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## FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY IN EMI: NARRATIVE EXPERIENCES OF KAZAKHSTANI UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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**Abstract.** Foreign language anxiety is still a significant problem faced by learners in language learning. While researchers have studied this topic quantitatively, the number of studies that have analyzed how anxiety manifests itself in students' narrative stories remains small. This study aims to explore how FLA is interpreted by students through their narratives about their language learning using a narrative inquiry framework. The main thrusts of this study were to identify the key 5 narrative constructs, such as redemption, contamination, agency, communion, and meaning-making, and to compare self-identified higher and lower levels of English proficiency. A narrative inquiry design was used in the study, supported with students' structured narrative interviews from one Kazakhstani University in an EMI environment. A total of 22 students were interviewed, and their interviews were analyzed using thematic codes. The results show that students with higher language proficiency showed higher agency in their stories. However, contaminative tendencies were evident in participants of both levels, with lower levels showing this more often. Among the main problems that the students faced, problems with speaking, grammar difficulties, and public performances were identified. At the same time, support from teachers, peers, and relatives helped to keep students motivated. In conclusion, the study highlights the complex, story-based nature of FLA in the context of EMI, showing that anxiety is not simply a function of language proficiency, but is shaped by self-perception, emotional reactions, and social support. Theoretical significance of the research is that it applies the narrative identity framework to FLA, allowing a deeper exploration of this topic by identifying psychological aspects that may arise in language learning. Practically, our research suggests that teachers could create a supportive environment for students, where constructive feedback and peer collaboration are present, which, in consequence, may help to manifest more redemptive tendencies in learners' narratives.

**Keywords:** foreign language anxiety, English as a foreign language, English as a medium of instruction, narrative identity, student experiences, higher education, peer collaborative, narrative constructs

### Introduction

It has become more available to investigate foreign language learners'

psychological struggles as well as their academic performance in the schooling environment. Despite the well-established traditional approaches towards Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and types of anxiety that determine whether a student is predisposed to anxiety traits or situational anxiety, the research calls for anxiety to be investigated as a more dynamic construct where a learner's context and environment are intertwined [1]. There are contextual and socio-cultural factors that can play a contributing role, such as ethnic background, the intensity of English language lessons, the duration of foreign language studies, age, as well as the connection to their own first language, being only some of the mentioned factors. It is suggested to highlight "aspects of change" [2, p. 3] that influence a student's perception of the language, behavioral changes, and the effectiveness of the language acquisition process, rather than concluding FLA to be a static and unchangeable attribute.

Various studies have been conducted, which, as a result, revealed that each student's unique language learning story and the personal experiences followed may influence a level of their foreign language anxiety both in positive or negative ways [3]. In fact, a clinical psychologist McAdams has created five narratives to attribute anxiety levels, where a life narrative has been found as one of the proposing principles and is defined as "a person's internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose" [4, p. 233]. Further research has adapted narrative identities' analysis on a foreign language learner's narrative in order to construct a detailed analysis of FLA and its effects on the student's learning experience. It is thought to help foreign language teachers address in-class anxiety and create a more positively charged learning experience by structuring relatively painful memories "into constructive narratives" [2, p. 63] to alleviate anxiety levels or obtain a redemptive effect. The narrative identity study applies five variables, such as redemption, contamination, agency, communion, and meaning-making, and each of them are attributed to certain thoughts and feelings that have been observed as effective in coping with a negative language learning experience or making sense of a traumatic event that has occurred. In an English as a foreign language classroom, creating narrative identities could help address past experiences that have been contributing to certain insecurity, high anxiety, struggles to maintain effective learning experience and participation in a classroom's social life. Students who have created narrative stories or "unified narrative" [2, p. 57] were found to have lower anxiety levels and high in cohesion, compared to stories that lacked cohesion which predicted a student's high anxiety levels.

