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IVAN CRESPO
University of Illinois

Reducing Language Anxiety through the LARC Framework

Language anxiety makes it difficult for many English learners to speak, even when they know what they want to say. This emotional barrier can block communication, limit classroom participation, and slow progress. While research has explored how anxiety affects second language learning, many teachers still lack simple, practical tools to help students build confidence. This article introduces the Language Anxiety Reduction Cycle (LARC), a four-step framework that guides learners from initial exposure to authentic English through structured practice, supported real-world interaction, and independent use. Each stage is designed to reduce fear and promote meaningful communication. Grounded in classroom experience and informed by second language acquisition theories, the model offers flexible, actionable strategies. Rather than aiming to eliminate anxiety altogether, the LARC helps students manage it and grow. This practical article is intended for teachers, program designers, and others interested in supporting English learners in developing the confidence to speak clearly.

Keywords: language anxiety, ESL instruction, communicative confidence, classroom strategies, second language acquisition

Over more than two decades of teaching English, I have worked with a large and diverse group of learners, each with a story that goes far beyond grammar points and vocabulary lists. My students have come from all over the world, united by a shared desire to speak clearly, be understood, and belong. Although they work hard to achieve their goals, many still struggle with emotional tension, fear, or nervousness that interferes with their ability to use English effectively. In other words, they suffer from language anxiety, which I define as a situational emotional response that disrupts communication in a second language regardless of the speaker's actual proficiency. This definition is informed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) concept of Foreign Language Anxiety, though I use the broader term *language anxiety* to emphasize learners' subjective experiences in everyday speaking situations. This kind of anxiety is deeply personal and context-dependent, often triggered more by the situation than by the content. I want to begin this article by sharing three stories that explain why I am focused on helping English teachers tackle their students' language anxiety.

One of the first stories that stayed with me was about a student from Taiwan. He had been living in the United States for two years and understood English perfectly well. In class, he followed every lesson. Outside of class, though, he became silent. One day I asked him why he did not talk to people on campus. He looked down and said, "I know the words, but I panic when I have to use them." He told me he practiced conversations in his head all the time, at the bus stop, in the cafeteria, but when someone spoke to him, everything shut down. He could not breathe, let alone speak.

Another student, from Brazil, brought energy and humor into my upper-intermediate classroom. She was a strong B2 learner, quick to answer questions, lead group work, and help others. But the moment we reached a unit on making phone calls, she became visibly anxious. During our first phone role-play, her hands were shaking. After class, she told me, "I can talk to people face-to-face, no problem. But when I'm on the phone, I feel blind. I can't see their face; I can't tell if they're annoyed or confused. And if I have to ask them to repeat something, I feel stupid. I get so nervous, I can't understand what they say!" She later confessed that she avoided calling anyone, even for pizza. Texting or emailing felt safer. That unit, she said, was her worst experience in the program.

There was a quiet, diligent student from Congo. She never missed a class and always completed her assignments. But during a class discussion about daily routines, she mentioned something that stunned us all: she never used a

cashier line at the grocery store. Instead, she always went to the self-checkout machines. When we asked why, she said, “Because I’m afraid, they’ll ask me something I don’t understand. Like, do I want a bag? Or if I found everything okay. What if I say the wrong thing? What if I freeze?” That comment sparked a long class discussion, and it was clear she was not alone in that fear.

Finally, I will never forget a student from China who was pursuing her master’s degree. Her case stood out because I was also a graduate student at the time, so I understood the intensity of the academic pressure she was facing. Although I did not personally struggle with language anxiety, I could relate to the demands of graduate school and the weight of constant performance. That connection allowed me to support her not only as a teacher but also as someone with a deeper understanding of how academia works in the US.

She was one of the most meticulous students I have ever taught. Her pronunciation was clear, her grammar was strong, and she practiced regularly; yet twice she passed out during classroom presentations. She had prepared thoroughly, created visual aids, and rehearsed with classmates. She knew her material well. But when it came time to speak in front of others, she collapsed. Later, she told me, “It is not just nerves. It is shame. I do not want to be the foreigner with the accent. I want to sound like I belong.”

These stories, and so many others like them, come from my own classrooms at an American university. Different ages, countries, and language levels, but the same pattern: in my observation, some learners who were capable and motivated appeared paralyzed by the fear of speaking. Over time, these experiences pushed me to develop something more structured than just encouragement and practice. I created a framework I now call the Language Anxiety Reduction Cycle, or LARC. I did not invent it overnight. It came together through years of trial, observation, and honest conversations with students across multiple intensive English courses for adult learners. My observations were shaped by ideas from research on the affective filter (Krashen, 1982) and Foreign Language Anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986), which helped me recognize how emotional barriers interfere with communication. This observation is consistent with Horwitz et al. (1986) on communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation, and with MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) on anxiety affecting working memory and fluency. I have applied the framework across different programs and levels and observed encouraging results. This article presents the LARC in its full form, connects it to established research, and offers practical steps for other educators who want to help learners not just survive English communication, but grow through it.

