

## Research Article

# Understanding the Triggers of English-Speaking Anxiety among University Students: A Cross-Cultural Mixed-Methods Study

Tauqeer Ali Rajpar<sup>1</sup> , Abdul Malik Abbasi<sup>2</sup> , Abdullah Laghari<sup>3</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Department of English, Sindh Madressatul Islam University, Karachi, Pakistan

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Language and Culture Studies, Sindh Madressatul Islam University, Karachi, Pakistan

<sup>3</sup>Department of English, Quaid-e-Awaam University of Engineering, Science and Technology, Sindh, Pakistan

### Abstract

This study investigates the prevalence and underlying triggers of speech anxiety among ESL undergraduate students at the institute in Pakistan. The study is primarily grounded on Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1988), Horwitz et al.'s Foreign Language Anxiety framework (1986), and Brown's (2000) socio-affective and personality constructs, using these theories to interpret English speech anxiety in ESL learners. Recognizing English as both an official language and a critical tool for academic and professional advancement, the research examines how the pressure to speak flawlessly can lead to heightened anxiety, self-consciousness, and performance impediments in the classroom. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study first distributed a 30-item Likert-scale questionnaire to 40 BS English students to quantitatively gauge anxiety levels, followed by semi-structured interviews with a subset of 10 students and several English language teachers to explore the contextual and personal dimensions of communication apprehension. The findings reveal that many learners experience significant nervousness and fear-manifested through physical symptoms such as trembling and mental blocks-when required to speak publicly in English, which in turn undermines their fluency and self-esteem. The paper discusses effective strategies adopted by students, such as practicing with peers, extra tutoring, and reading aloud, and underscores the need for educators to foster supportive classroom environments that reduce performance pressure while encouraging active participation. These insights offer valuable implications for language instruction and curriculum design aimed at mitigating speech anxiety and enhancing overall language proficiency. ESL teaching should nurture supportive classrooms, lower evaluation anxiety, and boost student confidence. Curriculum and teacher training should focus on spoken interaction and minimizing stressors. The study recommends future research on the long-term impact of anxiety reduction on language fluency, broader sampling, cross-institutional or cross-cultural comparisons, and qualitative work to improve interventions for ESL learners.

**Keywords:** Understanding, Triggers, Speech Anxiety, English, Communication Skills, ESL Learners, ELT Teachers

 Correspondence  
Abdul Malik Abbasi  
[amabbasi@smiu.edu.pk](mailto:amabbasi@smiu.edu.pk)

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This research investigates the challenges faced by undergraduate English students at the institute, Karachi in speech proficiency. It identifies triggers affecting their English-speaking skills and explores strategies to boost confidence in public speaking and ESL classrooms. The study also provides recommendations for effective speech communication and overall development. English creates a sense of global community. Since the mid-20th century, it has become widely spoken and understood around the world. As the language of media, advertisements, road signs, and menus, English serves as a lingua franca, enabling international understanding (Crystal, 2003). In today's era, it would not be unreasonable to assert that proficiency in English is essential for thriving in the global village, as this language is pivotal for library

resources and academic scholarship. A significant portion of the literature available in libraries is written in English. Whether it is classroom instruction or flight instructions, English serves as the primary medium of communication. According to Robert Eaglestone, English is the third most popular subject, following computer studies and business studies (Eaglestone, 2000). Business activities and transactions are predominantly conducted in English, which is closely associated with prestige and a cultured intellect.

Given its cultural significance, English was introduced in the subcontinent to humanize its people and in London during the Industrial Revolution to civilize the influx of individuals from rural areas (Eaglestone, 2000). In Pakistan, English holds official status and is the language of the constitution and administration. Neglecting this language equates to overlooking one's opportunities for success and career advancement. For those aspiring to leadership roles, proficiency in English is indispensable. Despite its official status and its inclusion as a compulsory subject from elementary to advanced levels, many students struggle to articulate their experiences, convey their messages clearly, and negotiate effectively in English. As Rao (2019) highlights, effective communication is crucial for fulfilling one's desires and achieving goals, especially in a rapidly changing global context. With the world becoming increasingly interconnected, English has attained the status of a global lingua franca and is widely used in business, education, travel, banking, and newspapers.