In Kazakhstan, university level programs which are being held in EMI (English as a medium of instruction) context are distinctive for the multilingual background they revolve around: Kazakhstani students are at most bilingual or multilingual with Kazakh or Russian as dominant instructional languages before they applied to the university [5]. In the face of multiple factors, such as educational background and proficiency levels of students, a correlation has

been found in foreign language anxiety levels. For instance, learners who have graduated from specialized schools presented significantly lower levels of FLA compared to students from a mainstream schooling background [6]. Thus, one of the remaining problems in EMI is related to the educational gap between high school and university-level programs, which might hinder successful learning in a foreign language when students apply to the EMI university unprepared. Accordingly, Kulgildinova and others highlighted the need for multilingual learning enduring as a continuous process during Kazakhstani students' significant transition from secondary to higher education [7]. As a result, it can increase students' anxiety levels due to psychological factors and difficulties related to idea generation and increase their reliance on a teacher support [8]. Some additional factors that have been found associated are challenges to keep up with the study load and to perform in English in front of their peers. Considering the effectiveness of EMI on student language proficiency and the trilingual policy Kazakhstan is attributed to, it is found crucial to provide educational context that decreases students' language anxiety and reinforces scaffolded and, thus, a positive learning experience. This paper outlined 3 research questions, where R1 and R2 aim to determine how EMI university-level students' narrative stories could provide insight about challenges Kazakhstani students face in terms of the language learning process and its maintenance:

RQ1. How do university students with different levels of English show agency when talking about language anxiety in EMI?

RQ 2. How does studying in EMI affect whether students tell more redemptive or contaminated stories about learning English?

RQ3. What role do other people (teachers, peers, family, native speakers) play in their personal stories of language learning anxiety or success?

The R3 is posed in order to gain a deeper understanding of whether social supports can positively affect a student's FLA and benefit the language learning process throughout narratives, which could further help educators and educational organizations establish supportive educational policies and courses.

### **Materials and methods**

This research employed a mixed approach method design to thoroughly examine the relationship between FLA and students' narrative identity stories. The study integrated a narrative enquiry approach, which is a qualitative method that focuses on personal stories as data. The main aim of this study is to investigate how university students in Kazakhstan experience Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) while studying in English as the Medium of Instruction. Semi-structured narrative interviews were used to encourage participants to reflect on important moments from their journeys of learning English for data collection purposes. In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted using the Language Learning Story Interview (LLSI), adapted by Hiver et al. [9], designed to explore narrative identity in the context of second language acquisition.

For coding criteria, five key narrative constructs were applied from the narrative identity framework developed by McAdams and McLean [10]:

- Agency-the degree to which students demonstrate autonomy and control in their journeys of language learning.
- Communion-the degree to which students experience interpersonal connection and emphasize support and caring.
- Redemption-the transformation of a negative experience into a positive outcome.
- Contamination- the transformation of a positive experience into a negative outcome.
- Meaning-making-the extent to which students learn something or extract insights from their experiences.

Each participant's interview was divided into 8 scenes, where 5 of them were coded and rated on a scale of 0-1 based on the absence, partial intensity, or strong intensity of the above-mentioned five variables. The numerical results, which described 5 scenes, namely a positive language-related experience, a negative language-related experience, a turning point in the English learning process, early positive, as well as early negative memories, were evaluated in Excel and then analyzed in Google Collab (Python). The remaining 3 scenes: regrets related to language learning experience; common problems in learning English; values and goals related to language learning were analyzed and visualized using NVivo to obtain a thorough analysis of the data.

### **Participants**

The study involved 22 students from one university in Kazakhstan, all of whom study in an English as a Medium of Instruction environment. All participants are undergraduate students aged 18 to 24. Participants were selected by purposive sampling and divided into two categories based on their self-reported CEFR English proficiency levels: Cluster A (n=12) comprised higher-level respondents (Intermediate to Advanced), while Cluster B (n=10) comprised lower-level users (Elementary to Intermediate). Participants represented diverse academic fields, including education, engineering, and social sciences. All participants were confident users of Kazakh and/or Russian, with English as their third language. The interviews were conducted in the language that the participants chose, which was the most convenient for them to use.

