



**Efficacy of Cognitive-Behavioral Interventions in Reducing Foreign Language Speaking  
Anxiety: A Case Study of master's degree students**

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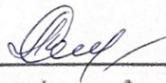
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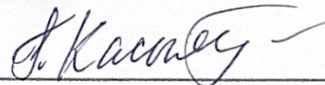
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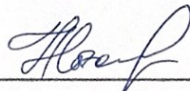
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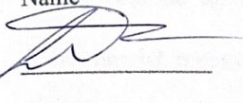
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## **Efficacy of Cognitive-Behavioral Interventions in Reducing Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety: A Case Study of master's degree students**

### **Abstract**

This study investigates the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral interventions (CBIs) in reducing foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) among master's degree students in Kazakhstan. Despite high English language proficiency, many graduate students face moderate to high levels of speaking anxiety, during such activities as classroom participation, oral exams and presentations. Such phenomenon may not only lower general performance of a student, but also limit students' confidence and professional development. To address this issue, a three-week intervention program was designed using core CBT strategies: cognitive restructuring, graduate exposure and relaxation technique. A mixed-method case study approach was used, involving 30 master's students from both public and private universities of Kazakhstan. Quantitative data was collected using Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) before and after interventions. Data was analyzed on a group-level, showing reduction in speaking anxiety, the most significant drop was evident in unprepared speaking, fear of negative evaluation and public correction. Qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews after group interventions, as a complementary tool. Data was analyzed thematically and four key themes were revealed: (1) increased awareness through gradual practice, (2) improved emotional regulation, (3) enhanced speaking confidence, and (4) application of practices beyond the classroom. Study contributes to limited research on postgraduate students' speaking anxiety, providing valuable insights from Kazakhstan's educational context. Research findings suggest that brief, low-cost and adaptable interventions can have a meaningful impact on learners' psychological readiness to speak.

*Keywords:* foreign language anxiety, speaking anxiety, cognitive-behavioral interventions.

**Шетел тілінде сөйлеу барысында пайда болатын алаңдаушылықты  
төмендетудегі когнитивті-мінез-құлықтық интервенциялардың тиімділігі:  
магистранттар арасында жүргізілген жағдайлық зерттеу**

**Аңдатпа**

Бұл зерттеу Қазақстандағы магистранттар арасында шетел тілінде сөйлеу барысында туындайтын алаңдаушылықты (FLSA) төмендетуде когнитивті-мінез-құлықтық интервенциялардың тиімділігін зерттеуге бағытталған. Ағылшын тілін жақсы меңгергеніне қарамастан, көптеген магистранттар ауызша сөйлеуге байланысты жағдайларда – сабаққа қатысу, ауызша емтихандар және презентациялар кезінде – орташа немесе жоғары деңгейдегі алаңдаушылықты бастан кешіреді. Мұндай күй тек академиялық үлгерімге кері әсерін тигізіп қана қоймай, сонымен қатар студенттердің өзіне деген сенімін және кәсіби дамуын шектейді. Аталған мәселені шешу мақсатында когнитивті-мінез-құлықтық терапияның негізгі стратегияларына негізделген үш апталық интервенциялық бағдарлама әзірленді: когнитивті қайта құрылымдау, біртіндеп бейімделу (exposure) және релаксациялық техникалар. Зерттеу барысында сандық және сапалық талдауды біріктіретін жағдайлық зерттеу (кейс-стади) әдісі қолданылды. Оған мемлекеттік және жекеменшік жоғары оқу орындарының 30 магистранты қатысты. Сандық деректер интервенцияға дейін және кейін шетел тіліндегі сыныптық алаңдаушылық шкаласы (FLCAS) арқылы жиналды. Топтық деңгейдегі талдау сөйлеу алаңдаушылығының төмендегенін көрсетті, әсіресе дайындықсыз сөйлеу, теріс бағалаудан қорқу және көпшілік алдында түзетуге қатысты аспектілерде айқын өзгеріс байқалды. Интервенция аяқталғаннан кейін сұхбаттар арқылы сапалық деректер жиналды. Тақырыптық талдау нәтижесінде төрт негізгі тақырып анықталды: (1) біртіндеп тәжірибе арқылы өзіндік ойлау үлгілерін тану, (2) эмоцияны басқару қабілетінің артуы, (3) сөйлеу сенімділігінің жоғарылауы және (4) алынған стратегияларды аудиториядан тыс қолдану. Бұл зерттеу магистранттардың сөйлеу алаңдаушылығын зерделеп, Қазақстандағы білім беру жүйесіне құнды деректер ұсынады. Нәтижелер қысқа мерзімді және үнемді интервенциялардың студенттердің сөйлеуге дайындығына оң әсер ететінін көрсетті.

*Кілт сөздер:* шетел тілін үйренудегі мазасыздық, когнитивті-мінез-құлықтық интервенциялар.

## **Эффективность когнитивно-поведенческих интервенций в снижении тревожности при говорении на иностранном языке: кейс-стади среди магистрантов**

### **Аннотация**

В данном исследовании изучается эффективность когнитивно-поведенческих вмешательств (СВІ) в снижении тревожности при разговоре на иностранном языке (FLSA) среди студентов магистратуры в Казахстане. Несмотря на высокий уровень владения английским языком, многие аспиранты сталкиваются со средним или высоким уровнем речевой тревожности во время таких мероприятий, как участие в аудиторных занятиях, устные экзамены и презентации. Такое явление может не только снизить успеваемость студентов, но и ограничить их уверенность в себе и профессиональное развитие. Для решения этой проблемы была разработана трехнедельная программа вмешательства с использованием основных стратегий КПТ: когнитивной реструктуризации. Был использован смешанный метод изучения конкретных ситуаций, в котором приняли участие 30 магистрантов из государственных и из частных университетов Казахстана.

Количественные данные были собраны с использованием шкалы тревожности (FLCAS) до и после занятий. Данные были проанализированы на групповом уровне и показали снижение тревожности, наиболее значительное было при неподготовленном выступлении, страхе негативной оценки и публичной коррекции. Качественные данные были собраны с помощью полуструктурированных интервью в качестве дополнительного инструмента. Данные были проанализированы тематически, и были выявлены четыре ключевые темы: (1) повышение осведомленности за счет постепенной практики, (2) улучшение эмоциональной регуляции, (3) повышение уверенности в разговоре и (4) применение практик за пределами аудитории. Эта работа вносит свой вклад в ограниченное исследование речевой тревожности аспирантов, предоставляя ценную информацию об образовательном контексте Казахстана. Результаты исследования показывают, что краткие и адаптируемые интервенции могут оказать влияние на психологическую готовность учащихся к публичному выступлению.

*Ключевые слова:* тревожность при изучении иностранного языка, тревожность при говорении, когнитивно поведенческие интервенции.

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

#### 1.1 Background and Importance

Learning a foreign language has taken a significant role in the context of global education and intercultural communication. Being proficient in the English language is not only beneficial, but also necessary for success in school and at the workplace, especially when global interaction increases and becomes more frequent. However, mastery of foreign language involves more than acquiring vocabulary, grammar or pronunciation, it also includes overcoming affective and psychological barriers that impede communicative effectiveness. Among these psychological barriers, the most prominent one is Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA), which affects students' motivations, language proficiency and overall educational experience.

#### 1.2 Definition and Impact

Foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) is defined by the feeling of tension, apprehension and nervousness that students often experience when they are required to speak in a foreign language. As speaking tasks are mainly of spontaneous nature, speaking becomes the most anxiety provoking skill, which leads to fear of making mistakes, negative evaluation from peers and teachers, as well as negative self-perceptions. This phenomenon is mostly common among English as a foreign language (EFL) learners, who often face extra pressure due to differences in cultural environment and language structures (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Number of studies (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; Phillips, 1992; Gregersen, 2003) have presented that FLSA negatively affects students' confidence, willingness to participate and consequently language proficiency. According to Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), foreign

language anxiety is a unique complex of feelings, attitudes and behaviours, in specific associated with language learning. A subgroup of FLA known as Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) focuses on anxiety that appears during speaking. Speaking anxiety results in avoidance behavior, poor language performance , since it is associated with excessive self-monitoring and self-perceived communication incompetence (Dewaele, 2013).

### **1.3 Significance for Master's Degree Students**

Significant population to research in this context is master's degree students, for the reason that higher expectations and advanced academic level put on them. In comparison to undergraduate students who may still be in the process of developing their linguistic and academic competencies, master's students are expected to take part in more complex discussions, conduct research and present their findings in academic and as well professional settings. Mentioned above increases pressure and consequently causes rise of speaking anxiety. Those challenges affect not only academic performance but also their future career opportunities.

According to Woodrow (2006), students' participation in networking opportunities, academic conferences and even job interviews can be limited due to the high level of FLSA, which potentially reduces their academic growth.

According to researchers , master's degree students frequently experience stress and anxiety due to heavy academic workloads, complex coursework, and the need to actively participate in different conferences and academic discussions (Cho & Hayter, 2020; Alzahrani & Ilyas, 2023).

While speaking anxiety has been extensively studied among undergraduate students, there is a shortage of research among postgraduate students. The gap in literature review stresses the need for additional studies into FLSA related challenges faced by master's degree students, and how interventions can be adapted to their needs.

