



UNDERSTANDING ENGLISH SPEAKING ANXIETY AMONG PAKISTANI UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF CONTRIBUTING FACTORS, CONSEQUENCES, AND PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES

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Abstract

English language proficiency has become an essential academic and professional requirement in Pakistan; however, many university students experience considerable anxiety while communicating in English, particularly in speaking contexts. This study explores English speaking anxiety among Pakistani university students by examining its major causes, academic consequences, and possible pedagogical interventions. The study employed a quantitative survey design involving 105 graduate students selected from two classrooms of three universities in Lahore. Data were collected through an adapted questionnaire based on the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), focusing on communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, linguistic difficulties, classroom environment, and learning experiences. The findings revealed that a substantial proportion of students experienced moderate to high levels of speaking anxiety. The major contributing factors included fear of making grammatical mistakes, limited vocabulary, lack of confidence, examination pressure, and fear of peer judgment. The results further indicated that speaking anxiety negatively influenced classroom participation, oral presentations, academic discussions, and overall English language development. The study highlights the need for supportive and interactive English teaching practices that reduce learners' emotional barriers and encourage meaningful communication. Strategies such as communicative language teaching, collaborative learning, task-based activities, and positive teacher feedback are recommended to create psychologically safe ESL classrooms. The study contributes to understanding the complex relationship between psychological factors and English speaking performance in Pakistani higher education contexts.

Keywords: *Communication Apprehension, English Speaking Anxiety, ESL Learners, Foreign Language Anxiety, Language Learning, Pakistani Universities, Pedagogical Strategies.*

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1. Introduction

English has a pivotal role in Pakistan's education, work, and life. English language competence plays a key role in learners' academic achievement and future career prospects, being the official language of higher education, communication in science, and international interaction. The Pakistani universities demand students to communicate in English, in lectures, presentations, research writing, seminar, and professional communication. In spite of the years of formal learning of English, however, many university learners still face problems with oral expression, such as hesitation, avoidance and anxiety when they are asked to speak English (Rahman, 2020).

One of the most difficult skills in language is speaking, as it demands immediate processing of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and construction of meaning. Speaking is a real-time activity; it is dynamic: learners have to create language in real time in situations where they have to interact with others. This need for immediate performance may create psychological stress, especially for second language learners who may feel concerned about making errors or being judged negatively (Horwitz et al., 1986). Foreign language anxiety becomes an important affective component which is perceived as influencing the students' willingness to communicate and their general language attainment.

The factors affecting English speaking anxiety in the Pakistani ESL context are (psychological, linguistic, social and educational). In many universities, the lack of opportunities to engage in meaningful communication in English is because students have learned English at the previous educational stages focusing on grammar, translation, and examination rather than in the context of communicative competence (Shamim, 2021). As a result, the learners may have the knowledge of English but they are not confident in speaking in English in real contexts. The discrepancy between linguistic knowledge and communicative competence is a major factor of speaking anxiety.

The classroom context is also a key factor in influencing learners' emotional experience. Students may feel more anxious about making mistakes when they have little speaking opportunity and they are required to focus on accuracy to a too great degree. If

the learner feels that errors are mistakes, then he or she is not likely to be interested in engaging in discussion with the teacher. The Affective Filter Hypothesis states that emotional factors like anxiety, lack of motivation, and fear of criticism can hinder language learning by blocking the ability to process input and engage in interaction (Krashen, 1985).

The students of various universities in Pakistan often experience fear, nervousness, and anxiety while delivering oral presentations, discussing in classroom, during interviews and while participating in public speaking related activities. These experiences are especially important for graduate students who are required to communicate at a higher level for presentation to the academic community, research conferences and in their professional environment. Despite this, however, learners are still not very confident and fluent in speaking English, which shows that the anxiety of speaking English is still a problem in the higher education system.

Foreign language anxiety has been studied in the context of various cultures but there are not many studies that have explored the phenomenon of foreign language anxiety in the context of university students studying a foreign language at the graduate level in an ESL context in Lahore. In general, existing literature tends to focus on general English proficiency or language learning problems, but not too many studies have been conducted on the psychological aspect of students' reluctance to use English. Appreciating these experiences is essential to designing pedagogically appropriate strategies and methods for tackling not only language deficits, but emotional obstacles as well.