Ethical procedures were carefully followed throughout the study. Ethical requirements were met in the study by obtaining an informed consent form from participants, which clearly informed them of the study's purpose, participants' rights, and the voluntary nature of their participation and withdrawal. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained by research investigators throughout the entire process. The researchers were attentive to participants' potential emotional sensitivity, since they were asked to reflect on their personal stories. The supportive and comfortable atmosphere was maintained throughout all interviews.

## Results

### Quantitative results

To answer RQ1 regarding the influence of proficiency levels on language anxiety, comprehensive data were acquired to shed insight into the role of agency in the learners' English as a foreign language learning experience. Based on the narrative score analysis, agency was the most prevalent variable in higher-proficiency-level students (Cluster A), who showed a higher mean agency score (0.20) and median (0.19) compared to students in Cluster B with lower-proficiency levels, whose mean agency score was 0.13 and median was 0.00, respectively. Overall, Figure 1 presents 3 agency-predominant narratives in Cluster A respondents, additionally with one story that combined elements of redemption alongside agency traits; whereas there is only one agency-related narrative in lower-proficiency level students, additionally with another redemptive-agency story.

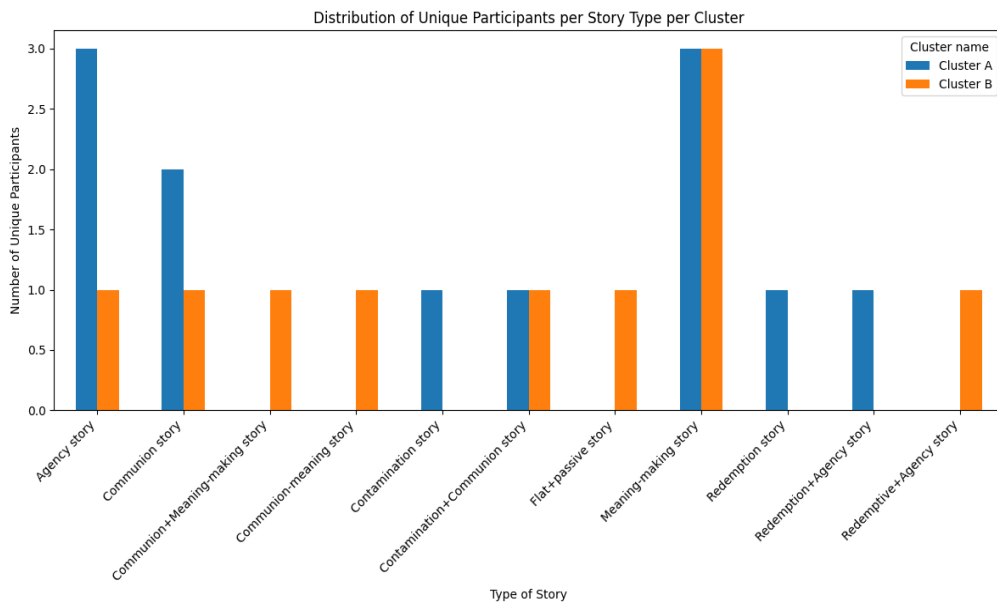


Figure 1 – Distribution of Participants based on their types of narratives

RQ2 investigated the role EMI has to play to result in respondents' redemptive or, on the contrary, contaminative variables within their narrative stories. Nevertheless, no distinctive trend toward more redemptive narratives was observed among higher proficiency level students, as both clusters showed slightly higher mean Contamination scores (Cluster A: 0.17, Cluster B: 0.19) than Redemption scores (Cluster A: 0.12, Cluster B: 0.14). As a result, the participants presented the predisposition to contaminative rather than redemptive characteristics when narrating their experiences as English learners in English-mediated universities across all proficiency levels. Additionally, the analysis of the

following three scenes, mainly the most significant problem the respondents have faced, their values, as well as their outlook onto their whole language journeys concluded that contamination remained the dominant characteristic in lower-proficiency-level students, as presented in Figure 2, compared to redemptive traits.