#### **1.4 Cognitive-Behavioral Interventions**

Educators and psychologists have investigated the number of strategies in order to reduce foreign language anxiety, and improve language proficiency. Among them, there has been found one that is particularly successful, is cognitive-behavioral interventions (CBIs).

Cognitive-behavioral interventions rooted from cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). These interventions mainly focus on identifying and changing cognitive patterns and behaviors associated with anxiety. CBT highlights how thoughts, emotions, and behaviors interact with each other, suggesting the idea that by changing negative thought patterns, individuals can better regulate their anxiety level. The effectiveness of CBT in reducing anxiety and improving coping strategies within overall resilience is supported by empirical evidence (Beck, 2011). Studies demonstrate that CBT-based techniques, which include cognitive restructuring (changing negative thought pattern), relaxation training, and systematic desensitization (gradually facing anxiety provoking situations) are effective tools in reducing speaking anxiety level in educational context (Kim, 2020; Zhang, 2021).

Promising results have been found in the studies on cognitive behavioral interventions specifically in educational settings, including decrease of anxiety and improvement in academic performance, influencing generally emotional well-being of individuals (Shortt, Barrett, & Fox, 2001).

**1.4.1 Limitations and Research Gap.** Nonetheless, the amount of research that focuses on foreign language speaking anxiety experienced among master's degree students' and the efficacy of CBIs on this specific setting still remain limited. There is a lack in the literature on master's degree students experiences with FLSA, whose academic and professional contexts differ from undergraduate learners or learners less experienced. Thus, further exploration on this specific topic is needed, in order to improve management techniques and further the learning process. Additionally, it is important to investigate whether CBI based interventions are adaptable to group learning environments, since they are typically designed for individuals. Although peer pressure and social interactions are considered to be one of the reasons of anxiety, consequently, the crucial role here is to determine if group based CBI can effectively reduce speaking anxiety.

## **1.5 Contextualizing the Study in Kazakhstan**

It is particularly interesting to explore this phenomenon in the context of Kazakhstan. English language proficiency is becoming an important requirement for both academic and professional success, as the result of growing emphasis on multilingual education and internationalization of higher education institutions. Despite large investments and educational reforms which aimed to improve English language instruction, many students still experience severe anxiety when speaking English. Limiting their ability to take part in various academic activities. Based on recent studies conducted in Kazakhstan, university students on the continuum basis experience anxiety, which underscores the need for psychological and educational interventions (Suleimenova, 2013; Shorman, 2024; Yergaliyeva et al., 2023). Moreover, taking into account the unique linguistic landscape of Kazakhstan, which is dominated by Kazakh and Russian languages, may as well contribute to linguistic insecurity

when speaking English, making FLSA a more important issue (Baitukenova & Zharkynbekova, 2022).

## **1.6 Purpose of the Study**

Therefore, the current study aims to examine the efficacy of cognitive-behavioral interventions in reducing foreign language speaking anxiety among master's degree students. In particular, this research will investigate how targeted cognitive-behavioral strategies impact students' anxiety levels. By concentrating on the population that is thought to have high linguistic competence, but still struggling with speaking anxiety, study will expand knowledge on how psychological interventions can support advanced language learners.

## **1.7 Research question**

RQ1: How effective are cognitive-behavioral interventions in reducing foreign language speaking anxiety?

RQ2: How do postgraduate students perceive their experience with cognitive behavioral strategies aimed at reducing foreign language speaking anxiety?

**1.7.1 Problem statement.** Despite having a high language proficiency level, many master's degree students struggle with anxiety, often due to fear of negative evaluation rather than linguistic ability (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). While FLSA has been widely studied at the undergraduate level, according to Yu (2024) there is a noticeable gap of research made at the postgraduate students.

### ***1.7.2 Research objectives.***

To assess the level and cause of foreign language speaking anxiety

To implement short-term cognitive behavioral strategies

To evaluate changes in students' anxiety-related thoughts, emotions and behaviors post interventions.

To explore participants' reflection on the usefulness of CBT strategies.

## **1.8 Research Methodology and Design**

For this study qualitative and quantitative methods will be utilized, offering broader perspectives. Qualitative data will be gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. This approach offers comprehensive insights into individuals personal experiences , perceptions and attitudes towards speaking anxiety. In order to examine the effectiveness of cognitive behavioral interventions quantitative data will be collected via pre-test / post-test, using Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). This data allows collection of objective measurements, to evaluate changes in participants anxiety level, as a direct result of four-week interventions. By using the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, methodological triangulation can be achieved, which makes the findings of the research more reliable and valid (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Study includes 30 master's degree students, from the departments of education, in one of the private universities of Kazakhstan. The procedure will start with the FLCAS questionnaire to measure initial anxiety level, followed by a semi-structured interview to understand personal

experience with FLSA. After that, a structured four-week cognitive behavioral intervention program will be implemented. Followed-up with post-test (FLCAS questionnaire) and closing interview, to assess changes in anxiety level and gain feedback on the interventions' effectiveness. This mixed-method approach will provide more in-depth exploration of not only statistical changes, but also participants' lived experiences with anxiety. Therefore, study offers both numerical and narrative insights into the impact of CBIs.

## **1.9 Significance of the Research**

The goal of the research is to theoretically and practically contribute to existing studies. Theoretically, it will enhance the understanding of psychological aspects influencing foreign language, especially in advanced academic settings. Practically, it will give teachers and educational institutions practical, evidence-based strategies for reducing anxiety among master's students, creating more encouraging and effective learning environments. By filling the gap between psychological theory and educational practice, this study aims to encourage more supportive and confident language learning in higher education.

### ***1.9.1 Novelty of research***

Novelty of a research lies in three key ways. Firstly, it focuses on the understudied population that are master's degree students, who face unique academic and professional pressure, Yu (2024) noted the scarcity of research focuses on postgraduate students in FLA phenomenon. Secondly, adapted CBIs that are usually used individually, in this research used in a group setting. Thirdly, study provides a localized perspective, from Kazakhstan's multilingual context.

## CHAPTER 2

### Literature Review

This chapter reviews theoretical and empirical studies on Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), with a particular focus on speaking anxiety and intervention strategies among graduate students.

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) poses a significant impediment to language acquisition, affecting learners' performance and capacity to communicate efficiently, particularly in speaking skills (Shen,2022). This phenomenon characterized by apprehension and unease during oral communication in a non-native language has attracted considerable attention from researchers and educators alike (Worde, 2003;Wei, 2022). Due to the complex nature of foreign language speaking anxiety, a clear understanding of its nature and causes should be addressed. FLA stems from different factors, such as fear of negative evaluation, insufficient preparation and cognitive challenges that make it difficult for students to express themselves (Daud et al., 2022; Herawaty et al., 2021).

The term “communication apprehension” describes a form of anxiety that appears in interpersonal communicative settings (McCroskey, 1987), which is relevant to second and foreign language learning. As noted by MacIntyre and Gardner (1989), communication apprehension increases in relation to students negative self-perception, that caused by their inability to understand others and make themselves understood , especially in a language classroom where students have little control over communicative situations and their performance is monitored by teachers and peers (Horwitz et. al., 1986). Speaking about the fear of receiving poor grades, Young (1991) stated that students are more likely to be concerned about

how,when,what or how often those mistakes are made and corrected, or whether error correction should be administered in class. In language classroom teachers' assumption about their role may not align with students' needs and expectations, therefore it can act as some sort of barrier for L2 students and consequently cause anxiety in them.

Test anxiety is a sort of performance anxiety that results from a fear of failure. Students with test anxiety often tend to set unrealistic expectations for themselves. And one of the significant components of negative motivation is believed to be test anxiety. In formal testing or other evaluation contexts, it might be described as "an unpleasant feeling or emotional state that has physiological and behavioral concomitants" (Dusek 1980, p. 88). Test anxiety increases when students are asked to perform in a foreign or second language, since they are required to remember and coordinate various grammatical elements simultaneously during a limited test period. Consequently, students may give the wrong answer or freeze out of nervousness, even if they knew the right answer (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Price, 1991).

Furthermore, some researchers delve into different kinds of learning activities, in relation to foreign language anxiety. Horwitz (2001) argues that learners feel more comfortable when doing pair work and personalized activities, but it may be a subjective opinion, as some learning activities may also be stressful to others. Furthermore, some investigators linked foreign language anxiety to other aspects, such as "(a) presenting before the class, (b) making mistakes, (c) losing face, (d) inability to express oneself, (e) fear of failure, (f) teachers, and (g) fear of living up to the standards" are some examples of the primary causes of anxiety, according to Cubukcu (2007) (p. 133).

Master's degree students' experience with anxiety often intensifies, because of particular demands, such as academic presentations, professional engagement, and publication of research on a foreign language. While anxiety has been explored in various contexts, limited research has focused on upper-level language classrooms, where students still experience anxiety despite advanced proficiency (Ewald, 2007). Studies of Horwitz (1996) and Naudhani et al., (2018) have shown that speaking anxiety, teacher-generated anxiety and foreign language classroom anxiety are prominent among students. Therefore, it is important to understand that speaking anxiety appears differently across individuals, which requires customized interventions (Mohamad, 2020). By understanding the initial source of foreign language anxiety, it is essential to create a supportive learning environment (Ali, 2022).