Context and Development of the LARC Framework

The LARC emerged from classroom-based observations made during more than two decades of teaching English. The framework was refined through multiple iterations of implementation across four non-credit, 14-week listening and speaking English courses designed for adult learners enrolled in an intensive English institute at a major U.S. university. Each class typically included 2 to 15 learners representing diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, with most students coming from East Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Central Asia. The students ranged in age from their early twenties to mid-forties and had proficiency levels between A2 and B2.

Over approximately four academic terms, the LARC’s four stages, exposure to authentic materials, extensive classroom practice, reality-immersion activities, and independent real-world communication, were refined and sequenced to support learners’ confidence in real-life speaking situations. The typical implementation timeline for each cycle ranged from two to four weeks, depending on the course theme and instructional objectives.

The LARC was introduced gradually as part of regular classroom instruction rather than through a formal research protocol. Its development relied on systematic reflection, classroom observations, and feedback gathered informally through student discussions, reflection logs, and post-course comments. These data were not collected under an Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol and are therefore not presented as empirical evidence. Instead, they reflect practitioner-based insights that guided the evolution of the framework. The following sections describe how the LARC connects to existing research and illustrate its classroom application through practical examples.

Literature Review

First, it is important to understand Krashen’s (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, a key theory in second language acquisition. This hypothesis explains how learners’ emotions influence their ability to take in and process language input. The “affective filter” acts like an emotional barrier that can either facilitate or block learning. When the filter is low, learners are more open and receptive to new language, making it easier to understand and absorb what they hear or read. When the filter is high, often due to anxiety, low motivation, or low self-confidence, it blocks input from being fully processed and learned.

These emotional factors interact in complex ways. For example, a highly motivated learner may experience less anxiety, lowering their affective filter. However, if that learner has low self-confidence, their filter can remain high, making language absorption more difficult. This shows that motivation alone is not sufficient for successful learning—self-confidence and anxiety levels are equally critical.

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) provide a comprehensive definition of foreign language anxiety (FLA) and describe its common symptoms, including communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Their development of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) offered a systematic way to measure these anxieties in learners, making it possible to quantify what had previously been recognized only qualitatively. Importantly, the purpose of the FLCAS was to identify and assess anxiety, not to provide interventions. This distinction clarifies why the tool measures the presence and severity of FLA without directly suggesting strategies to reduce it.

The authors do, however, offer practical suggestions for addressing anxiety, such as creating supportive classroom environments, using small-group activities, and gradually increasing speaking demands (p. 131). While the FLCAS itself does not implement these strategies, these recommendations align with broader pedagogical approaches to lower affective barriers. Applying the FLCAS as a pre- and post-assessment for interventions like the LARC could be explored in future studies, providing empirical data on how targeted techniques influence learners' anxiety levels over time.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) expanded this understanding by showing that anxiety affects real-time cognitive processes. Anxiety can overload working memory, slowing speech production or causing learners to hesitate. They also highlighted that a learner's willingness to communicate (WTC) depends on personal traits and situational factors. Even confident learners may hesitate in tense environments or with unfamiliar topics. Understanding these influences helps teachers create conditions that encourage communication without overwhelming students.

Subsequent research confirms the link between anxiety and reduced performance. Zheng and Cheng (2018) and Zhang (2019) found that high anxiety particularly affects speaking tasks, where learners must perform in real time. Zhang's meta-analysis revealed a consistent negative correlation between anxiety and language performance, emphasizing the need for structured, sustained interventions integrated into the curriculum.

Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) argued that enjoyment and anxiety are independent but interacting forces shaping classroom experiences. Fostering enjoyment can buffer anxiety and encourage learners to take communicative risks. This aligns with the goals of the LARC, which aims to build confidence and emotional resilience through meaningful interaction.

Synthesis and Recent Research

These studies highlight three main points: anxiety negatively impacts language performance, especially in speaking; interventions are most effective when structured, sustained, and integrated into regular instruction; and positive emotions can buffer the effects of anxiety. Recent research continues to support these insights. Toyama and Yamazaki (2021) reviewed classroom interventions and found that strategies such as mindfulness exercises and peer interactions effectively reduce anxiety. Jin (2021) applied positive psychology approaches, showing that gratitude exercises and positive reinforcement can significantly lower anxiety. Kayhan (2025) conducted a meta-analysis indicating that structured programs incorporating relaxation techniques and communicative activities effectively reduce speaking anxiety and enhance learner confidence. These studies reinforce the importance of addressing both cognitive and emotional factors in language learning and provide strong support for classroom interventions like the LARC.