### 1.1. Problem Statement

In the public sector education, classrooms are often dominated by teacher talk, discouraging student questions. This contrasts with varied approaches in the private sector. English is perceived as a superior language, causing anxiety for students when speaking it publicly. This fear stems from its association with cultured individuals and a lack of encouragement to share ideas, leading to self-consciousness about mistakes and evaluations. Such anxiety can hinder undergraduate students' speaking skills, essential for personal growth, career advancement, and success in any organization.

### 1.2. Objectives

- To find out how anxiety affects students' performance in speaking.
- To explore how ESL learners with speech anxiety can enhance their English proficiency.

### 1.3. Research Questions

- How does anxiety affect the student's performance in speaking?
- How can ESL learners with speech anxiety enhance their English Proficiency?

### 1.4. Significance of the Study

English is one of the important languages. It is widely spoken and understood; therefore, it should be prioritized and learnt to succeed. Students start learning it since schools days despite they face various issues in learning it this study aims to help students overcome these challenges and speak English fluently and confidently, not only in the classroom but also out of the classroom by doing so, students will be better equipped to succeed in their academic and professional careers, where English is often the primary language used for the communication.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

English in Pakistan is utilized as a second language (ESL) rather than a foreign language, due to its prevalent use in courts, educational institutions, and schools. Nevertheless, students often experience anxiety when using English, attributed to various triggers. One significant factor includes instructors with high language proficiency and pronunciation standards, which can intimidate and heighten anxiety levels among new learners (Abbasi, 2020).

Rajar and Shoukat (2023) characterize anxiety as more of an impediment than an aid. He highlights the detrimental impact of anxiety on students' oral performance and suggests that educators frequently overlook this emotional state, attributing students' struggles to a lack of motivation or low performance. This neglect exacerbates the issue, as the failure to identify and address this emotional condition with appropriate strategies intensifies the problem. Research regarding Intermediate Pakistani students from the public sector indicates that anxiety in foreign language learning hampers acquisition, leading learners to struggle with verbalizing their thoughts and beliefs (Liu & Huang, 2011). They further illustrate that classroom anxiety has a debilitating effect; heightened fear diminishes learning capacity and raises concerns about tests and evaluations. Conversely, motivated learners tend to outperform those affected by apprehension and worry.

Khusnia (2016) argues that anxious students become self-conscious, rendering them sensitive to others' opinions and viewing themselves through the lens of these perceptions. Mistakes trigger self-criticism and may result in diminished interest in language learning. The researcher identifies numerous triggers contributing to anxiety (Nazir et al., 2012; Horwitz et al., 1986). Horwitz et al. posit that foreign language learning induces varying levels of anxiety, potentially leading to avoidance behaviors. Fear can immobilize learners, impair memory recall, and transform their perception of teachers into figures of intimidation. Consequently, rather than engaging in intellectual activities, students may focus on evading teachers' attention, thus stifling their ability to articulate their perspectives. Fear fosters demotivation, prompting learners to withdraw from language classes. Such experiences cultivate a negative orientation towards the language, causing students to undervalue themselves and discontinue language learning endeavors.

Language learning involves both cognitive and personality triggers. A person's personality is influenced by social triggers and traits such as self-esteem, motivation, inhibition, risk-taking, and anxiety. Brown (2000) notes that anxiety is associated with feelings of frustration, nervousness, and worry. He references Scovel, who defined anxiety as a state of apprehension and fear. The term anxiety can be vague due to its psychological nature and its dual functions: positive stimuli can encourage participation and learning, while negative stimuli can discourage it. Both types of stimuli have broader implications beyond classroom practices (Horwitz, 1986).