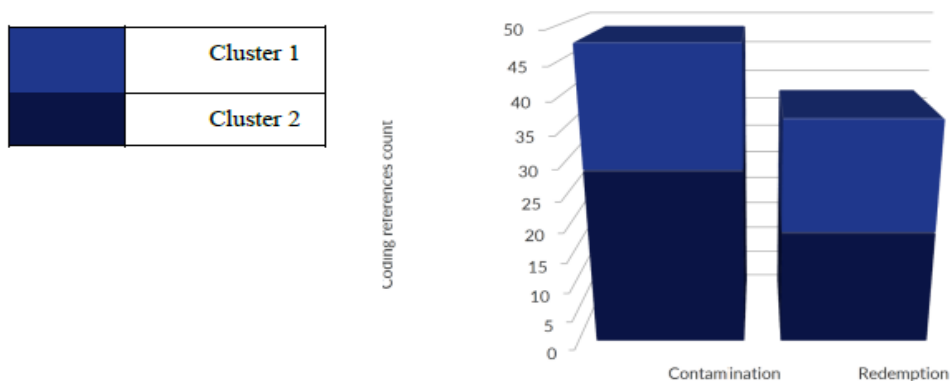


Figure 2 – Comparison of redemptive and contaminative variables

### Qualitative results

To gain a thorough understanding of what might have caused the trend into contaminative characteristics in learners’ narratives, a list of problems was identified. In summary, speaking difficulties, public speaking difficulties, as well as grammar-related difficulties have been identified as the top three most significant problems throughout the respondents’ language learning stories in both clusters (Figure 3).

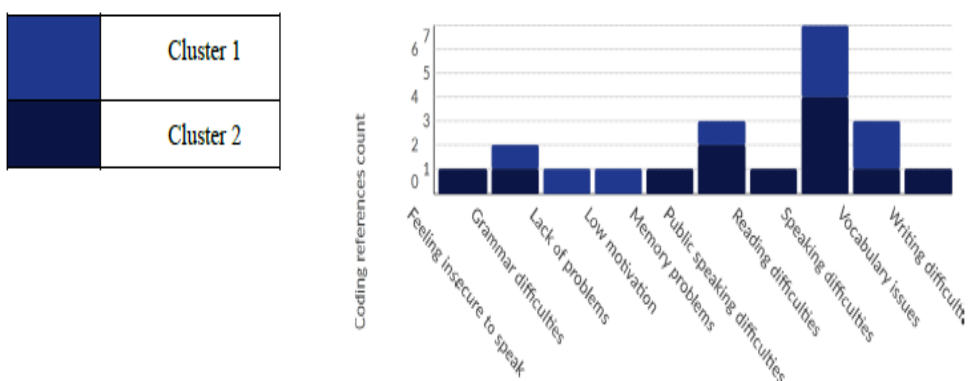


Figure 1 – Problems faced by participants in both

Regarding psychological challenges, the students experienced demotivation that negatively influenced their language learning journey in the

long-term perspective, as some respondents stated that “there was no control over progress or dynamics. It was boring...There was no competitive spirit in the class” (Participant 7). The major challenges were related to fear in the social context, when Participant 21 stated that “when I made grammatical mistakes in spoken English, I felt very ashamed, I felt very bad because, why are you making mistakes if others aren’t?” or a sense of insecurity, as presented by Participant 7: “It’s kind of annoying, and you start to push yourself more because...it turns out I’m not the coolest, I don’t know English better than everyone else”.