Despite this solid foundation, many teachers still struggle to consistently implement actionable strategies in real classroom contexts. The LARC builds on the insights of foundational frameworks such as Krashen's (1982) affective filter, Horwitz et al.'s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety model, and MacIntyre and Gardner's (1994) work on willingness to communicate. However, it shifts the focus toward practical application by offering a repeatable, teacher-friendly process designed to gradually build learners' confidence, lower anxiety, and foster a classroom environment where communicative risk-taking becomes more manageable over time.

Situating the LARC Within Existing Frameworks

The LARC transforms abstract theoretical concepts into concrete pedagogical action, progressing through four stages: exposure to authentic materials, extensive classroom practice, reality-immersion activities, and independent real-world communication.

Table 1
How the LARC complements other frameworks

Framework	***Focus***	***Key Concepts***	***How the LARC Complements***
Krashen's Affective Filter	Emotional variables affecting input	Anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence	Offers staged steps to reduce anxiety and improve input absorption
Horwitz's FLCAS	Measurement of anxiety in learning contexts	Communication apprehension, test anxiety, fear of evaluation	Provides practical activities targeting those anxieties
MacIntyre & Gardner's WTC	Propensity to initiate communication	WTC, cognitive load, context sensitivity	Encourages risk-taking through scaffolded real-world interaction

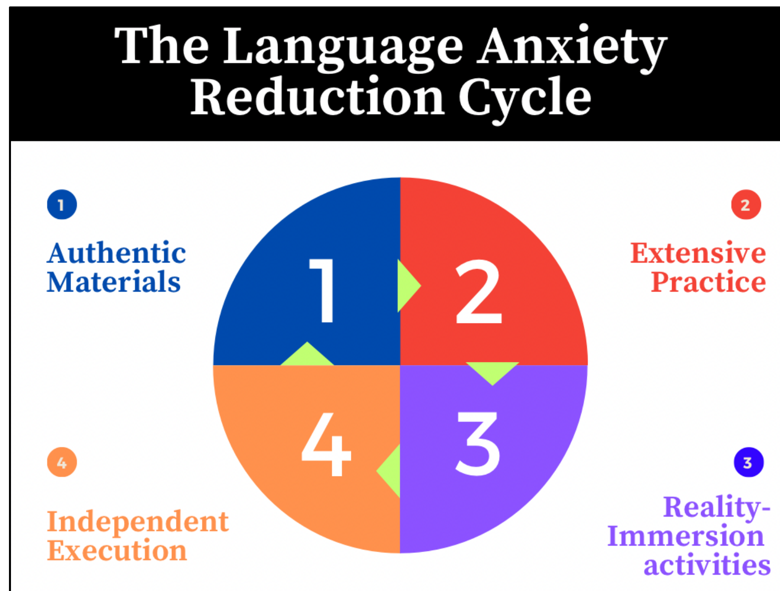
Note. This table shows how the LARC situates among other frameworks and each aspect it complements.

By grounding itself in theory and applying that knowledge in practice, the LARC aims to provide teachers with a framework that is conceptually grounded and pedagogically actionable.

The Four Stages of the LARC

The LARC progresses through connected stages designed to guide learners from initial exposure to confident real-world communication. Figure 1 shows how these stages form a cycle, reinforcing growth through practice and experience.

Figure 1
The Cycles of the LARC Including the Progression from One Cycle to Another



Note. The diagram illustrates the four sequential stages of the LARC. Arrows indicate the progression from one stage to the next, with a cycle back to the first stage if further practice is needed after completing stage four.

Exposure to Authentic Materials

Authentic language refers to naturally occurring speech or text produced by proficient speakers in real-world contexts (Gilmore, 2007). Exposure to such materials gives learners a sense of what real communication sounds like, including idioms, natural pauses, and overlapping dialogue. Each of these features can overwhelm learners for different reasons. Idioms often cannot be understood literally, requiring cultural and contextual knowledge, which

can slow comprehension. Natural pauses may be interpreted as breaks in meaning or moments when a response is expected, creating uncertainty. Overlapping dialogue challenges learners to process speech in real time and determine appropriate turn-taking. These combined factors increase cognitive load and can heighten anxiety. To support learners, students listen multiple times, identify key words, and notice how context supports comprehension. Repeated exposure to authentic materials reduces initial anxiety and helps build listening confidence. This approach aligns with Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis, which emphasizes the importance of repeated, comprehensible input. Similarly, delaying correction during classroom practice helps maintain fluency and lowers the fear of public mistakes (Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Harmer, 2007).

