a discrepancy between his actual speech and his idealized variety." Although Labov's work was conducted on native speakers in stratified social contexts, it is also extremely relevant to second and foreign language acquisition in that, in both contexts, speakers are constantly in the process of bridging the gap between actual and ideal language performance (Lippi-Green, 2012). In EFL contexts, this ideal variety is naturally associated with native speaker varieties of English – an idealized and social construction that is beyond the reach of most students and has been criticized as inappropriate for non-native speakers (Norton, 2000). Also, in contexts where English is taught as a foreign language, such as Uzbekistan, the dominance of native-speaker norms in educational materials further reinforces idealised linguistic standards that remain unattainable for most learners, contributing to persistent feelings of inadequacy (Nematov, 2025).

What makes linguistic insecurity most relevant to EFL literature is its apparent inability to be alleviated through traditional language instruction. Unlike other linguistic features, linguistic insecurity is more closely tied to self-evaluation and self-esteem and is thus more closely associated with how students perceive and react to their own language performance – how they tend to measure themselves against external standards and always find themselves wanting. Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) note that this is closely tied to issues of identity negotiation in multilingual contexts where language is always used as a performance of social affiliation.

2.2 Foreign Language Anxiety and its Relationship to Achievement

The most similar and most researched construct to linguistic insecurity in the context of SLA is foreign language anxiety (FLA), which is "a species of complex of personal feelings, beliefs, and actions related to learning a foreign language in a classroom context, resulting from aspects of uniqueness in the language learning process" according to Horwitz et al. (1986). It was found to affect listening comprehension, vocabulary memorization, speaking, and writing in foreign language students (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Cheng, 2002; Woodrow, 2006), and was negatively correlated with foreign language proficiency in most studies investigating this relationship (Zhang, 2019). From a communicative-pragmatic perspective, effective language use requires not only linguistic accuracy but also sensitivity to context, appropriateness, and socio-cultural norms, which may further increase learners' self-monitoring and anxiety during real-time interaction (Muratova, 2025).

Yet, as Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) pointed out, "anxiety and enjoyment can coexist in foreign language learning," and "high-achieving students may experience a form of anxiety that is different from that experienced by lower-achieving students, especially when perfectionism is involved." Price (1991) found that "highly anxious students tended to be among the most proficient in their foreign language class," indicating that "anxiety may be maintained by the high standards that proficient students impose on themselves."

This all points to a gap in the current literature. The experience of linguistic insecurity among students who are objectively proficient in a foreign language has not been researched as a distinct and cohesive construct.

2.3 The Imposter Phenomenon in Academic Language Learners

A similar construct from educational psychology can provide a useful framework for understanding a similar phenomenon in foreign language learning. Clance and Imes (1978) described "the imposter phenomenon" as "an internal experience of feelings of intellectual fraudulence in high-achieving individuals who feel unable to internalize their success." They explained that "these are persons who attribute their success to luck, timing, or the failure of others to recognize their inadequacy, rather than to their own abilities."

Advanced EFL students may be particularly vulnerable to these kinds of imposter thoughts. They know, from external markers of ability like grades or from others' opinions, that they are good at English, but they also know, from their own experience, all the mistakes they almost made, all the words they were unsure of. So, when they are praised, they know the praise is false, at least from their own perspective. Another relevant theory, which might help us understand these imposter thoughts, is Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy, specifically the difference between real self-efficacy, or capability, and the belief in one's capability.

2.4 Identity, Social Comparison, and Affective Dimensions of EFL Learning

Language learning cannot be seen as a cognitively neutral process. It is, as Norton (2000) points out, "inextricably intertwined with learners' social identity, including their sense of self, self-worth, and social belonging." In the context of EFL learning, students develop a language learner identity, influenced by social comparison, peer opinion, and the opinions of the teacher, as well as the broader social opinions about what good English sounds like (Ushioda, 2011; Dörnyei, 2009). In the case of high-ability students, the visibility of being good at English becomes a burden. They have to maintain the image of the good student, and any failure becomes a fall from the already established identity.
The cultural and institutional context of Uzbekistan has particular implications for these processes. English has social and professional capital in the current educational reform process, and speaking it fluently and accurately is associated with the desire for global mobility and professional achievement. In the Uzbek higher education context, motivation has been shown to play a significant role in shaping learners' engagement, self-perception, and language development trajectories (Kosimov et al., 2025). In such a context, the difference between aspiration and performance is not merely individual but also has social connotations. High-achieving learners who experience insecurity face a double bind: they are both acknowledged as performing well and yet experience feelings of inadequacy, they are both required to perform well and yet the higher they perform, the more their insecurity increases.