Bailey (1983) suggests that a learner's self-image can lead to either facilitative or debilitating anxiety, impacting their learning positively or negatively. Additionally, students' attitudes toward teachers and the language can affect their learning experiences. Krashen's Second Language Learning (SLA) model includes five hypotheses: Acquisition Learning Hypothesis, Natural Order Hypothesis, Monitor Hypothesis, Input Hypothesis, and the Affective Filter Hypothesis. The affective filter refers to the emotional states of a person, such as attitudes, needs, anger, boredom, and apprehension, which can influence the learning process (Patsy & Spada, 2011). Sadighi and Dastpak (2017) identify anxiety as an affective factor that negatively impacts learners, primarily due to insufficient vocabulary, assessments, and fear of making mistakes in public.

As noted by Abdullah and Rahman (2010), proficiency in English is valued, particularly in professional settings. However, many students face challenges in speaking English, often because teachers expect high performance from them at an early stage. Students who avoid speaking in class may experience anxiety, fear of judgment, and negative evaluations. To address this issue, teachers should adopt methods that cater to all students' learning strengths to reduce stress levels.

The English language is a core component of modern education systems due to its global significance. However, encouraging students to speak in the target language presents numerous challenges, largely attributed to speaking anxiety. This issue transcends linguistic barriers and is regarded as a social problem within educational institutions. Speaking in a second language, such as English, is particularly difficult for individuals who are less talkative or have not received encouragement from an early age, leading to weaker communicative behaviors. Consequently, these students struggle to achieve proficiency and fluency in English due to the pervasive fear associated with anxiety. The attitudes and behaviors of parents regarding outspokenness significantly influence children's verbal skills. Students who have not been habituated to speaking face significant hurdles upon reaching school age and often remain silent due to self-consciousness and fear of ridicule. These quieter students often receive less attention from teachers

compared to their more vocal and assertive peers. The calm and passive demeanor exhibited by less talkative students is indicative of underlying fear and anxiety triggered by their environment.

Kucuk and Daskan (2024) argued that the prevalence of anxiety in the context of learning English surges, manifesting through increased body temperature, sweating, fear, stress, and accelerated heartbeats. Unmanaged anxiety can be detrimental, especially during critical events like interviews, leading to adverse outcomes for students. It often intensifies in academic settings, causing severe reactions that hinder performance. Anxiety impedes students' ability to articulate their knowledge and thoughts, diminishing self-confidence and instilling a fear of mistakes and academic evaluation. This results in students being unable to express themselves effectively, ultimately impacting their academic success negatively.

Abbasi et al. (2019a) argue that academic and social anxiety directly impact ESL learners' performance and cognitive abilities. The competitive nature of academics in the twenty-first century intensifies this anxiety. Students often experience a desire to succeed while fearing failure, which contributes significantly to their anxiety. The study highlights that students' aim for social acceptance can be a major source of this anxiety. Abbasi (2020) states that the phonetic and cognitive aspects of communication skills, such as pronunciation, grammar, listening, and reading skills, are identified as significant techniques for university students in Pakistan.

Weak English-speaking skills at the university level are often linked to outdated teaching methods in schools and colleges. Abbasi (2011) found that private sector teachers in Pakistan use more effective strategies for ESL learners than those in the public sector. The study recommends teacher training, workshops, and seminars to help ESL teachers adopt modern classroom methods and improve students' English communication skills. Abbasi et al. (2019b) note that English speech anxiety in classrooms is influenced by various factors, including the teacher's high language proficiency and pronunciation, which can increase anxiety for new students. While nervousness is natural when speaking a second language, Pakistani English speakers are encouraged to overcome this anxiety.