Extensive Classroom Practice

Once students have been exposed to real-world language, the next step is structured classroom practice. This includes role plays, guided discussions, and collaborative problem-solving activities. During these tasks, I avoid correcting mistakes immediately to help maintain learners' fluency and confidence. Instead, I take notes and provide constructive feedback afterward, making sure not to single out any student (Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Harmer, 2007). Delaying correction seemed to help reduce their fear of public mistakes. This stage focuses entirely on real-life situations, so classroom content depends on what you are currently working on with your students. Role-plays and guided discussions intentionally recycle vocabulary, phrases, and communicative routines introduced during the exposure stage, so students practice production with familiar input. This scaffolded recycling lowers cognitive load and helps transfer comprehension skills to spoken performance. Common examples include making an appointment or asking for clarification. Students practice these situations until the key phrases and vocabulary become automatic. Over time, the classroom becomes a safety net where risk-taking is normal, and communication feels less intimidating. It is essential to ensure students have thoroughly practiced these scenarios and feel confident before moving on. If they are not ready, the next step can feel overwhelming, and our goal is to reduce their anxiety, not increase it.

Reality-Immersion Activities

Classroom practice has its limits. Students need opportunities to interact with people who are not their instructors or peers, but in a way that still feels safe and supported. Reality-immersion activities provide that bridge. They simulate or facilitate authentic communication while maintaining teacher guidance and structure.

To make these activities successful, I plan the logistics carefully. For off-campus and community tasks, I contact partner locations in advance, explain the learning purpose, and schedule short interactions in small groups (typically three to five students) during low-traffic times. I secure permission from the site and obtain informed consent from students. During the visits, I accompany the groups, stay available to step in if needed, and lead a five- to ten-minute debrief immediately afterward.

When in-person visits are not feasible, I arrange short, monitored Zoom or phone conversations with community volunteers. I also coordinate timing and transportation with students and prepare simple backup plans in case an activity must be shortened or rescheduled. These experiences help students realize they can use English successfully beyond the classroom. Sometimes a teacher's reassurance is not enough; students need to feel that success for themselves in a supportive environment.

Independent Real-Life Tasks

The final stage involves real-world communication without teacher assistance. Students might be assigned to make a real phone call, ask a stranger for directions, or speak with a service provider. They are not graded on fluency or accuracy, only on effort and reflection. Some students succeed immediately and feel empowered. Others struggle, and that is also valuable.

Some have transformative moments during this stage. One learner wrote in her final reflection, "I was scared to make the call, but when the person on the phone understood me, I almost cried. I did it. I really did it." Others may hesitate or need more time before feeling confident. Both outcomes matter. The LARC does not promise instant transformation. It offers a flexible structure that honors each learner's pace and supports their growth over time.

When a task feels overwhelming or does not go as planned, we revisit earlier stages. This return is not a setback, but a deliberate part of the learning process. It reinforces the idea that communication improves through cycles of exposure, practice, and reflection.

A Step-by-Step Example of Using the LARC

In a two-week unit focused on making appointments and requesting information, I follow these steps (see Table 2):

Table 2

Applying the LARC to a Two-Week Unit on Phone Communication

Week	Day	Activity type	Description
1	Day 1	Exposure	Students listen to three authentic phone calls. Key phrases and comprehension challenges are discussed.
1	Day 2	Exposure	Students watch a video of someone struggling to make a call. Groups suggest strategies for improvement.
1	Day 3	Practice	Students role-play scheduling an appointment. Instructor observes silently and provides collective feedback.
1	Day 4	Practice	Role plays increase in complexity, adding background noise or unexpected dialogue turns.
2	Day 5	Reality-Immersion	Students engage in monitored Zoom calls with English-speaking volunteers for five minutes each.
2	Day 6	Preparation	Students select a real business and write a script for calling them.
2	Day 7	Independent Task	Students make the actual call and complete a reflection form afterward.
2	Day 8	Debrief	Class discussion on successes and challenges. Instructor emphasizes communication as a process.

Note. This table outlines how the LARC was implemented in a two-week unit. Activities were sequenced to gradually build learners' confidence and communicative ability.