The present study, therefore, aims to explore the issue of English speaking anxiety among Ph.D. scholars of three universities in Lahore. It investigates the main causes of speaking anxiety, the impact of speaking anxiety on student participation in learning, and pedagogical methods that can be used to reduce students' speaking anxiety so as to make them confident in using English.

Problem Statement

English is widely taught in Pakistani universities, but most of the students show hesitation and anxiety while asking to speak in English. This is a prominent issue with graduate students who are expected to be active in research-related communication, presentation, and academic discussions. Students have a very limited understanding of the English language, and they do not participate in speaking activities because they get worried about making errors, not being understood, bad pronunciation, and not being confident when speaking.

This may be exacerbated by traditional teaching approaches that focus on exam scores over the communicative competence. Consequently, students have less input in class and fewer opportunities for fluency in their class speaking. Thus, it is important to

study the cause and effects of EAL anxiety to enhance ESL teaching methods in Pakistani Higher Education Institutions.

The study of foreign language anxiety has been widely conducted in the past, but some issues are still absent in the context of Pakistani universities. To begin with, there have been few empirical studies that have explored the experiences of the English speaking anxiety of graduate students in Lahore's universities. Secondly, many studies have concentrated on linguistic problems without taking into account psychological and classroom related factors. Third, sufficient attention has not been paid to pedagogical strategies in practice, which may decrease speaking anxiety among Pakistani ESL learners. The gaps of this study are addressed by a conceptual analysis along with the survey-based evidence from the graduate students of three universities of Lahore.

1.1. Research Objectives

The study aims to:

1. Examine the level of English speaking anxiety among Pakistani university students.
2. Identify major linguistic, psychological, and classroom-related factors contributing to speaking anxiety.
3. Analyze the effects of speaking anxiety on students' academic participation and communication performance.
4. Suggest pedagogical strategies for reducing English speaking anxiety in ESL classrooms.

Research Questions

1. What is the level of English speaking anxiety among graduate students in Pakistani universities?
2. What factors contribute most significantly to students' English speaking anxiety?
3. How does speaking anxiety influence students' classroom participation and academic performance?
4. Which pedagogical approaches can effectively reduce English speaking anxiety among ESL learners?

2. Literature Review

English speaking anxiety is the fear, hesitation and nervousness of learners in communication in English. It has an impact on student participation, speaking ability and confidence in language. While Horwitz et al. (1986) came up with the idea of foreign language classroom anxiety, recent research indicates that speaking anxiety is influenced by psychological, linguistic, cultural, and instructional dimensions (Teimouri et al., 2022).

Despite years of formal instruction in English, the problem of English speaking anxiety continues to affect Pakistani students at the university level, as they have limited

exposure to real communication. Some recent studies have revealed that anxiety is a common problem among Pakistani university students, stemming from the fear of being evaluated negatively, lack of vocabulary, pronunciation issues, and limited speaking practice (Ahmed et al., 2025; Asim, 2025).

Students' oral communication is significantly affected by psychological factors such as fear of making mistakes, lack in self-confidence, and fear of judgment from fellow students. Anxious learners tend to refrain from engaging in speaking activities because they view mistakes as failures instead of learning opportunities (Ahmed et al., 2025).

Limited language skills are another significant factor in speaking anxiety. With limited vocabulary, pronunciation issues, and grammatical mistakes, students struggle with expressing themselves in a natural and spontaneous manner and become hesitant or cautious when speaking in class (Asim, 2025).

In addition, the classroom practices affect students' emotional responses. Teacher centeredness, accuracy orientation and low level of communicative activities can make the learners feel anxious, while positive feedback and communicative classrooms can boost speaking confidence (Ahmed et al., 2024).

Students' anxiety about speaking has a negative impact on their learning and communication in the workplace. Students who are anxious often refuse to participate in classroom discussions, presentations and oral tests, which limits their language development. According to recent studies in Pakistan, language anxiety hinders effective communication and diminishes the students' self-confidence in academic environments (Ahmed et al., 2025).

Studies indicate that a learner-centered method can help to decrease speaking anxiety. Students have opportunities to practise English in a low-stress setting such as Communicative Language Teaching, task based activities, collaborative learning, and teacher feedback. These methods foster engagement and help build confidence in speaking (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018; Ahmed et al., 2024).

3. Theoretical Framework

The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Theory (Horwitz et al., 1986) and Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985) are used as the theoretical bases for this study. According to Horwitz et al., anxiety is a result of communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test-related pressure. Krashen believes that affect factors like anxiety and lack of confidence raise the affective filter and this impedes successful language learning. Theories can be used to understand the relationship between psychological and classroom factors with English speaking anxiety amongst Pakistani University students.