Nevertheless, the majority of the respondents expressed resilience and redemptive qualities in trying to overcome the previously mentioned difficulties, for instance, as stated by Participant 7: “At first I created this kind of demotivation, but then you get used to it and just work on yourself”, while Participant 11 observed: “I thought that it was really hard, but then I got adrenaline chasing myself”.

Regarding RQ3, Figure 4 pictures the most influential figures that have positively affected respondents during learning the English language. Teacher support was identified as the most crucial support instrument for the majority of respondents, regardless of their proficiency levels, as stated by Participant 19: “It was after she [new English teacher] arrived that I really began to enjoy learning English”. The following ones included friends’ and family’s support that effectively created a more positive environment around their English language learning experiences, as some respondents identified parents as the ones who “instilled this support in me, and because of them I went further and started studying” (Participant 8).

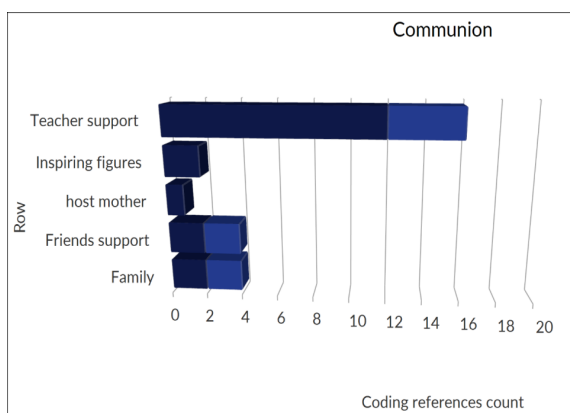


Figure 4 – Influential figures that have positively affected language learners

## Discussion

The findings suggest that the agency and redemption that English as a foreign language learners attain in the process of their language learning

significantly affect whether a student is going to interpret their language learning narrative as positively charged and meaningful. Regardless of whether a learner is a high-proficiency or low-proficiency learner, it has been found that negative evolution of the language learning process can be prevalent in any student's language narrative. This supports Scovel's [11] findings, which did not observe a strong correlation between foreign language anxiety levels and a student's proficiency level. Even continuing a language learning path at the university level with English as a medium of instruction (EMI) can either positively affect the students' attitude towards the language acquisition process or prevent it from being maintained. Thus, it seems of a certain importance for educators, family members, and other social figures to reinforce a positive language learning environment for learners, especially in their early learning stages, promoting a safe and challenging environment that will push students to learn and collaborate rather than feel language anxiety or experience traumatic events that can result in giving up learning the foreign language.

The study obtained insight that redemptive characteristics, such as a learner's conscious decision to persevere and continue the learning process despite the experienced challenges can affect students' learning becoming more meaningful, affecting a student's confidence and becoming excellent in language learning and even choosing English language as their university major or choosing an EMI university to further obtain redemption and continue their language learning story regardless any negative experiences they have earlier faced.

The study supports the previous works that depicted foreign language anxiety as a more complex trait that needs to be addressed closely along a student's personal interpretations, experience, culture, and language learning history [3].

The study can be particularly valuable for Kazakhstani educators and foreign language teachers, since most of the previous literature on anxiety and stress responses have been applied primarily in Western educational and cultural contexts [12]. Paying closer attention to the peculiarities of language acquisition in Kazakhstan is especially important in light of the trilingual policy that has been applied, where learners – like the participants of the study – are typically bilingual or multilingual. Previous research in Kazakhstan has already observed a positive relationship between the EMI environment and foreign language anxiety, showing that mainstream school students were motivated to improve their language learning [7] despite the challenges they encountered. The responses of this study further support these findings. The findings highlight the importance of addressing psychological aspects – such as language anxiety, feelings of insecurity, or fear of social performance – alongside foreign language learners' academic performance. Consequently, positively charged environments and instructors, peer collaboration, and family support can positively affect the academic performance and willingness to study the language in the long term.