Monitoring and Measuring Student Success

To evaluate how well students are progressing through the LARC, I use a combination of informal but systematic measures that capture both performance and affective change. After each activity, students complete a short reflection form with two open-ended questions: *What did you feel most confident about?* and *What was most challenging?* These reflections help track shifts in self-awareness and comfort level. I also keep an instructor observation checklist noting whether students initiated conversation, maintained interaction without switching to their first language, and successfully completed communicative goals (for example, asking for directions or clarifying information). In addition, students rate their speaking confidence on a simple 1–5 scale before and after each major task, which provides a quick snapshot of perceived improvement. These combined observations, reflections, and self-ratings give a well-rounded picture of learners' growth in both communication ability and emotional readiness. Although this process is classroom-based rather than experimental, it functions as an ongoing formative assessment. In future studies, I plan to pair these classroom indicators with a formal pre/post measure such as the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz et al., 1986) to document changes in anxiety more systematically.

Beyond the Cycle

The LARC provides a structure, but it is not a cure-all. Teachers must also confront the perfectionism many learners carry with them. I have worked with several business professionals who speak English fluently and communicate effectively in meetings, emails, and presentations. Yet, they feel anxious because they cannot express

themselves with the same precision and nuance they do in their first language. They worry about sounding less competent, less articulate, or less persuasive.

In my observation, for some learners this kind of anxiety seemed to be rooted not in a lack of skill, but in internal pressure to perform at a native-like level. This aligns with Horwitz et al. (1986) and Zhang (2019), who discuss fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and the role of perfectionism in foreign language anxiety. In these cases, I remind learners that even fluent speakers hesitate, revise their thoughts, and ask for clarification. These behaviors are not signs of weakness. They are a normal part of communication. Emphasizing this reality helps reframe speaking not as a polished performance, but as a flexible and collaborative act.

At the same time, some learners carry emotional histories that go beyond classroom solutions. Anxiety can be tied to broader issues such as immigration stress, academic pressure, personal trauma, or earlier language learning experiences. In these situations, teachers should not feel they must navigate these challenges alone. Collaboration with mental health professionals, advisors, or support staff can help ensure that students receive the support they need beyond language instruction. The LARC can offer structure and encouragement, but it works best when embedded within a larger ecosystem of care.

Implications for Teacher Preparation

Most teacher training programs emphasize theory yet leave future teachers without practical strategies for addressing the emotional dimensions of language learning. This foundational knowledge is essential, but it is not enough. Teachers need concrete tools they can use from the beginning of their careers.

The LARC can be introduced in teacher training programs to fill this gap. In methods courses, teacher candidates could analyze real-life case studies of anxious learners and design interventions using the LARC stages. In practicum settings, they might be asked to implement one stage of the cycle and reflect on how it affected student engagement. Professional development workshops could use the LARC to connect theoretical knowledge to day-to-day teaching.

When teacher education includes emotional awareness and practical strategies, new educators are more likely to create classroom spaces where students feel safe enough to take risks and grow.

At the same time, future teachers should be encouraged to adapt the LARC to their unique teaching contexts. What works well in a university ESL classroom may need to be adjusted for a K–12 setting or an online environment. The LARC is not a rigid formula. It is a flexible framework that invites experimentation and reflection.

This approach also aligns with California's commitment to inclusive and equitable language education. California's English Language Development (ELD) standards emphasize communicative competence, emotional safety, and culturally responsive teaching. Many adult and K–12 English learners in California classrooms experience the same emotional barriers described in this article. Integrating frameworks like the LARC into teacher preparation programs supports these goals by promoting communicative confidence, cultural responsiveness, and learner well-being across diverse educational settings.

Conclusion

Language anxiety remains one of the most persistent challenges in second language education. Although researchers have documented its effects in detail, many classrooms still lack consistent strategies for addressing it. The LARC offers a response that is grounded in theory and shaped through practical classroom experience.

The framework guides learners through stages of authentic exposure, structured rehearsal, supported interaction, and independent use. Each step builds on the last, creating opportunities for growth that feel manageable rather than overwhelming. The process is not about eliminating anxiety entirely. It is about helping students develop the confidence to engage, even when uncertainty is present. In this way, the LARC fosters resilience and reinforces the idea that progress comes through sustained, supported effort.

Some students experience dramatic breakthroughs during the independent task stage. One learner wrote in her final reflection, "I was scared to make the call, but when the person on the phone understood me, I almost cried. I did it. I really did it." Others may struggle, needing to return to earlier stages of the cycle. Both outcomes are part of the process. The LARC is not a quick fix, but a pathway that honors each learner's pace.

Even after years of using this framework, I still encounter moments that do not go as planned. A reality-immersion activity might backfire, or a student might feel overwhelmed despite careful scaffolding. These moments remind me that teaching is relational work. The LARC is a guide, not a guarantee. It keeps us focused, but it also requires us to stay flexible, attentive, and human.

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