2.5 Gaps in the Literature

Much research has already explored the constructs of FLA, self-efficacy, and language learner identity. However, there has been relatively little qualitative research investigating the experiences of high-achieving EFL learners who experience linguistic insecurity as a unique condition. Most of the studies of FLA have failed to make a distinction between learners who experience insecurity as a result of poor performance and those learners who experience insecurity despite good performance. Liu & Jackson (2008) have pointed out the unwillingness of proficient learners to communicate as a phenomenon, but the unwillingness of EFL learners to communicate has not been explored as a theme of qualitative research.

Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative multiple-case study design (Stake, 1995; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Multiple-case study methodology was selected because the central interest of the study is not statistical generalisation but the thick, contextualised description of a specific phenomenon — linguistic insecurity among high-achieving learners — as experienced across a set of individual cases.

Each participant constitutes a case in the sense employed by Stake (1995): a bounded instance of the phenomenon under investigation. The study is further informed by a phenomenological orientation, attending to participants' subjective experiences and the meanings they ascribe to their insecurity.

3.2 Research Questions

The study was guided by the following questions: (1) How do high-achieving EFL students experience linguistic insecurity in university settings? (2) What forms of linguistic insecurity do they report across speaking, writing, and classroom participation? (3) What factors do they identify as contributing to their insecurity despite demonstrable achievement? (4) What coping strategies do high-achieving but insecure EFL learners develop?

3.3 Participants and Sampling

Participants were 15 undergraduate students at Fergana State University, Uzbekistan, enrolled predominantly in the Faculty of English Language and Literature and the Faculty of Foreign Languages. They were selected through criterion-based purposive sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Inclusion criteria required that participants (a) demonstrated strong academic performance in English-related modules (grade point average of B+ or above, or equivalent institutional marking), (b) were assessed by at least one teacher as a high-performing English student, and (c) self-reported experience of insecurity or lack of confidence in English use despite their performance level.

A two-stage screening process was employed. First, English language teachers were asked to nominate students they considered high-performing. Second, nominated students completed a brief screening instrument, including a self-report item asking whether they sometimes felt uncertain or insecure when using English despite doing well academically. Students who affirmed this experience were invited to participate. Among the 15 final participants, nine identified as female and six as male, ranging in age from 18 to 23. All had studied English for a minimum of six years. Eleven were English majors; the remaining four were enrolled in other faculties but had been identified by their instructors as strong English users. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect participant confidentiality.

3.4 Data Collection

Two instruments were employed. The primary instrument was a semi-structured individual interview protocol covering five thematic domains: English learning background; self-perception as a language user; experiences of insecurity across modalities (speaking, writing, presentation, and classroom discussion); perceived causes of insecurity; and coping strategies. Interviews lasted between 32 and 51 minutes and were conducted in Uzbek, English, or a mixed mode at each participant's preference. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. Following the interview, each participant was invited to submit a short written reflection responding to three prompts: a description of a specific moment of linguistic insecurity; a personal account of its perceived causes; and a description of their habitual response to such moments. Fourteen of the fifteen participants submitted written reflections, yielding a combined corpus of approximately 68,000 words.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis, proceeding through the stages of familiarisation, initial code generation, theme development, theme review, and final theme definition and naming. The reflexive element was particularly important given the researcher's positionality as an EFL educator familiar with the institutional context; reflexivity was maintained through analytical memo writing and an audit trail of coding decisions. Both interview transcripts and written reflections were coded, enabling data triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Five themes are presented in the findings section, each illustrated with representative participant quotations translated where necessary into English.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board of Fergana State University. All participants provided written informed consent and were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage without academic penalty. Participants were briefed that discussing feelings of insecurity might prompt emotional discomfort, and contact information for university student support services was provided. All identifying information was replaced with pseudonyms.