Channa and Abbasi (2018) provide evidence that engineering students can enhance their reading comprehension skills by implementing metacognitive strategies. Channa and Abbasi (2018) reported that students encountered challenges in comprehending texts because of inadequate prior knowledge, which led them to depend on dictionaries. Consistent with these findings, the present research indicates that many students lack sufficient background information and experience considerable reading difficulties. Nordin et al. (2018) recommend promoting students' metacognitive skills in all settings, such as summer camps and modern reading materials. Engineering students recognized their reading strengths and weaknesses, which helped them monitor their comprehension. Channa, Abbasi et al. (2023) reported that classroom observations corroborated interview data, confirming that the implementation of metacognitive scaffolding and strategic approaches can enhance students' reading comprehension. Channa and Abbasi (2018) identified metacognitive strategies—such as reflective thinking, text scanning, summarization, and self-questioning—as essential components for achieving effective reading comprehension.

Additionally, weak English-speaking skills at the university level may result from ineffective teaching methods at the school and college levels. To investigate the teaching strategies used for ESL learners at the intermediate level in Pakistan, Abbasi (2011) conducted research using both quantitative and qualitative methods with a sample of 40 English language teachers from public and private sectors. The study concluded that while private sector institutions employ more effective strategies compared to the older strategies used by the public sector, there is a significant need for teacher training programs, workshops, and seminars for ESL teachers. These initiatives aim to equip teachers with modern methods to enhance students' English communication skills. Abbasi et al. (2019a) emphasize that to practice all four core skills of the English language and allocate enough time to each one of them on a daily basis. Revision keeps the vocabulary active and thus helps achieve fluency in using any language in order to avoid speech anxiety.

Nazir et al. (2014) English is a crucial global language, but anxiety can hinder students' ability to learn and speak it effectively. In Pakistan, speaking English is vital, yet many ESL and EFL students struggle with it despite proficiency in other skills. To reduce anxiety, it's important to prepare students before speaking, avoid interruptions during speaking, and encourage them to post-speaking.

Gumartifa and Syahri (2021) argue that the importance of learning English, including the four skills—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—is stressed for both teachers and students. Speaking is

especially challenging due to triggers like anxiety, motivation, depression, shyness, and confidence. Continuous practice is crucial for mastering pronunciation, intonation, and expression. Teachers can help by assessing and addressing student anxiety through questions or interviews. Yalçın and İnceçay (2014) state that speaking a foreign language, particularly English, can be daunting for anxious learners, impacting their performance. Identifying and reducing anxiety is key; students feel less stressed with lower pressure and more success. Teachers should encourage spontaneous practice and group activities to create a non-threatening environment, helping to alleviate the fear of speaking and reduce anxiety.

Putri et al. (2020) argue that speaking English is challenging in terms of teaching and learning. It encompasses four major skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking, with speaking being the most daunting for students compared to the other skills. Despite significant efforts to improve their speaking abilities, many learners struggle to speak English proficiently, a problem that is widespread. Anxiety hampers the learning process and negatively affects students' performance. Students often feel anxious when required to speak or answer questions in English.

Triggers contributing to this anxiety include:

1. Self-perception: Students' behavior and self-judgment play a crucial role. Negative self-perceptions can exacerbate anxiety and severely impact their ability to learn English. This issue should not be overlooked.
2. Beliefs about English language learning: Students often strive to mimic native accents, focusing on pronunciation rather than clarity. Effective communication should prioritize accurate pronunciation over accent imitation.
3. Teachers' beliefs and actions: Teachers who emphasize correction over supportive learning can increase student anxiety. Educators should adopt positive reinforcement strategies to alleviate stress and foster learning.
4. Classroom procedures: Requiring students to speak English in front of peers can provoke anxiety and discomfort. Voluntary participation and small group interactions can reduce pressure and create a more relaxed learning environment. Implementing these strategies can help mitigate anxiety and enhance students' confidence and proficiency in speaking English.