### **Conclusion**

This study provides insights into how students in one university of Kazakhstan construct their narrative stories of English language learning in an EMI environment, with a particular attention to the role of agency, redemptive and contamination tendencies, and social support. The results of this study showed that students with a higher proficiency level expressed greater agency in narrating their learning experiences, suggesting that proficiency is not only a cognitive resource but also a psychological one that strengthens self-directed engagement. At the same time, contaminative tendencies were more dominant in both clusters rather than redemptive ones, indicating that the EMI environment does not always guarantee positive or negative narrative transformations. There were also instances where students demonstrated resilience when faced with challenges in language learning, indicating that redemptive tendencies remain a potential trajectory where learners attempted to reframe their negative experiences into positive ones. The results show that social support, particularly from teachers, families, and peers, play a crucial role in the students' narrative stories, helping to maintain their motivation and positively influence their journey towards becoming more confident language users.

This research underscores the importance for educators and educational policy developers to prioritize the creation of an environment conducive to effective learning, addressing both linguistic and psychological requirements of students. Comprehensive teacher support and structured peer interaction can mitigate anxiety and foster more positive outcomes in language acquisition narratives.

This study is limited because it covers a small sample from one university, which means that it cannot be generalized to the whole context of Kazakhstani university level students. However, this study makes an important contribution by applying narrative inquiry and combining it with quantitative coding, which contributed to a more in-depth analysis of the topic. Future researchers might expand the sample by considering students from different universities, and also considering the pre-existence or absence of EMI-related learning experiences in respondents' lives.

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## **ЕМІ ОРТАСЫНДА ШЕТ ТІЛІН ҮЙРЕНУДЕГІ ҚОБАЛЖУ: ҚАЗАҚСТАНДЫҚ УНИВЕРСИТЕТ СТУДЕНТТЕРІНІҢ НАРРАТИВТІК ТӘЖІРИБЕСІ**

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**Аңдатпа.** Тіл үйренудегі алаңдаушылық (FLA) студенттердің арасында кездесетін маңызды мәселердің бірі болып табылады.

Зерттеушілер бұл тақырыпты сандық тұрғыдан зерттегенімен, студенттердің нарративтік әңгімелерінде мазасыздықтың қалай көрініс алатынын көрсететін зерттеулердің саны аз. Бұл зерттеу жұмысының мақсаты-студенттердің FLA-ны баяндау зерттеуінің құрылымын қолдана отырып, тіл үйрену туралы әңгімелері арқылы қалай түсіндіретінін анықтау. Бұл зерттеудің негізгі бағыттары: негативті тәжірибені позитивке айналдыру (redemption); позитивті тәжірибенің теріс бұрмалануы (contamination); әрекет қабілеті (agency); қауымдастық (communion) және мән-мағынаны құру (meaning-making) сияқты бес негізгі баяндау құрылымын анықтау болды, және қатысушылардың ағылшын тілін меңгеру деңгейін өздері бағалауы негізінде жоғары және төмен деңгейлерді салыстыру болды. Зерттеу барысында оқыту ағылшын тілінде жүргізілетін Қазақстандық университеттердің бірінің студенттерімен құрылымдық әңгімелесу сұхбаттарымен нығайтылған баяндау тәсілі қолданылды. 22 студентке сауалнама жүргізіліп, олардың сұхбаттары тақырыптық кодтар арқылы талданды. Нәтижелер тілді меңгеру деңгейі жоғары студенттердің өз әңгімелерінде әрекет ету қабілетінің (agency) жоғары деңгейін көрсеткенін көрсетеді. Алайда, позитивті тәжірибенің теріс бұрмалануы (contamination) екі деңгейдегі қатысушыларда да айқын болды, әсіресе төменгі деңгейлерде бұл жиі байқалды. Студенттердің алдында тұрған негізгі мәселелердің ішінде ауызша сөйлеу, грамматикалық қиындықтар және көпшілік алдында сөйлеу проблемалары анықталды. Сонымен бірге мұғалімдердің, сыныптастырының және туыстарының қолдауы студенттердің ынтасын сақтауға көмектесетіні байқалды. Қорытындылай келе, бұл зерттеу ЕМІ (ағылшын тілі арқылы оқыту) контекстіндегі FLA-ның күрделі, әңгімеге негізделген сипатына баса назар аударады, бұл мазасыздық тек тілді меңгеру функциясы емес, өзін-өзі бағалау, эмоционалды реакциялар және әлеуметтік қолдаудың әсерінен қалыптасатынын көрсетеді. Зерттеудің теориялық маңызы - FLA-ға нарративтік тұлғалық концепциясын қолдану арқылы бұл құбылысты тереңірек ашу, яғни тіл үйрену процесінде пайда болатын психологиялық аспектілер мен сыртқы факторларды анықтау. Практикалық маңызы - мұғалімдер студенттерге қолдау көрсететін орта қалыптастыру, конструктивті кері байланыс беру және оқушылардың бірлескен жұмысы арқылы студенттердің әңгімелерінде redemption тенденциялары көбірек байқалуына ықпал етеді.