Findings

Analysis of the interview transcripts and written reflections provided five themes that, taken together, characterize the experience of linguistic insecurity for these high-achieving research participants. These five themes are closely interconnected and represent a complex web of emotions related to the experience under investigation.

4.1 Theme One: Fluency Without Confidence — The Paradox of High Achievement

The most common experience shared by research participants was their keen realization that there was a disconnection between their external success and internal experience. Participants felt that they knew, at some level, that they were successful, but also felt that this success was in some way unreliable or unrepresentative. This paradox was well expressed by Kamola (Year 3, female): “My teachers say I am one of the best students in the group. But when I am actually speaking, I feel like I am one step away from making a terrible mistake, and everyone will finally see that I am not as good as they think.”

The word “finally” was used in multiple responses by different research participants and seems to suggest that this experience of linguistic insecurity is in some way anticipatory, waiting for something rather than fearing it. Sherzod (Year 2, male) also expressed this same experience: “I always feel like I have been lucky so far. My grades are good, but I know there are things I don’t know, and one day I will be asked exactly those things.” This is remarkably similar to what Clance and Imes (1978) refer to as the Imposter Phenomenon, in which success is somehow attributed to good luck and insecurity is felt to be more representative of reality.

Some participants linked this paradox to the difference between the English used in examinations and the English used in everyday life. Nodira, a Year 2, female student, said: “In a test, I know what is expected of me and I do it. But if a foreigner speaks to me on the street, I panic. That panic tells me my real English is much worse than my grades suggest.” This quote, and all the quotes used in this chapter, have been anonymized and slightly adapted for clarity and readability.

4.2 Theme Two: Perfectionism and the Fear of Sounding Unintelligent

The participants’ insecurity was also linked to perfectionism, i.e., to the high expectations they set for themselves. Unlike the users of a foreign language, the participants were competent enough to recognize the difference between their language use and perfect language use. Malika, a Year 4, female student, described her state of mind before contributing to a class discussion: “I prepare what I want to say. Then I reconsider it. Then I think, what if there is a better word? What if my grammar is wrong? By the time I decide it is good enough, the conversation has moved on.”

This process of mental preparation and self-censorship was described by eleven of the fifteen participants to some degree. For example, Doniyor (male, Year 3) described the physical sensation of this: “Before I speak English in class, there is this feeling in my chest. I call it the ‘not-enough’ feeling. I know what I want to say, I just don’t trust myself to say it exactly right.” The fear was not of failing but of speaking a form of English that was perceived to be below the level that others had come to expect of them. Bandura's (1997) work on self-efficacy is highly relevant here. These

participants had a history of achievement but a consistently poor opinion of their ability to sustain that achievement.

The idea of sounding unintelligent was a common theme. Several participants talked of the difference between knowing something and being able to sound like they knew it in English. For example, Dilnoza (female, Year 3): "I can explain things in Uzbek perfectly. But in English, even when I know the content, I sound simpler, less intelligent. That embarrasses me." This is a reflection of a more general phenomenon described in the bilingual literature: the restricted ability to express oneself even for proficient L2 speakers can be perceived as a diminution of identity and intellectual ability (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004).

4.3 Theme Three: Social Comparison and the Peer Gaze

The linguistic insecurity experienced by the participants was also strongly influenced by their social surroundings in the classroom. High-achieving EFL students are in a visible social position in relation to their peers, who both call upon them to respond and present, and compare them to others in the class. This was felt, however, as pressure rather than support. Barno (female, Year 2) summarized this social situation: "In my group, people expect me to speak well. When I make an error – even a small one – I see them looking at me differently. Or maybe I just imagine it. But either way, it stops me."

Comparison to other high-achieving peers was also seen as a source of linguistic insecurity. Jasur (male, Year 3) talked about how he felt in relation to another member of his class who was also at a high level: "There is a student in my group who just speaks. He makes mistakes too, but he doesn't stop. I keep thinking, why can I not do that? Why does the same mistake feel smaller for him than for me?" This illustrates how linguistic insecurity is created and perpetuated through social comparison, as Bandura (1997) points out in his concept of vicarious experience and self-efficacy judgments.