A concept that was put forward by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) is Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) which refers to the anxiety that a learner feels when learning a second language in a classroom. This theory posits that language anxiety occurs when it comes to language use in particular situations, and language anxiety typically comes in three ways: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety.

Communication apprehension refers to learners' discomfort and nervousness when communicating in a foreign language. Pupils with such anxiety may be reluctant to engage in discussions as they don't feel confident in their own ability to speak. The fear of negative evaluation is the concern about criticism from teachers or peers for pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary mistakes. Test anxiety is related to stress during an oral examination, presentation and language evaluation.

In the Pakistani ESL context, this theory can be used to explain why many of the University students do not engage in English speaking activities although they are formally taught English. Learners are not motivated to engage in communicative tasks, as a result of fear of making mistakes, classroom judgment, and performance pressure (Ahmed et al., 2025). Thus, FLCA is an appropriate perspective for a discussion of psychological and classroom causes of English speaking anxiety.

Krashen (1985) that highlights the importance of the emotional aspects in second language acquisition put the Affective Filter Hypothesis forward. The theory posits that anxiety, motivation, confidence and self-esteem have an impact on the acquisition and use of a second language by learners.

Krashen believes that when learners feel fear, stress, or lack of confidence, a high affective filter prevents language input and decreases their participation. On the other hand, a low affective filter would provide an emotional climate that would facilitate learners' willingness to communicate and to learn language naturally.

This is especially applicable to the context of the Pakistani University classrooms where students might have a sound average level of English, but are reticent in using English in the classroom due to psychological barriers. Students' affective filters can be reduced and their active communication can be stimulated through supportive teaching practices, collaborative activities and positive feedback.

4. Conceptual Framework of the Study

Based on these theories, the present study proposes that English-speaking anxiety is influenced by multiple interconnected factors:

4.1. Independent Variables

- Psychological factors
(fear of mistakes, lack of confidence, fear of evaluation)

- Linguistic factors
(limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, grammatical concerns)
- Classroom factors
(teaching methods, classroom environment, teacher feedback)

4.2. Mediating Factor

- English Speaking Anxiety

4.3. Dependent Outcomes

- Classroom participation
- Oral communication performance
- Academic confidence

The framework suggests that reducing psychological and instructional barriers can decrease speaking anxiety and improve students' English communication abilities.

5. Research Methodology

5.1. Research Design

The study employed a quantitative survey research design to investigate English-speaking anxiety among Pakistani university students. A quantitative approach was selected because it enables systematic measurement of students' anxiety levels and identification of major factors influencing their English speaking experiences.

5.2. Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted in three universities located in Lahore, Pakistan. The participants were graduate students enrolled in different academic disciplines where English was frequently used for lectures, presentations, discussions, and academic communication.

The sample consisted of 105 graduate students, selected from two classrooms at each university. From each institution, 35 students participated in the survey, providing representation from different university environments.

Table 1: Distribution of Participants

University	Participants	Percentage
University A	35	33.3%
University B	35	33.3%
University C	35	33.3%
Total	105	100%

A convenience sampling technique was used because participants were selected based on accessibility and their direct involvement in English academic activities.

5.3. Research Instrument

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire adapted from the **Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)** developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). The questionnaire was contextualized according to Pakistani university ESL settings.

The instrument consisted of four sections:

5.3.1. Section A: Demographic Information

- Gender
- Academic background
- English learning experience

5.3.2. Section B: Psychological Factors

- Fear of making mistakes
- Confidence issues
- Fear of peer evaluation

5.3.3. Section C: Linguistic Factors

- Vocabulary limitations
- Pronunciation difficulties
- Grammar-related concerns

5.3.4. Section D: Classroom and Pedagogical Factors

- Speaking opportunities
- Teaching approaches
- Teacher support

A five-point Likert scale was used:

1 = Strongly Disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neutral

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly Agree

5.4. Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process was conducted during regular academic sessions. Participants were informed about the objectives of the study, and ethical considerations including confidentiality and voluntary participation were ensured. Students completed the questionnaire individually, and responses were collected for statistical analysis.

6. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations. These statistical techniques were used to determine:

- Overall levels of English speaking anxiety
- Major psychological and linguistic causes
- Effects on classroom participation
- Students' perceptions of pedagogical strategies

Mean score interpretation was based on the following criteria:

Mean Range	Anxiety Level
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1.00–2.33	Low
2.34–3.66	Moderate
3.67–5.00	High

7. Results and Analysis

This section presents the findings of the survey conducted among **105 graduate students from three universities in Lahore**. The results are organized according to the research objectives, including overall speaking anxiety levels, contributing factors, consequences, and students' perceptions regarding pedagogical strategies.

7.1. Overall Level of English Speaking Anxiety

The first objective of the study was to identify the level of English speaking anxiety among university students. The findings revealed that a large proportion of students experienced moderate to high levels of anxiety during English speaking activities.

Table 1: Overall English Speaking Anxiety Level

Anxiety Level	Frequency (n=105)	Percentage
Low Anxiety	18	17.1%
Moderate Anxiety	56	53.3%
High Anxiety	31	29.6%
Total	105	100%

The results indicate that **82.9% of students experienced moderate or high speaking anxiety**, demonstrating that English oral communication remains a challenging area for many Pakistani university learners. Only 17.1% of students reported low anxiety, suggesting that confident English speakers represent a relatively smaller proportion of the sample.

These findings support previous research indicating that university students in Pakistan frequently experience anxiety due to limited speaking practice, fear of mistakes, and concerns about evaluation (Ahmed et al., 2025; Ullah et al., 2025).

7.2. Psychological Factors Contributing to Speaking Anxiety

The study examined psychological factors including fear of mistakes, lack of confidence, and fear of negative evaluation.

Table 2: Psychological Factors Affecting English Speaking Anxiety

Statements	Mean Score	Interpretation
I feel nervous when speaking English in front of others	4.12	High
I fear making grammatical mistakes while speaking	4.25	High
I worry that classmates may criticize my English	3.98	High
I lack confidence during	4.08	High

English conversations		
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The findings demonstrate that **fear of grammatical mistakes (M = 4.25)** was the strongest psychological factor influencing speaking anxiety. Students reported that concern about incorrect sentences, pronunciation errors, and peer judgment often prevented them from participating actively in English conversations.

Similarly, lack of confidence (M = 4.08) emerged as a significant barrier. Many students indicated that they understood English but felt uncomfortable using it orally. These results align with recent studies showing that self-confidence and fear of evaluation strongly influence learners' willingness to communicate in English (Ahmed et al., 2025).

7.3. Linguistic Factors Influencing Speaking Anxiety

The study further explored linguistic difficulties that contribute to students' anxiety.

Table 3: Linguistic Causes of English Speaking Anxiety

Statements	Mean Score	Interpretation
Limited vocabulary affects my ability to express ideas	4.18	High
Pronunciation difficulties reduce my speaking confidence	3.94	High
Grammar concerns prevent me from speaking freely	4.05	High
I struggle to respond quickly in English conversations	4.10	High

The findings reveal that vocabulary limitations were the most significant linguistic factor (M = 4.18). Students often experienced difficulty expressing their thoughts because they could not recall appropriate words during spontaneous communication.

Grammar-related concerns (M = 4.05) also contributed significantly to anxiety. Many learners focused excessively on producing error-free sentences, which reduced fluency and increased hesitation. These findings support previous research emphasizing that limited linguistic resources increase cognitive pressure during second language communication (Asim, 2025).

7.4. Classroom and Teacher-Related Factors

The study examined how classroom practices and teacher behavior influence English-speaking anxiety.

Table 4: Classroom Factors Affecting Speaking Anxiety

Statements	Mean Score	Interpretation
Limited speaking activities	4.20	High

increase my anxiety		
Teacher criticism affects my confidence	3.87	High
Group activities help me speak more confidently	4.15	High
Supportive teacher feedback reduces my anxiety	4.32	High

The results indicate that supportive teacher feedback was considered the most effective anxiety-reducing factor ($M = 4.32$). Students reported that encouragement from teachers increased their confidence and willingness to participate.

Limited speaking opportunities also contributed significantly to anxiety ($M = 4.20$). Students who rarely practiced oral communication felt less prepared for presentations and classroom discussions.

These findings highlight the importance of creating supportive and interactive ESL classrooms where learners can practice English without fear of criticism.

7.5. Effects of Speaking Anxiety on Academic Participation

The study also investigated the consequences of speaking anxiety on students' academic experiences.