Finally, this review explored existing literature of FLA along with FLSA, focusing on identification of effective cognitive-behavioral interventions among master's degree students.

## **2.1 Defining Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA)**

Horwitz and Cope (1986) were the first to describe foreign language anxiety, as a form of anxiety that is unique to the educational setting of learning and speaking. They identified three main components of anxiety, such as fear of negative evaluation, exam anxiety and communication apprehension. Horwitz et al. developed Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) as a tool to measure anxiety and which is widely used till now.

Trang (2012) conducted a review on Horwitz and Cope's (1986) foreign language anxiety theory; several shortcomings of the study were identified. One main consideration that was mentioned, is that theory might not adequately address the differences between students, which has an impact on level of anxiety. For example, personality traits or previous language learning

experiences. For the reason that theory relies heavily on foreign language classroom anxiety scale (FLCAS), the validity of the study in various cultural and educational contexts was questioned.

Another perspective on FLA was proposed by Krashen in 1986. Stephen Krashen (1986) proposed Affective Filter Hypothesis, which states how a student's anxiety leads to a mental block, which prevents learners from acquiring new knowledge, as they cannot comprehend or remember any information given. Following, Krashen claims that factors increasing affective filter are: error correction, forcing output too early, isolation, lack of comprehensible input and embarrassment, those mentioned before points can significantly decrease the chances for a successful learning. As reported by Liu (2023) a learner with high motivation and confidence tends to have a lower filter, which allows more input to reach their language acquisition. Similarly Milan (2019) as well claimed, that the rise of Affective Filter blocks input and hinders language acquisition, therefore a supportive classroom environment where students feel comfortable is needed.

However, this perspective was questioned by Bailey and Fahad (2021). After revising Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, they suggested that the study does not explain the sociocultural factor which remains to be influential in language acquisition. Sociocultural factors lay in community support, cultural identity and social interaction, which Affective Filter Hypothesis may overlook. In line with this, Swain and Lapkin (1995) doubted the input hypothesis of Krashen. Instead, they presented Comprehensible Output Hypothesis. According to it, language production (output) is equally important, therefore solely relying on input theory is not sufficient for comprehensible language learning.

Beyond fundamental ideas that Horwitz has presented, further research underscores the need for more dynamic and tailored FLA techniques. Thus, Shirvan and Taherian (2021) offered Complex Dynamic System Theory (CDST), which states anxiety may vary depending on students' feelings, small scale classroom events, and even word choices that are made during speaking exercises.

By examining different perspectives, the shift from the traditional view on foreign language anxiety can be offered, as FLA is seen as more dynamic and context dependent, rather than fixed trait. Suggesting that anxiety can vary depending on the task, situation or even emotional setting of the class, providing fresh perspective on how interventions should be designed and applied. As a result, the one-size-fit-all approach is no longer effective, especially for graduate students, who face completely different challenges, as they are expected to navigate more complex and demanding communicative tasks. Complex Dynamic System Theory (CDST) was proposed by Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) that proves the existence of a relationship between students' emotions and their learning environment. According to mentioned frameworks, teachers behavior and teaching design, shape students' emotional responses.

## **2.2 Effects of FLA on Speaking and Academic Performance**

One of the most anxiety provoking skills, is found to be speaking skill, for its spontaneous and interactive nature. Learners typically feel more under pressure during speaking tasks, because they have to process and deliver language in real time, with limited opportunity for preparation or error correction. Young (1990) have found strong negative correlation between anxiety level and speaking proficiency, emphasizing that learners' capacity to talk fluently and clearly can be limited as anxiety increases. Similarly, Hanifa (2018) emphasized that students

learning English as a Foreign language (EFL) frequently experience significant anxiety, in particular while speaking in front of the audience during presentations or oral exams.

Anxiety results in decreased participation, limited language production, lower communication effectiveness, overall reducing learning success and confidence.

Graduate students are especially vulnerable due to the higher expectations around their academic and professional performances. Considering the demands of mastering specialized material and professional evaluation, Horwitz et al. (2010) found that graduate students' oral presentation anxiety differs from general classroom anxiety, therefore, to effectively navigate it special attention to it is required.

Over the past decade FLA effects on students have produced contradictory results. Educators suggest that foreign language anxiety can have a negative effect on students' speaking ability, as stated Onwuegbuzie, et. al. (1999) FLA affects negatively on speech fluency and learning in a general sense. Similar findings were made by, Na (2007), and Spielmann and Radnofsky (2001) explored FLA in a variety of EFL learners, concluding the negative effect of language anxiety on learners' performance. Also, Goshi (2005) aligned with the perspective that negative self-beliefs and negative perspective on English language learning increases anxiety. On the contrary, a positive role of foreign language anxiety in terms of language learning was highlighted by some other researchers including Alpert and Haber, (1960); Chastain, (1975); Kleinmann, (1977). In this case, Bailey (1983) analyzed students' diaries to assess their competitiveness and anxiety in the language classroom. Four main themes emerged from students' comments: (1) their reaction to the class, (2) their preference for a democratic class, (3) their need to succeed and to receive positive feedback, (4) their competitiveness. According to

the study, students' foreign language anxiety was mainly caused from communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Interestingly, competitiveness in a learning environment may lead to the development of “facilitative anxiety”- a form of anxiety that motivates students to try harder and perform better. This finding suggests that moderate levels of anxiety can benefit learners' engagement and achievement, in a healthy competitive field.

Additionally, the relationship between FLA and speaking proficiency is not always predictable. For instance, Dewaele and Pavelescu (2019) introduced the concept of “emotional ambivalence” in a foreign language use, pointing out that during speaking tasks some learners experience both excitement and anxiety at the same time. This duality that only links anxiety with negative outcomes, complicates earlier presented models. That emotional complexity is especially relevant in high-stakes academic settings, where speaking engagement may serve both as professional development and intense psychological stress. Therefore, interventions that are going to be implemented should be sensitive not only to anxiety reduction, but as well to the motivational and identity-building aspect of foreign language use.

Several studies have identified the main factors contributing to speaking anxiety. Highlighting the complexity of FLSA aspects, including cognitive, emotional and behavioral components. Cognitive theories of Schmidt and Watanabe (2001), suggest that anxiety arises from the fear of negative-evaluation and negative self-perception. Similarly, Luo (2012) recommends that anxiety can significantly be exacerbated by negative self-perception, fear of making mistakes, and unpleasant language-learning experiences in the past. Learners frequently engage in catastrophic thinking, expecting to fail or feel embarrassed before speaking. Emotional responses, like fear and shame worsen anxiety, leading to a cycle of avoidance and smaller

chances to speak (Aida,1994).Those factors often result in creation of negative schemas that reduce students' willingness and ability to communicate in the target language.

In the Saudi EFL context, Alrabai (2014) carried out a comprehensive study involving 1,389 students, in order to explore the source and impact of Foreign language anxiety (FLA). Study revealed that communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and cultural concerns such as the fear of “losing face” were found to be the main cause of anxiety among students, which affects their willingness to speak and general language proficiency. For this study mixed-method approach was used, to quantitatively assess anxiety level, author used Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). Qualitative interviews and classroom observations were as well implemented to explore students' personal experience in depth. Therefore, Alrabai identified key factors of anxiety and proposed practical strategies to reduce FLA. Such as raising teachers' awareness of anxiety, creating a low-stress classroom environment , using positive reinforcement, incorporating group work , adjusting assessment methods and encouraging teaching methods that are attentive to cultural differences.

Likewise, Baitukenova and Zharkynbekova (2022) discovered that Kazakhstan's unique linguistic environment also contributes to Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) among learners. Usually, bilingualism facilitates the acquisition of a new language, by increasing linguistic flexibility and confidence. However, in the multilingual environment of Kazakhstan, where both Kazakh and Russian are widely used, unique social and psychological difficulties appear. Because of the frequent need to switch between languages and manage complex linguistic demands, students become more self-aware of their own pronunciation, accent, fluency, and general language accuracy when speaking English. Consequently, students

experience increased pressure, despite their bilingual proficiency, they may still fear negative feedback, negative comparison or fail to meet language standards. Nonetheless, Levine (2003) stated that students from monolingual backgrounds also tend to feel more anxious than students from bi- or multilingual backgrounds.

Another interesting factor facilitating anxiety is gender. Öztürk and Gürbüz (2014) found that female EFL learners express higher motivation, yet experiencing greater speaking anxiety than male students. This tendency was supported by both qualitative and quantitative data, suggesting that motivated female learners may still face some emotional barriers, therefore gender-sensitive strategies are essential in mitigating foreign language speaking anxiety.

This unique interaction between emotional and linguistic competence emphasizes how important psychological therapies and encouraging teaching methods are, in reducing speaking anxiety. Moreover, the importance of fostering a positive learning environment and supportive teaching practices, were as well mentioned by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014). They highlighted that encouraging open communication, providing constructive and empathetic feedback- are the key factors to build strong teacher-students relationships that furthermore reduces anxiety.

Saghafi and Elahi Shirvan (2020) found that foreign language speaking anxiety varies by topic, especially increasing during unfamiliar content. The findings show that anxiety is not a fixed state but can be varied depending on content and the learner's perception of the difficulty of the topic. Which means that anxiety levels are context-dependent.