For some of the female students, this peer gaze had another layer of meaning as well. Shahlo (F, Year 4) commented that strong female students were expected to have linguistic precision in their class interactions: "People expect girls who are good students to be careful, accurate. If I make an error, it seems bigger than when a boy makes the same error." While this research is not designed to investigate gender-based insecurity factors, such comments suggest areas that might be explored in future research.

4.4 Theme Four: Accent Anxiety and the Politics of Pronunciation

Pronunciation was found to be a unique and significant area of linguistic insecurity. Although the students demonstrated strong linguistic skills in grammar and vocabulary, their accent, intonation, and fluency in English were found to be significant areas of anxiety. Ulugbek (Year 3, male) said: "When I talk, I know I have an accent. I try to correct it, but the more I try, the more I think about it. Then I sound even more strange."

Some students also talked about how they listened to their recordings and felt uneasy because of the discrepancy between their internal voice and actual pronunciation. This was also related to their anxiety about how they would be perceived as non-native English speakers in contexts where native English speaker standards are implied but not necessarily made explicit. Munira (Year 4, female), who scored the highest in her year group in her exams, said: "My written English is very good, I know that. But my accent makes me feel like an outsider. Like I am pretending."

There is clear evidence of connection to Lippi-Green's (2012) work on accent and social belonging and how this plays into social gatekeeping. Accent anxiety for EFL students in Central Asia is more complex because it also involves issues of global mobility and legitimacy in professional and educational contexts.

4.5 Theme Five: Strategic Silence as Self-Protection

A common reaction to linguistic insecurity among all participants was a sense of strategic silence. Strategic silence refers to a sense of not wanting to engage in a situation in which language use is required. It is a rational choice for self-protection. Kamola explained her choice of strategic silence as a means of "staying safe." She said, "If I don't speak, I can't be judged. I know this is not good for learning, but it protects me." Sherzod explained his choice of not participating in a discussion not because he didn't have ideas to share, but because participating in a discussion required exposing his use of English to judgment.

Strategic silence is not a lack of engagement. All participants were cognitively engaged in what was happening. In fact, all participants reported thinking of what to say in their minds, although they didn't say what they thought. Nodira wrote in her journal, "I think of good answers in class but do not say them. I write instead when I can. Writing gives me time to fix myself." The preference for writing over speaking was a choice made by nine out of fifteen participants. It is a choice based on a sense of more controllable circumstances.

The long-term effects of this approach were, nevertheless, a point of concern for the participants themselves. For one, some participants observed that while the practice of silence may have provided relief for anxiety, it further heightened feelings of insecurity over time due to the lack of practice and feedback. Jasur admitted: "The more I avoid speaking, the worse I get at not being afraid of speaking. It is a circle I know I am trapped in, but I don't know how to escape it." This candid admission of the participants themselves reveals the self-perpetuating nature of the anxiety of speaking, which Young (1991) and Woodrow (2006) point to as one of the most significant effects of the anxiety of speaking.

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that linguistic insecurity is experienced in a way that is qualitatively different from that experienced by struggling or low-achieving EFL students. For this group of students, linguistic insecurity was not felt in relation to lack of ability but in relation to success, and this was mediated by factors such as increased expectations, perfectionism, and social visibility, and the discrepancy between actual and perceived competence.

The Imposter Phenomenon

The imposter phenomenon framework proposed by Clance and Imes (1978) also provides some significant explanatory traction for this study's results. The imposter phenomenon was seen in this study in relation to how students externalize success and internalize incompetence. The students in this study attributed their success to external factors such as hard work and good luck, while at the same time internalizing incompetence and seeing their mistakes as evidence of genuine incompetence. This inability to reconcile external and internal attributions prevents high-achieving students from updating their self-concepts in response to external feedback, and this would be seen as a failure to translate mastery experiences into self-efficacy beliefs, as proposed by Bandura (1997). The social comparison dimension identified in Theme Three adds another layer of complexity to this study's results. High-achieving students are part of a social environment where their performance is visible and subject to social comparison. For this group of students, therefore, seeing another student communicate fluently despite making mistakes would not be seen as liberating but rather as a source

of insecurity because it would draw attention to the discrepancy between actual and affective fluency. Liu and Jackson (2008) also identified this in relation to Chinese EFL students who are unwilling to communicate despite having actual fluency because of social self-consciousness and evaluation apprehension. The results of this study suggest that this also applies to Uzbek EFL students in relation to local educational standards that value accuracy and reserve rather than risk-taking and fluency.