Table 5: Effects of Speaking Anxiety

Statements	Mean Score	Interpretation
Anxiety prevents me from participating in discussions	4.16	High
I avoid English presentations because of nervousness	4.05	High
Anxiety affects my academic confidence	4.12	High
I hesitate to communicate with teachers in English	3.96	High

The results demonstrate that speaking anxiety negatively influenced students' classroom engagement. Many students avoided presentations and discussions despite having relevant knowledge. Anxiety also reduced students' confidence in academic communication. These findings suggest that speaking anxiety is not only a language learning issue but also an academic participation challenge.

7.6. Students' Perceptions of Anxiety-Reduction Strategies

Participants were asked about teaching strategies that could help reduce English-speaking anxiety.

Table 6: Effective Pedagogical Strategies

Strategies	Mean Score	Interpretation
More classroom speaking activities	4.40	Highly Effective
Pair and group discussions	4.35	Highly Effective

Positive teacher feedback	4.32	Highly Effective
Role plays and presentations	4.18	Effective
Technology-based speaking practice	4.10	Effective

The findings indicate that students strongly preferred interactive teaching approaches. More speaking activities, collaborative discussions, and supportive feedback were considered the most effective strategies for improving confidence and reducing anxiety.

7.7. Summary of Findings

The survey findings demonstrate that English-speaking anxiety is a significant issue among Pakistani university students. The major causes identified were:

1. Fear of grammatical mistakes
2. Limited vocabulary
3. Lack of confidence
4. Fear of negative evaluation
5. Limited speaking opportunities

The consequences included reduced classroom participation, avoidance of presentations, and decreased academic confidence. Students suggested that interactive teaching approaches, supportive feedback, and increased speaking practice could effectively reduce anxiety.

8. Discussion

The study examined English-speaking anxiety among 105 graduate students from three Lahore universities and found that most participants experienced moderate to high levels of anxiety. The findings indicate that English speaking difficulties are influenced by psychological, linguistic, and classroom-related factors. These results support previous research showing that foreign language anxiety negatively affects learners' willingness to communicate and oral performance (Teimouri et al., 2022).

Fear of making mistakes emerged as the strongest cause of speaking anxiety. Students often avoided English communication because they feared grammatical errors, pronunciation problems, and negative evaluation. This finding supports Horwitz et al.'s (1986) theory that communication apprehension and fear of evaluation are major dimensions of foreign language anxiety.

The results also revealed that low confidence reduced students' participation in classroom discussions and presentations. Recent studies confirm that self-confidence and emotional support significantly influence learners' willingness to communicate in English (Ahmed et al., 2025).

Limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, and grammar concerns were identified as major linguistic barriers. Students reported hesitation when they could not

quickly recall words or construct accurate sentences. Similar findings suggest that inadequate linguistic resources increase cognitive pressure and reduce speaking fluency among ESL learners (Asim, 2025).

The findings highlight the importance of classroom practices in shaping students' speaking experiences. Limited speaking opportunities and teacher-centered instruction increased anxiety, whereas supportive feedback and interactive activities improved confidence. A positive classroom environment helps lower emotional barriers and encourages students to participate actively (Ahmed et al., 2024).

9. Pedagogical Implications

The study suggests several strategies for reducing English-speaking anxiety:

- **Communicative Language Teaching:** Regular discussions, debates, role plays, and presentations can improve confidence and speaking fluency.
- **Supportive Feedback:** Teachers should provide constructive feedback and treat errors as part of language development.
- **Collaborative Learning:** Pair and group activities can create less threatening environments for anxious learners.
- **Technology Integration:** Digital speaking tools and online practice platforms can provide additional opportunities for low-pressure communication.

10. Conclusion

The study concludes that English-speaking anxiety remains a significant challenge among Pakistani university students. Fear of mistakes, limited vocabulary, low confidence, and fear of evaluation were identified as major causes of anxiety. This anxiety negatively affects classroom participation, academic presentations, and communication confidence.

Reducing speaking anxiety requires a shift from traditional teacher-centered instruction toward interactive, learner-centered approaches. Supportive classrooms, increased speaking opportunities, and effective pedagogical practices can enhance students' confidence and English communication skills.

11. Recommendations

1. Universities should increase opportunities for English speaking practice through discussions and presentations.
2. Teachers should adopt supportive feedback strategies to reduce fear of mistakes.
3. ESL courses should focus on both fluency and accuracy.
4. Collaborative and technology-supported learning activities should be integrated into English classrooms.
5. Teacher training programs should address strategies for managing learner anxiety.

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