Papi and Khajavy (2021) explored how motivational mechanisms, specifically regulatory focus, impact second language achievement. There is a promotion focus (goal-oriented and optimistic) and a prevention focus (focused on avoiding mistakes and failure). Learners with a

promotion focus tend to experience less anxiety and therefore have higher language performance. While on the contrary students with prevention focus have higher anxiety and use language more cautiously. Consequently, shifting learners towards a promotion focus can reduce anxiety and improve confidence.

### **2.3 Empirical Evidence on FLA and academic outcomes**

When it comes to speaking skills, empirical studies consequently demonstrate negative correlation between Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and language performance. Zhang (2019) conducted a meta-analysis which included over a 1000 participants and 55 independent studies, in that work he revealed negative correlation ( $r = -0.34$ ,  $p < .01$ ) between FLA and overall foreign language performance. Interestingly, test anxiety and reading anxiety showed weaker correlation, while listening tasks revealed strongest correlation. Additionally, negative correlation remained stable across different proficiency levels, demonstrating that FLA has an impact on all students regardless language proficiently level.

Likewise, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) explored the effect on language anxiety on cognitive processing in second language learning. They identified that higher levels of anxiety interferes with cognitive processing, which are essential for language learning. That includes input, processing and output stages. Despite the fact that anxious students tend to spend more time studying, their performance did not reflect that effort, implying that anxiety hinders cognitive functioning. Anxious students showed slower processing speed and lower accuracy which makes the interference more evident.

Chen and Chang (2004) explored the aspects of FLA on language learning among Taiwanese students, their study revealed that increased anxiety affects students' comprehension,

performance and active participation in classes. They noted that speaking anxiety is connected to a lack of confidence, which has a negative impact on performance. According to Aydin (2008), Turkish EFL students also had significant anxiety levels, and one major factor lowering their readiness to interact was their fear of receiving a poor grade. Liu and Huang (2011) explored the relation between foreign language anxiety and English learning motivation among university students, and found that high anxiety correlated with low motivation, while more motivated learners experience less anxiety. Key anxiety triggers include fear of public speaking and performing pressure. Additionally Kruk (2018) found FLA dynamics is influenced by such factors as teaching methods and learning attitudes.

Mentioned above, highlights the importance of using effective teaching strategies in order to reduce the effect of FLA, helping students to gain confidence and evoke active participation.

#### **2.4 Coping strategies for foreign language anxiety**

The effectiveness of various coping strategies that could help Japanese EFL learners to reduce anxiety, were explored by Yasuda and Nabei (2018). The key outcome variable that study was focusing on, was students willingness to communicate (WTC). Study found that strategies like preparation and positive thinking had the strongest positive impact. Similarly, Kondo and Yang (2003) emphasized the benefits of mindfulness and relaxation techniques, which include breathing and meditation as an effective way to manage anxiety. This approach helps students to stay focused and emotionally grounded, allowing them to engage in any language activity more confidently and with a clear mind.

However, coping strategies may not be effective universally, it is often influenced by individual characteristics and cultural context of learners, which might depend. Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) concluded that personality traits, learning preferences and previous learning experience can affect how a particular strategy will work. For some learners positive self-talk may offer reassurance and motivation, while for others it may feel unnatural and have negative connotations. The effect of cultural background likewise emphasized by Yashima (2002), he acknowledged that students from collectivist cultures may be less likely to engage in active coping strategies. Instead, they tend to prioritize group and social conformity. For example, if in the class no one is speaking or answering the questions, most likely students will not disturb the silent behaviour of the group even if they know the answer. Leading them to suppress their anxiety rather than address it.

Building upon this idea, Tee, Kamarulzaman, and Tan (2020) found that students choose a strategy to manage public speaking anxiety based on the proficiency and the context. In particular, intermediate level students tend to use compensation strategies (e.g., using gestures, paraphrasing or guessing lacking vocabulary) and metacognitive strategies (e.g., planning before speaking a task and monitoring their performance). In comparison to high language proficiency learners, they prefer affective strategies, such as self-encouragement, relaxation techniques and positive self-talk in managing anxiety. Moreover, students that were exposed to an English-medium instruction (EMI) environment where the English language is used to teach academic subjects in countries where is not the language of the majority, were found to favor social strategies (e.g., asking for help, speaking in groups) and memory strategies (e.g., memorizing chunks of language or using mental associations). Therefore, study highlights how

the effectiveness of management techniques is closely linked to students' language proficiency and context.

Elahemer and Mat Said (2022) reviewed speaking anxiety interventions and categorized them as direct- CBT and relaxation, and indirect- motivational strategies and classroom changes. Extending this line of research, Kimani et al. (2021) highlighted the effectiveness of real-time interventions, such as breathing exercises and interactive tools, that improve self-regulation and confidence during public speaking. Engaging with peers that are also learning the language can provide emotional support and reduce the sense of isolation. Since in collaborative learning students can share their experience and coping strategies, the sense of community can help decrease anxiety (Dörnyei, 2005).

Despite the widespread use of those strategies, some authors argue that efficacy of those strategies are not universal. Besides, researchers are against over reliance on coping strategies, as it serves as a habit rather than solution to the problem. Young (1991) suggested that students who heavily rely on preparation only, further may struggle to engage spontaneously in conversations , which is significant for language acquisition.

## **2.5 Cognitive-Behavioral Interventions (CBIs) for Anxiety Reduction**

Cognitive-behavioral interventions (CBIs) have shown to be effective in reducing Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) , by promoting positive thinking, developing healthier cognitive strategies. This approach helps learners to build confidence in speaking via addressing negative thought patterns that intensify anxiety. Such techniques as cognitive restructuring, exposure therapy and relaxation techniques have proven to be lower anxiety (Kleinmann, 1977; Tóth, 2018). Another example that proves these points, was presented by Woodrow (2006), he

found that students who participate in structured CBIs reduce anxiety level, as well have improvements in oral language proficiency.

Closely, Güvendir et al. (2020) examined how CBIs can help to reduce public speaking anxiety and foreign language anxiety among pre-service English teachers. Study found that cognitive restructuring techniques are an effective tool for lowering anxiety, by reshaping negative thought patterns.

Jin, Dewaele, and MacIntyre (2021) explored the application of positive psychology strategies, in specific learners' reflection on the past learning success- to reduce FLA. For 30 days, 88 Chinese students were asked to recall a specific successful language learning experience, where they described the situation in detail, reflecting on their past positive emotions, explaining why the situation was meaningful to them. It was designed to trigger positive emotional memories, reinforce a sense of progress, and to lessen negative self-perception related to language use. This approach aligns with Krashen's affective filter theory (1982), where the author highlights an important role of positive emotions in improving language learning process. However, culturally homogeneous samples may affect the generalizability of the findings. Yet, study offers insightful information into how positive emotional experiences can support anxiety reduction in language classrooms.

Baroi and Muhammad (2024) conducted cognitive-behavioral group therapy (CBGT) to 60 university students. The intervention group got sessions that used cognitive restructuring, exposure, and relaxation approaches to address test anxiety, communication anxiety, and fear of a bad evaluation. While there was no change in the control group, the results indicated significant decreases in anxiety and increases in confidence.

Hofmann and Boettcher (2014) found that CBT had a moderate positive effect on quality of life, especially on physical and psychological areas. However, improvements in social and environmental aspects were limited. Additionally, face-to-face sessions and longer treatment duration were more effective. Those research studies underscore the potential of cognitive-behavioral interventions in addressing unique needs of master's degree students and positive psychology strategies in reducing FLSA.

Recent research stresses the integration of third-wave cognitive behavioral approaches, which include Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy that emphasize emotional regulation and present-moment awareness. According to Swain et al. (2021) these approaches have shown to be effective for students who continue to feel anxious in spite of traditional CBT interventions. For instance, ACT promotes psychological flexibility by helping students to accept uncomfortable emotions (e.g., anxiety before speaking) rather than attempting to suppress them. This in fact allows students to remain engaged in communicative tasks despite discomfort, which aligns with Krashen's (1982) theory. Integrating mindfulness-informed techniques, could enhance current interventions and present more holistic tools for managing anxiety.

While cognitive behavioral interventions (CBIs) have become well-known as an effective treatment for anxiety disorders, their efficacy is not universal and may be influenced by a variety of personal and environmental factors. CBT is generally beneficial, although results can vary, especially when cognitive approaches are used alone. It may be more beneficial to combine CBT with additional modalities (Kaczurkin & Foa, 2015). Critics argue that cognitive restructuring may not adequately address critical emotional processes like self-comparison and trauma related emotions, because CBT focuses on logical reasoning and behavior control that overlooks these

processes. Additionally CBT's structured nature may be seen as inflexible since treatment does not take into account the participant's deep cultural and personal backgrounds, which could lower efficacy and involvement (Collimore & Rector, 2014).