Accent anxiety, as revealed in Theme Four, is a phenomenon that mirrors the ideology of the standard language, as described in Lippi-Green (2012). The ideology of the standard language is the social construct that assumes the existence of a neutral accent in English, which is then used as a measuring stick and is always found wanting in comparison to the standard accent. Accent anxiety is therefore a common phenomenon in the Uzbek setting, given the strong focus on English learning as a prerequisite for international mobility and professional success. Indeed, the more advanced the student is in English learning, the more accent anxiety they may experience, given their heightened awareness of the gap between their accent and the idealized standard accent.

Strategic silence, as revealed in Theme Five, is a significant phenomenon in the Uzbek setting from a pedagogical point of view. Research has consistently revealed that speaking is a vital component in the development of oral language proficiency (Young, 1991; Woodrow, 2006). However, the students most likely to benefit from oral participation are the very ones most likely to be silent in the classroom, as a consequence of their accent anxiety. This is a paradox in the development of oral language proficiency, in that the very behavior that would reduce their accent anxiety is the behavior they are least likely to exhibit due to their accent anxiety.

The results also have implications for teaching practices. For instance, several respondents indicated that, despite teachers' good intentions, being praised for one's ability actually exacerbated, rather than alleviated, anxiety due to the stakes involved in subsequent performances. This implies that, in fact, praising may inadvertently fuel perfectionism, which fuels linguistic insecurity in the first place. Teachers teaching high-performing EFL students could, for example, try to inculcate in them the habit of praising process, rather than outcome, and normalising error as an essential part of language use at all levels of proficiency. Dörnyei's (2009) ideal L2 self approach implies that teachers could be more effective in helping students construct a realistic and compassionate vision of themselves as language users in the future, rather than dwelling on externally defined notions of performance. These findings suggest that fostering self-directed learning practices may serve as a valuable intervention for reducing linguistic insecurity, as autonomous learners are better equipped to manage uncertainty and engage with language use beyond the classroom (Umaralieva, 2025).

Conclusion

This qualitative multiple case study research has explored the phenomenon of linguistic insecurity among 15 high-achieving university EFL students at Fergana State University in Uzbekistan. Five interrelated themes have been revealed through reflexive thematic analysis of semi-structured interview and written reflection data: the paradox of fluency without confidence; perfectionism and the fear of sounding unintelligent; social comparison and the peer gaze; accent anxiety and the politics of pronunciation; and strategic silence as self-protection.

This research contributes to existing knowledge in that it presents linguistic insecurity as a phenomenon that is not limited to knowledge and skill deficits but also as an affective orientation to language use that can persist and even increase in high-achieving EFL students. The research thus challenges the taken-for-granted assumption in both research and pedagogy that increasing levels of language proficiency can overcome confidence issues. For EFL students whose linguistic insecurity is fueled by perfectionism, social comparison, and strong investment in their identity, standard

instructional approaches cannot sufficiently promote the affective security that fluent communication demands.

There are a number of limitations to the current study that need to be noted. First, the current study is limited to a single site and a relatively modest sample size. This limits the scope of analytical generalisation. Furthermore, the current study relies on self-report data, which, while appropriate for accessing subjective experiences, cannot access the underlying mental and affective processes. Future studies could usefully employ a longitudinal design and expand the scope of the investigation to other Central Asian settings of EFL instruction to examine the effect of regional educational culture on the phenomenon.

Despite the limitations of the current study, the results provide a useful basis for pedagogical response. If the current study is correct that the source of the linguistic insecurity of the high-achieving learners is rooted in perfectionism, visibility, and inappropriate benchmarks, then a range of interventions that directly address these sources of insecurity appear to be more promising than the current focus on further skill development. One of the most important and least attended to challenges facing foreign language instruction at the university level is helping advanced EFL learners make sense of what they know and what they allow themselves to feel.

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