**Тірек сөздер:** шет тілін үйренудегі уайым, шет тілі ретінде ағылшын, оқыту тілі ретінде ағылшын (ЕМІ), нарративтік тұлға, студент тәжірибесі, жоғары білім, бірлескен жұмыс, нарративтік құрылымдар

## ЯЗЫКОВАЯ ТРЕВОЖНОСТЬ В УСЛОВИЯХ ЕМІ: НАРРАТИВНЫЙ ОПЫТ СТУДЕНТОВ КАЗАХСТАНСКОГО УНИВЕРСИТЕТА

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**Абстракт.** Языковая тревожность (FLA) по-прежнему остается серьезной проблемой, с которой сталкиваются учащиеся. Цель данного исследования — изучить, как студенты интерпретируют FLA через свои повествования об изучении языка, используя структуру повествовательного исследования. Основные направления данного исследования заключались в выявлении пяти ключевых повествовательных конструкций, такие как преодоление (redemption); негативное искажение опыта (contamination); способность к действию (agency); общность (communion) и создание смысла (meaning-making), а также в сравнении уровней владения английским языком, определенных участниками самостоятельно, между высокими и низкими уровнями. В исследовании был использован нарративный подход, подкрепленный структурированными нарративными интервью со студентами одного из Казахских университетов, где преподавание ведется на английском языке. Было опрошено 22 студента, и их интервью были проанализированы с использованием тематических кодов. Результаты показывают, что студенты с более высоким уровнем владения языком демонстрировали более высокий уровень способности к действию (agency) в своих рассказах. Однако негативное искажение опыта были очевидны у участников обоих уровней, причем на более низких уровнях это проявлялось чаще. Среди основных проблем, с которыми сталкивались студенты, были выявлены проблемы с разговорной речью, грамматические трудности и публичные выступления. В то же время поддержка со стороны учителей, сверстников и родственников помогала студентам сохранять мотивацию. В заключение, исследование подчеркивает сложный, основанный на рассказах характер FLA в контексте ЕМІ (применение английского языка как средство обучения), показывая, что тревожность не является просто функцией владения языком, но формируется под влиянием самооценки, эмоциональных реакций и социальной поддержки. Теоретическая значимость исследования заключается в том, что оно применяет концепцию нарративной идентичности к FLA, позволяя глубже исследовать эту тему путем выявления психологических аспектов и внешних факторов, которые могут возникать при изучении языка. С практической точки зрения, наше исследование показывает, что учителя могут создать благоприятную среду для студентов, в которой присутствуют конструктивная обратная связь и совместная работа со сверстниками, что в результате может помочь проявить более позитивные тенденции в историях учащихся.

**Ключевые слова:** тревожность в изучении иностранного языка, английский как иностранный, английский как язык обучения, нарративная идентичность, студенческий опыт, высшее образование, совместное обучение, повествовательные конструкции

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