CBT's approach identifies and modifies negative thought patterns and behaviours, which has been shown to significantly reduce anxiety level and improve self-esteem ("Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Anxiety," 2022). For instance, Silva et al. (2024) found that school based CBT programs in Sri Lanka notably reduced 9 grade students' anxiety, with the effect remaining to last for three month post-interventions. Similar to this, Khan et al. (2025) discovered that 115 teenagers' anxiety symptoms noticeably improved, furthermore following CBT sessions the effect continued for six months after interventions. Izzah and Indrijati (2024) have proven the effectiveness of CB interventions in higher education, where it has been utilized to aid academy related anxiety among college students. Results of the above studies imply that CBT is flexible and successful in use, in a range of cultural context and educational level. However, it is important to recognize that not all students can benefit in an equal manner from cognitive behavioral therapy, therefore some may need additional or different interventions.

Another interesting study to mention was conducted by Melchor-Couto (2020), author explored foreign language anxiety in a virtual environment through virtual world- *Second life*. Some participants reported reduced anxiety due to anonymity and reduced physical presence, yet the other half of the participants have felt increased anxiety from technical challenges and unfamiliar situations. The potential for adapting CBT techniques in virtual settings are highlighted, illustrating how FLA may be impacted differently in non-traditional learning environments.

## 2.6 Graduate Student Specific Challenges

It is crucial to address the unique challenges faced by graduate students, since anxiety can significantly impact their academic performance, participation in discussions and overall confidence in using a foreign language. Accordingly, identifying the sources of anxiety, such as fear of negative evaluation, and communication apprehension can facilitate the development of targeted interventions to support students in overcoming those challenges. Yet, the demands that are expected for graduate students add different sources for anxiety.

There are several factors that lead to anxiety provoking situations, in particular at the graduate level of study, including delivery of academic presentations, research publications along with professional networking. Qualitative research of Horwitz et al. (2010), which was based on interviews and self-reported data of approximately 15 graduate learners from different disciplines revealed that graduate student anxiety mostly centered around content mastery and professional evaluation, which makes them differ from typical classroom anxiety.

Kasbi and Shirvan (2017) conducted a case study on four intermediate-level EFL learners, examining speaking anxiety through an ecological perspective. The study demonstrated that anxiety was context-dependent and impacted by task complexity, learner beliefs, and classroom dynamics through the use of interviews, classroom observations, and self-report tools over the course of five sessions.

A systematic review of the causes and consequences of foreign language anxiety (FLA) was carried out by Oteir and Al-Otaibi (2019). Results indicated that low academic achievement, poor proficiency, and higher dropout rates are all associated with high anxiety. Additionally, FLA generates feelings including anxiety and pain, decreases desire, hinders cognitive processing, and

decreases communication willingness. The authors acknowledged the FLCAS as a crucial instrument for determining anxiety levels and underlined the necessity of focused interventions. Furthermore, studies suggest that graduate students face unique interaction between academic identity development and language anxiety. As noted by Duff (2010) postgraduate students frequently manage several identities, including those of scholars, professionals and language users, while also proving themselves as valid members of academic communities. Hyland (2009) adds that speaking and writing in an academic setting demands the adoption of extremely specific language and rhetorical norms, which can increase anxiety and self-doubt. Mastering these demands requires not only verbal proficiency but also identity negotiation and emotional resilience for many graduate students, especially in multilingual or marginalized situations. Kazakhstan presents itself in a multilingual academic context that may intensify institutional expectations for English-medium publications and oral defenses. For example master's degree students are obliged to publish two manuscripts in journals, and as well conduct a study for their masters defence. Therefore, there is a need for more research on the relationship between FLSA and academic concept, especially to long term career development and scholarly activities. Moreover, graduate students need not only scaffolding, but psychological support systems like mentorship programs and individualized anxiety interventions to help them throughout the process.

Particular social and institutional elements that contribute to foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) has been brought to light by recent research conducted in Kazakhstan. Kadyrbayeva (2022) by investigating anxiety during speaking tasks among EFL students found that learners often feel discomfort due to fear of making mistakes and lack of confidence. Similarly, Kenzhetayeva (2024) carried out a qualitative case study at a university in Kazakhstan

that uses English as its medium of instruction and found that peer pressure and teacher-student relationships had an impact on students' motivation and anxiety. Results indicate that learners' motivation to participate in academic communication is influenced by social-emotional factors rather than language difficulties. Tajik, Odanova, and Moldabaeva (2022) noted that limited academic literacy and challenges interacting with English academic literature. This results in a decrease in confidence and those students tend to avoid high-level communication activities.

Practical example comes from Kazakh-American Free University (2025), a school-based CBT training program that was implemented to help students in managing academic anxiety. Training includes cognitive techniques such as Socratic questioning and the ETER model (Event, Thought, Emotion, Reaction), presenting how anxiety management techniques may be used in higher education in Kazakhstan.

Furthermore, Beisenbayeva (2020) explored how secondary school pupils used their native tongue (Kazakh or Russian) in English classes and discovered that students tend to avoid using English for the reason that they were anxious about being judged. Despite the pre-university setting, the results show more general trends on how peer judgment and classroom dynamics affect FLSA.

All collectively, those studies illustrate linguistic complexity, institutional expectations and sociocultural norms that Kazakhstani students experience. They also draw attention to the growing value of context-specific tactics and cognitive behavioral therapy in tackling these issues.

## 2.7 Identified Research Gaps

Despite extensive research that has been done, a significant gap into our understanding of foreign language speaking anxiety together with management techniques exists, especially among master's degree students. The majority of existing literature focuses on undergraduate students ( Aydin, 2008; Yasuda & Nabei, 2018; Yu, 2024), overlooking the unique academic, cognitive and professional demands that are faced by the graduate students. The disbalance is particularly noticeable in underrepresented situations like Kazakhstan, where sociocultural and educational factors may influence students' anxiety level. Due to advanced language demands that graduate students face including professional networking, publishing and sharing research via academic presentations, speaking anxiety may be exacerbated. According to Gkonou (2017) and Woodrow (2006) advanced communicative demands, such as academic conferences, publishing and engaging professionally add pressure for graduate students.

Moreover, despite the fact that various intervention strategies, including cognitive-behavioral approaches, have shown promising results in reducing anxiety (Baroi & Muhammad, 2024; Jin, Dewaele, & MacIntyre, 2021), still little attention has been given to their application for postgraduate populations, especially in a non-Western educational context like Kazakhstan.

A one-size-fits-all approach might not always adequately address context-dependent and identity-related aspects of FLSA, which can deeply influence and shape emotional experiences with language learning ( Elahi Shirvan & Taherian, 2021; Yashima, 2002 ). This highlights the need for contextually grounded, graduate level research into the efficacy of cognitive-behavioral interventions in mitigating foreign language speaking anxiety.

## CHAPTER 3

### Methodology

#### 3.1 Research design

In order to explore the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral interventions in reducing foreign language speaking anxiety, study adopts a mixed-method case study. To provide comprehensive results of interventions, both quantitative and qualitative data will be employed. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), noted that this combination allows the use of each method's advantages, namely statistical generalizability and contextual depth.

The case study approach is particularly suitable for this research, since it enables thorough context rich investigation of a complex phenomenon within real-life context. Intervention program was grounded to the three core areas, such as cognitive restructuring, exposure therapy and relaxation techniques, that are well-established principles of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) .

#### 3.2 Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select thirty master's degree students from different universities of Kazakhstan, including private as well as public institutions. In order to be qualified for the research participants had to meet three main requirements: (1) be currently enrolled in a teaching English as a foreign language TEFL program or any other related field as a master's student; (2) have experience with speaking English in a academic settings; Since all the participants were over 18 years old, they agreed to participate in this study totally voluntarily, signed informed consent forms, and were aware of research purpose, procedures and ethical guarantee of confidentiality and withdrawal. Participants include 21 single private university students, and 9 from single public universities, due to the fact that anxiety level can be

strongly connected to educational background, and teaching conditions (Yan & Horwitz, 2008; Liu & Jackson, 2011). Participants' age ranged from 21 to 25, 25 female and 5 male participants, with the English language level B2-C1.

**Table 1**

*Demographic information of participants (N=30)*

Category	Description	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
University Type	Private University	21	70%
	Public University	9	30%
Age Range	21–25 years old	30	100%
Gender	Female	25	83.3%
	Male	5	16.7%
English Proficiency	B2–C1 level (CEFR)	30	100%

*Note.* Table represents the background information about participants.

### **3.3 Data collection tool**

**3.3.1 Quantitative tool.** Before and after intervention, participants' anxiety level was measured using Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) which was developed by Horwitz and Cope (1986). In studies on second language acquisition this 33-item questionnaire is trusted and well-known for its reliability and validity. It uses a 5-point Likerts scale from (1=strongly agree to 5=strongly disagree), where higher total score indicates stronger anxiety when using a foreign language. Questions focus on common sources of anxiety, such as

communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety, that many language learners can relate to.

In this study FLCAS was administered anonymously both pre-intervention and post-intervention. Rather than analyzing responses individually, they were analyzed collectively, in order to identify any overall changes in anxiety level within the group. Previous studies have shown that the FLCAS is a highly reliable tool, with internal consistency around  $\alpha = .93$  (Horwitz et al., 1986; Tóth, 2018), supporting the use of the tool within this study.

**3.3.2 Qualitative tool.** As a complementary tool, the study employed semi-structured interviews to gain insights into participants' personal experience. Following interventions, participants were asked to take part in individual interviews that were conducted online and in English language. A flexible nature of open-ended questions served as the framework for these discussions, allowing participants to express and explain their feelings and opinions on group intervention programs, any improvements on reduced speaking anxiety and overall increase in speaking confidence.

Interview questions encouraged participants to reflect on specific moments during interventions, when they believed to make progress or faced difficulties. Additionally, they were asked to share their thoughts on the usefulness and effectiveness of various intervention techniques that were presented, including cognitive restructuring, relaxation and exposure therapy. Interview also focused on the overall impression of interventions, identifying what they thought helped them to feel less anxious and what they thought could be improved.

Interviews added personal stories and more meaning behind the raw numerical data. By using the combination of group therapy with individual interview, study provided a more complete understanding of how and why interventions might have been successful. This blended

data improved studies overall analysis, by providing the answer on not just “whether” anxiety was reduced, but also “how” students felt about this shift in real terms.

### **3.4 Intervention design and procedure**

Cognitive-behavioral interventions were implemented over a period of three weeks, and consisted of three structured sessions, each of them lasting approximately 50-60 minutes. Due to the fact that participants were students of different universities, all sessions were conducted online via Zoom platform. Interventions targeted three main areas of CBT: cognitive restructuring, behavioral exposure and relaxation techniques.

A consistent structure was followed, to ensure predictability and build trust among participants:

1. Brief warm-up activity
2. Introduction of core CBT strategy for a session
3. Guided group activity
4. Group reflection and discussion
5. Homework assignment to encourage application and reflection

#### ***Session 1: Understanding anxiety and cognitive restriction***

**Goal:** To introduce students with the nature of anxiety, relation to foreign language speaking, and to equip them with strategies for identifying and reshaping negative thoughts.

**Content:** This session begins with explanation on how thoughts influence emotions and behavior, based on Beck’s cognitive model and Ellis’s ABC framework. Students were introduced to the Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) cycle and common cognitive biases that intensify anxiety, including:

**Catastrophizing:** “If I make a mistake, I will be humiliated.” -imagining the worst case scenario.

**Mind reading:** “everyone is judging me”- assuming you know what others think, usually negatively.

**All-or-nothing thinking:** “If i’m not perfect, I’m a failure”- seeing things in black and white

**Activity:** Students first completed a Thought Monitoring Sheet, where they reflected on language learning situations that triggered speaking anxiety in them. They were asked to describe the context, identify the emotions that they experienced, note physical symptoms (racing heartbeat or shaky hands), and at the end write down the automatic thought that came to mind. This helps them to be more aware of the specific triggers and patterns of anxiety. Building on that, students used a CBT 3-column worksheet, where they filled in specific situations, automatic negative thought, and practiced formulating specific rational reframes, which were more realistic. These tools helped students to develop self-awareness and begin to face negative thought patterns in speaking anxiety.

**Homework:** Throughout the week, participants were asked to monitor at least three anxious speaking thoughts during the week, and to replace them, by applying supportive self-talk. As well, they were encouraged to note any changes that are observed.

**Rationale:** Session aimed to help students to recognize and challenge irrational beliefs, by providing practical tools for a more balanced and constructive way of thinking. Beck (2011)

showed that addressing this kind of thought pattern, which is known as cognitive distortion, can significantly lower anxiety.

### ***Session 2: Graduated exposure and confidence-building***

**Goal:** This session was implemented to help students gradually face speaking situations that tend to increase anxiety level. The idea was to reduce avoidance and build confidence via structured and low-pressure environment

**Content:** Students were introduced with the “speaking exposure hierarchy”- a CBT technique that breaks down anxiety-induced speaking tasks into more manageable ones. Students ranked common speaking situations from least to most stressful, following they start from easier tasks, gradually working their way up. This helps them gain a clear sense of control, as they build confidence and tolerance over time. Based on exposure therapy of Barlow (2002), it promotes steady progress through repeated and low-stakes activities.

Group also explored common avoidance behaviours, like staying silent, or skip participation, which serves as a temporary solution, but over time keeps anxiety going. For the reason that, students instead of confronting anxiety and irrational fears, they on the contrary strengthen the belief that speaking is humiliating or harmful. To boost confidence, they participated in visualization exercises, where mentally students successfully completed any speaking task they were afraid of. This practice provides students with the opportunity to see themselves handling the issue effectively before a real situation occurs, which has been shown to support self-efficacy and reduce performance anxiety (Bandura, 1997: Chambless & Ollendick, 2001).

**Activity:** Each participant was asked to create a “Speaking Ladder”, listing five tasks that usually made them anxious, starting from simple things like greeting classmates, to a more complex task like giving an oral presentation. After that, the first two steps were discussed in a Zoom breakout room, giving a low-pressure environment to try them out. At the end the group came back together to reflect and discuss feelings, physical and emotional reaction as well as any changes in confidence.

**Homework:** Students were encouraged to continue climbing their Speaking Ladder outside of the sessions, reflecting on what was hard and easier for them.

**Rationale:** The core idea for this session was drawn from CBT technique - gradual exposure, that helps students to gradually face their fears by practicing from small manageable steps (Barlow, 2002). By working through speaking challenges in supportive and low stress environments students were enabled to rethink how they view those situations and build confidence, since they realize that they are more capable than they had believed.

### ***Session 3: Stress management and skill integration***

**Goal:** The aim of this session was to help students to manage physical symptoms of anxiety, by providing them with practical self-regulation tools. It also gives them the opportunity to review what was learned in previous sessions, and prepares them for future independent use.

**Content:** This session focused on the physiological side of anxiety, where they understand the body's response to stress, and how it interferes with speaking performance. Body reactions include- increased heart rate, shallow breathing, muscle tension, or blank mind, therefore addressing those challenges is a crucial part of the CBT model. Moreover, participants were introduced to calming techniques:

- ***Diaphragmatic breathing:*** Deep and slow breathing, which helps to signal safety to the nervous system and reduce stress.
- ***Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR):*** Process of intentional tightening of a specific group of muscles (shoulders, hands or jaw) for a few seconds, then releasing the tension while focusing on the sense of relaxation.
- ***Grounding techniques:*** Sensory based strategies (5-4-3-2-1 method) where participants name 5 things they can see, 4 they can touch, 3 they can hear, 2 they can smell and 1 they can taste. Help students to feel more grounded and be present at the moment, before stressful events.

***Activity:*** Students participated in an audio-guided PMR session. Then “Body scan map” was used, to identify the areas where they feel anxiety during speaking tasks. Helping them to increase body awareness and give insights into personal stress patterns. Session ended with group reflection and takeaways from the entire intervention program.

***Homework:*** As final assignment students were encouraged to practice these strategies that worked for them the best, in work or academic settings. As well they were asked to fill out the last questionnaire and participated in the last individual survey.

***Rationale:*** While anxiety starts from the mind, it is often felt in the body, therefore this session addressed physical symptoms, by teaching students simple practical strategies to be calm and focused. Strategies like deep breathing and PMR are proven to be effective in anxiety reduction (Kocovski et al., 2011).

### ***3.4.1 Data collection procedure***

*The whole data collection process lasted approximately 3 weeks:*

By the beginning of the first week students were briefed on the intervention structure, confidentiality and voluntary nature of the study, then completed the FLCAS pre-test via Google Forms.

At the end of the first week till third week, students participated in intervention sessions. All sessions were delivered online via Zoom platform, in order to be practical, since participants were from different universities.

After the final third week session, students were given some time to complete the FLCAS post-test and to schedule individual interviews, which were also conducted through the Zoom platform. Interview recordings were transcribed via otteri.ai and then coded for themes. Participants were assigned an alphabetic letter 'P' and number to remain anonymous.

## **3.5 Data analysis procedure**

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods, therefore data analysis techniques were designed to align with the mixed-method case study approach.

***3.5.1 Quantitative data analysis.*** Quantitative data was collected using Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which were administered before and after interventions. Since questionnaires were completed anonymously, responses were analyzed on the group level. Hence, descriptive statistics were calculated based on participants responses to key anxiety-related items, before and after interventions. In specific, the percentage of people who

agreed or strongly agreed with high-anxiety statements were compared across pre- and post-test questionnaires, allowing to track changes in speaking anxiety patterns at the group level. For comparison, such items as communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test-related anxiety were prioritized. Consequently, reduction in agreement rates were interpreted as a positive change.

**3.5.2 Qualitative data analysis.** Qualitative data derived from semi-structured interviews with all participants after the intervention program has ended. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. After that, using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model, responses were grouped into key patterns. Coding included deductive (CBT-aligned) and inductive (participants driven) elements. Themes are expected to reflect how students' thinking patterns, emotional responses and confidence level changes during interventions and how they are planning to use them in future learning context.. In order to explore how participants engaged personally with interventions, both individual stories and shared experiences were examined.

### **3.6 Ethical considerations**

Before the data collection process, a self-assessment form was filled, since participants above the age of 18, approval was obtained from the ethics committee. Participants were informed of the purpose, voluntary nature and confidentiality of the study, and consent form distributed before the pre-test. All identifying information was excluded from the analysis, and anonymity was obtained. Participants had the right to withdraw at any stage of the study. The intervention program was prepared using gentle CBI techniques that are safe and manageable, supporting emotional well-being of participants.

## CHAPTER 4

### Results

#### 4.1 Quantitative results

**4.1.1 Descriptive item-level comparison.** To assess the impact of cognitive-behavioral interventions on foreign language speaking anxiety, participants completed FLCAS before and after interventions. Since all responses were submitted anonymously, the analysis was made on the group level with the key anxiety related items.

#### Figure 1

*Agreement rate formula*

$$\text{Agreement Rate (\%)} = \left( \frac{\text{Number of students who selected 4 or 5}}{\text{Total number of participants}} \right) \times 100$$

*Note.* Formula represents the percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed (4-5) with anxiety related statements, and was used to calculate data before and after interventions.

On the table below, the percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed with selected FLCAS items at both stages are presented. These items were selected according to their relevance to core anxiety dimensions, including communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluations and emotional distress.

**Table 2**

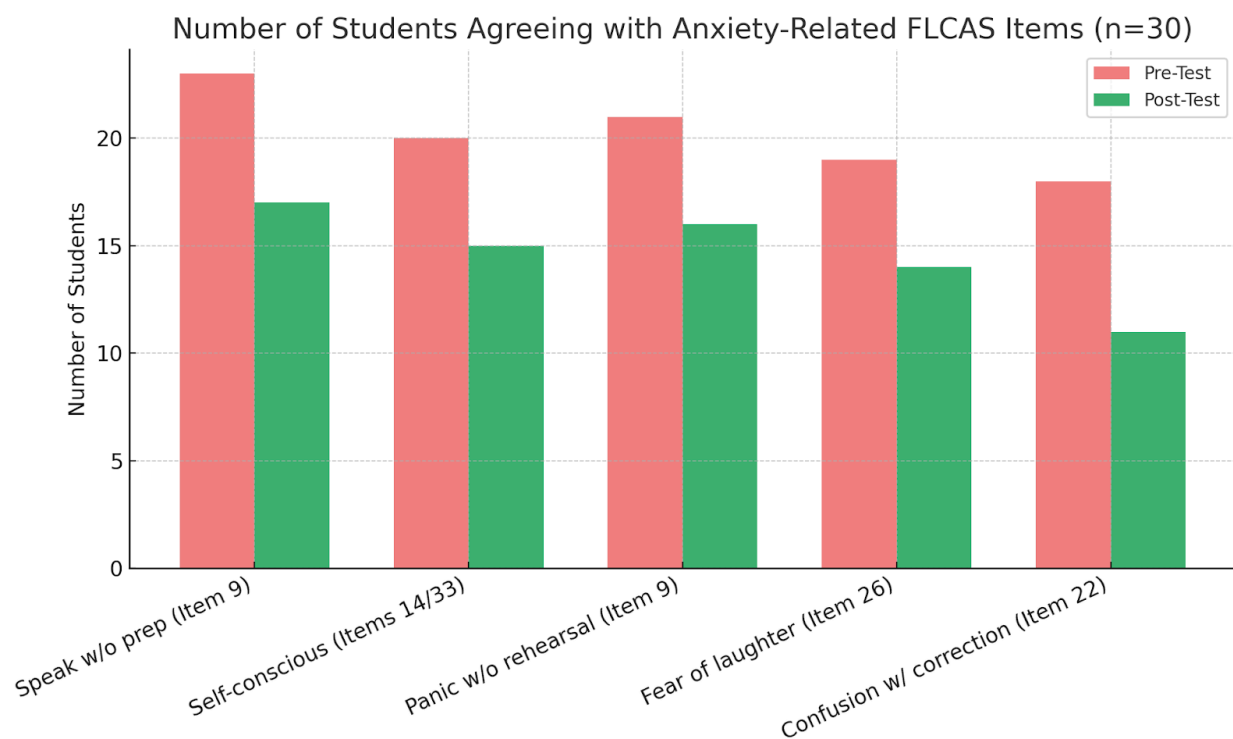
*FLCAS items pre- post-test, with number of students and changes*

FLCAS item (with number)	Pre-test	Post-test	Change
I get nervous when the teacher asks me to speak without preparation ( <i>Item 9</i> )	76% 23p.	57% 17p.	-19%
I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of others  ( <i>Items 14/33</i> )	68% 20p.	50% 15p.	-18%
I start to panic when I have to speak without rehearsal  ( <i>Item 9</i> )	71% 21p.	53% 16p.	-18%
I worry about being laughed at when I speak English ( <i>Item 26</i> )	65% 19p.	46% 14p.	-18%
I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting ( <i>Item 22</i> )	59% 18p.	38% 11p.	-21%

*Note.* Results presented pre- post-test with number of students and percentage of change.

**Figure 2**

*Comparison of Pre- and Post-test agreement rates on anxiety related items*



*Note.* Shows pre- post-test agreement on key anxiety related items.

The most significant improvement was observed in participants' reaction to classroom correction, with a 21% reduction in agreement. Notable decreases were also recorded involving fear of public speaking and unprepared participation. All things considered, findings show consistent reduction of anxiety after intervention.

**4.1.2 Observation from overall item trends.** Intervention program had a moderate yet meaningful effect on students' foreign language speaking anxiety level. Such items as fear of peer judgment (Item 26), spontaneous speaking (Item 9) and discomfort with correction (Item 22) showed reduction between 18% to 21%. These

changes suggest that participants started to feel more emotionally secure, knowing how to handle speaking tasks.

Instead of examining individual score changes, the analysis emphasized shifts on the group-level. Findings support the idea that short term interventions such as thought reframing, gradual exposure and relaxation techniques can contribute to anxiety reduction.

## **4.2 Qualitative results**

In order to complement statistical data, qualitative data was analyzed from 30 post-intervention semi-structured interviews. Four major themes emerged from the thematic analysis, reflecting on students' perception toward the interventions and its effect on their speaking anxiety. Where relevant, different university backgrounds were mentioned, revealing how institutional and educational backgrounds may influence students' personal experience.

### ***Theme 1: Better awareness of thinking patterns***

Many participants noted being more aware of their inner dialog during speaking tasks. Several students reported that now they are able to recognize negative thoughts, such as assuming other people are judging or expecting to perform perfectly.

*“I realized that I used to think that people were judging me whenever I made a mistake... Now I catch myself at that point and think ‘Is that actually true, or its just me?’” (Participants P14 )*

*“Before speaking I don’t know why, but I imagine the worst scenario, where everyone laughs at me and then I panic and forget my words. But after the session I’ve learned to pause and think more realistically, instead of anxiety take over ” (Participant P20)*

*Moreover, participant P3 noted that “... before hearing from you about speaking anxiety and its symptoms, I really didn’t know that my shaky hands and voice it’s the sign of anxiety, I was amazed, since I thought it’s usual reaction ”*

Interestingly, students from public universities were hesitant to speak, since their previous learning experience, such noted as negative evaluation from teachers and harsh corrections, were the reason for that, while private university students more frequently described internar pressure and perfectionism.

### ***Theme 2: Building confidence through gradual practice***

Participants highlighted the use of exposure hierarchy, practicing small steps made them feel less overwhelmed and brought the sense of accomplishment.

*“At first I didn’t even wanted to unmute myself, but step by step I felt more comfortable”  
(Participants P26)*

The use of breakout rooms for speaking practice was helpful, as it provided a safe space where mistakes felt less risky

*“I don't like speech in general but practicing in breakout rooms made it feel less impossible anymore... ” shared Participant P2*

Moreover, some participants commented on how the program created a supportive atmosphere, in comparison to previous classroom experience.

*Participant P30 shared “Usually we are not encouraged to speak, only when we expect to answer, but generally we avoid speaking in class unless we are not asked about it... But here it was really interesting and I felt safe to try ”*

Participants from private university shared that they have strong academic background, but it helped with confidence

*“We speak in English a lot, but it always academic- reading articles, writing different sort of essays, but this was a bit different, it (sessions) helped me feel more confident actually speaking, not just knowing the language” (Participant P3)*

*“After you explained that avoidance behavior is temporary and over time it can get worse, I reconsidered my silent behaviour, since I know the language well, I just didn't felt comfortable speaking ” (Participant P18)*

Another idea emerged was “safe risk-taking” , participants highlighted the opportunity to try speaking tasks without judgment and any fears, increasing their willingness to participate.

*As participant P28 summarized “More I practice, less it feels like a test, and more like just talking”*

Overall, the intervention structure provided students with a clear sense of direction, showed them that confidence can be gained through small, consistent steps.

***Theme 3: Using physical strategies to stay calm***

Participants mentioned positive impact of relaxation techniques, that were introduced at final session, for many these tools provided something they had not previously considered using:

*“When starting to feel anxious I try breathing exercise, and sometimes to get myself distracted I try 5-1 method, now it helps me a lot, even on a day-to-day basis”*

*Participant P7*

Some of them reflected on how they overlooked the tension they carried:

*“I realized how tense my jaw and teeth were before speaking task, now I can identify it so try muscle relaxation” Participant P29*

This theme was prominent among those who reported physical symptoms pre-intervention, including shaky hands, racing heartbeat and shortness of breath when speaking in front of class. These made them interpret anxiety as something overwhelming and uncomfortable.

Through these activities students learned that symptoms can be managed, even in a small way. In some cases, students began using these techniques beyond the language classroom, some tried them before oral presentations in another non-English class. Suggesting that interventions were helpful in general stressful speaking situations.

To sum up, students shifted their understanding and response to their anxiety. Rather than dealing with overwhelming anxiety triggers, they chose to face them with practical tools.

***Theme 4: Continue use of CBT techniques***

Some participants expressed interest in using these strategies beyond the classroom, for personal use in various different situations, and some of them were interested in using them for their own teaching experience.

*“I feel like it's useful not just only for English class, I can use it in any other future presentations, since we finished education process, but our dissertation defense is going to be soon, so I have some tools to try” Participant P5*

*“It's not that I'm not anxious anymore, but I have a way to deal with it, that's the difference.”*

*Participant P30*

*“Know I think that it can be useful for my students as well, I teach school students, and I would like to equip them with tools that they can use too” Participant 7*

Interestingly, participant P27 shared their experience from undergraduate years at public university, in comparison to graduate years in private institution:

*“I'm not sure if it's just me that is a grown up now, or its the institution that affected my anxiety, because while being an undergrad I avoided speaking because our teachers were way more strict and I kinda feared them, but here at my MA the atmosphere feel more supportive which makes it easier to express myself ”*

### **4.3 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative findings**

Qualitative data was supported by quantitative, demonstrating alignment between anxiety reduction and participants' reports in improved awareness, behaviour and self-regulation. The combination of both data increases credibility of the study.

Not only measurable changes were presented, but as well personal transformations were described. Moreover qualitative data provided explanation to numerical data, on how and why these strategies were effective.

## CHAPTER 5

### Conclusion

The study aimed to examine the efficacy of cognitive-behavioral interventions specifically in reducing foreign language speaking anxiety among master's degree students. Postgraduate students of Kazakhstan are often assumed to be a linguistically confident group, but usually they are overlooked in anxiety-focusing language research. Despite advanced linguistic proficiency, many postgraduate students continue to experience speaking anxiety.

Study employed mixed-method case study, where qualitative and quantitative data demonstrated that FLSA is a significant barrier that even advanced learners face, as well as short-term structured interventions can lead to measurable reduction in anxiety level. Three week interventions aimed to address these challenges, based on core CBT principles: cognitive restructuring, gradual exposure and relaxation techniques.

Results of the study provide insights on both characteristics of the FLSA and potential strategies to mitigate such phenomenon. Quantitative results presented significant reduction in anxiety after the intervention program. The biggest improvement was seen in items related to spontaneous speaking, fear of public correction, and negative peer evaluation; such components were shown in literature as a core component of anxiety related to language. Results from FLCAS before and after intervention demonstrate group reduction in anxiety from 18-21% , particularly areas that involve unprepared speaking, fear of negative evaluation, and public correction were the most prominent. Brief three online sessions demonstrated reduction in anxiety level, highlighting the potential of CBIs in educational settings. Quantitative data further supported this finding, via semi-structured interviews that were further analyzed thematically,

revealed four main themes: increased awareness of negative or negative thinking patterns, improved emotional regulation, improved speaking confidence, and further use of those strategies in the real-world. Students self-reported data demonstrated improved self-awareness, sharing how they started to identify and challenge negative thoughts that were running through their minds before speaking. Noting how often their negative assumptions mismatched with reality, making anxiety worse. Cognitive-restructuring exercises helped to question those thoughts and replace them with more balanced and realistic ones. Experiencing those strategies with peers as well showed positive outcomes- knowing others felt the same made the process less isolating and more supportive. Therefore, gradually overwhelming situations become more and more manageable. What stood out the most was how students started to use those interventions outside of the classroom, some shared that they use breathing techniques to calm themselves before an important speech like dissertation defence or job interviews. While others described noticeable change in their own reaction in making mistakes. Instead of feeling embarrassed they started to see these moments as a natural part of learning. Shift was not about the language itself, it is a reflection of a deeper change, in how they viewed themselves. By learning to reshape their thoughts, they become less afraid of judgments and more open to growth. This mindset shift is exactly what cognitive behavioral strategies aim to achieve.

While findings are promising, such limitations are noted, small sample size, even though participants came from different universities the results may not be generalized to all master's degree students of Kazakhstan or beyond. The duration of the programme is also short term, therefore the positive effect of the program is unknown. Further studies should explore longer intervention and richer sample size.

Despite these limitations, study offers a starting point for further research and practical application. Highlighting the value of integrating CBIs into academic settings. Educators that are equipped to understand and address speaking anxiety, can help to create a more supportive learning environment.

Study shows that FLSA is a real challenge, even for the advanced learners, therefore tailored support can help students to gain confidence and remain emotionally stable.

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## Appendix A

### Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale

*Horwitz, E.K., Horwitz, M.B., & Cope, J. (1986)*

**33 Items – 5-point Likert Scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree)**

Cronbach's alpha = .93

1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class.
2. I don't worry about making mistakes in language class.
3. I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class.
4. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language.
5. It wouldn't bother me at all to take more foreign language classes.
6. During language class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.
7. I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am.
8. I am usually at ease during tests in my language class.
9. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class.
10. I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class.
11. I don't understand why some people get so upset over foreign language classes.
12. In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.
13. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class.
14. I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers.
15. I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.
16. Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it.
17. I often feel like not going to my language class.
18. I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class.

19. I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.
20. I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in language class.
21. The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get.
22. I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for language class.
23. I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do.
24. I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students.
25. Language class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.
26. I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes.
27. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class.
28. When I'm on my way to language class, I feel very sure and relaxed.
29. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says.
30. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak a foreign language.
31. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language.
32. I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language.
33. I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.

## Appendix B

### Pre--Test Survey Questions

1. Age
2. Gender
3. University (public/private)
4. Do you experience anxiety when speaking English?
5. Have you ever learned about strategies to manage speaking anxiety?

## Appendix C

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. How did you feel about speaking English before the intervention?
2. What strategies from the sessions did you find most helpful?
3. Did your feelings about speaking English change after the sessions?
4. Can you describe a moment when you applied something from the program?
5. How do you plan to manage speaking anxiety in the future?

## Appendix D

### Intervention Worksheets and Tools

#### 1. Thought Monitoring Sheet

Use this sheet to identify situations that triggered speaking anxiety and reflect on your thoughts and feelings.

Situation	Emotion(s)	Physical Symptoms	Automatic Thought

#### 2. CBT 3-Column Worksheet

Practice cognitive restructuring by identifying negative thoughts and reframing them.

Situation	Negative Automatic Thought	Rational Reframe

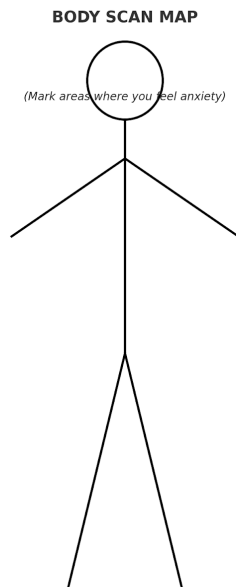
#### 3. Speaking Ladder Template

List five speaking tasks, from least to most anxiety-inducing.

Step	Task Description	Anxiety Level (1–5)
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		

#### 4. Body Scan Map

Use the body outline below to mark areas where you physically feel anxiety before or during speaking.



#### 5. Relaxation Strategy Summary

*Diaphragmatic Breathing:*

Breathe slowly and deeply into your belly for 4 counts, hold for 4, and exhale for 4.

*Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR):*

Tense each muscle group for 5 seconds, then release. Start from your toes and move upward.

*Grounding Technique (5-4-3-2-1 Method):*

Identify: 5 things you see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you hear, 2 things you smell, 1 thing you taste.

## Appendix E

### Consent form

Consent Form for students' participation in a research study entitled as

**“ Efficacy of Cognitive-Behavioral Interventions in Reducing Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety: A Case Study of Master's Degree Students”.**

This study is being conducted as a part of a master's dissertation for SDU University.

**Dear Participant,**

You are invited to contribute to this study. Thank you in advance for taking the time to read this information leaflet. Please take a few moments to fill it in and send it back to me by email: [ijaksybekova@bk.ru](mailto:ijaksybekova@bk.ru).

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral interventions (CBIs) in reducing foreign language speaking anxiety among master's degree students. It also aims to explore students' personal experiences with these strategies.

#### **Participant Selection**

You were invited to take part in this study because you are a master's student specializing in teaching foreign languages. A total of approximately 30 participants will be involved. Your participation is voluntary and greatly appreciated.

Please note, this is not a test and so there are no right or wrong answers. I am interested in your personal opinion and would like to request that you answer honestly.

**Confidentiality:** Any information obtained for this study through which you might be identified will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Your answers will be anonymized in the reporting of the results. Raw data will be maintained in a secure location and no identifying information will be used in the final dissertation or subsequent publications. No one, other than my supervisor, will have access to the raw data. All audio recordings, video recordings, and other documents, with the exception of the consent forms, will not be shared with any third party at the conclusion of this study.

**Refusal/Withdrawal:** Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision, whether or not you decided to participate, will not affect your future relations with SDU University.

Furthermore, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without any further commitments.

**Contact:** If you have any questions about this study, you can contact me, Primary Researcher(s): Jaxybekova Inkar, +7 747-492-67-97