Tercan and Dikilitaş (2015) state that learning a foreign language is closely linked to human psychology and influences triggers such as the motivation and attitude of learners. Anxiety experienced by students during the learning process can decrease their learning potential. Lower anxiety levels can be beneficial for students, aiding them in achieving their language learning goals and speeding up the learning process. Conversely, high anxiety levels can impede the learning process and lead to failure. Thus, anxiety is recognized as a significant predictor in language learning. Anxiety in foreign language learning is influenced by triggers like tests and assessments, which can hinder the learning process. A lack of formative assessment, where students' learning and performance are regularly evaluated, also contributes to anxiety. Al Hosni (2014) argues that speaking skills are an active use of language that facilitates understanding, learning, and practice. However, speaking English as a foreign language is challenging for many. The main purpose of education is to develop students' communication skills for life. For effective language learning, four elements are crucial: the opportunity to use the language, motivation, instruction, and practice. Ur (1996) identifies several triggers that inhibit students from speaking English: 1. Inhibition—students worry about making mistakes and fear criticism; 2. Lack of motivation to speak; 3. Low or uneven participation—large classes allow only one participant to speak at a time, with minimal participation from others; 4. Use of the mother tongue—students find it easier to communicate in their native language and often revert to it during class discussions.

Teachers should be well-trained in teaching English, especially in speaking skills. Many teachers are unaware of effective strategies, often focusing solely on grammar and vocabulary, neglecting spoken English. This needs improvement and a curriculum that includes speaking activities to provide more opportunities for students. Andas (2020) states that English has four skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Speaking is the most essential and complex skill due to components like morphology, syntax, and discourse. Students face issues like inhibition, fear of mistakes and criticism, lack of participation, limited vocabulary, and grammar knowledge. These contribute to their reluctance to speak.

### 3. METHODS

This study employs a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Participants include teachers and students from the university. A questionnaire with thirty questions was distributed to 40 male and female students to evaluate anxiety and confidence levels; data were analyzed quantitatively. Additionally, ten students and three teachers participated in interviews, which were thematically analyzed. The study ensures ethical considerations, including voluntary participation and confidentiality. Thus, the methodology integrates both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

#### 3.1. Research Design

Design Type is a mixed-methods-combining quantitative (30-item Likert-scale questionnaire for 40 English undergraduates to assess anxiety trends and symptoms) and qualitative (semi-structured interviews with 10 students and some ESL instructors to examine emotional and instructional triggers in speech anxiety) phases. Research design was utilized as a convergent parallel since quantitative and qualitative phases occur simultaneously, with findings integrated for comparison. Purposive sampling was used to ensure the varied anxiety levels and communication behaviors among interviewees. The theoretical framework was based on Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, Horwitz et al.'s anxiety constructs, and Brown's personality variables, guiding both study design and analysis. This triangulated approach enhances credibility by aligning self-reported data with observed behaviors and contextual cues. All related ethical protocols were carried out to ensure the quality of the results. Administration of the instruments was applied face-to-face for semi-structured interviews and online for those who filled out the questionnaires through WhatsApp.

#### 3.2. Participants

The consent form was filled out by the participants who took part in the study. The quantitative participation of forty undergraduate students from the BS English program were recruited at an institute, and a 30-item Likert-scale questionnaire focused on symptoms and causes of speech anxiety. Qualitative participation of a subset of 10 students, semi-structured interviews, and purposive sampling to capture a variety of anxiety experiences. The study also included several ESL teachers who were interviewed to provide insight into teaching practices and classroom dynamics influencing speech anxiety. The purpose behind the selection was for students to represent firsthand experiences of English speech anxiety in a Pakistani university ESL context. For the teachers to offer complementary perspectives on classroom practices, performance pressure, and student engagement challenges. The purposive sampling technique ensures the qualitative phase reflects a range of anxiety levels—capturing both highly anxious and moderately affected students.

The research involved 50 participants, including 40 undergraduate students and 10 ELT teachers. The participants, selected voluntarily, included male and female students.

**Table 1.** Data Analysis

SN	Statement	SA	A	N	DA	SDA
1	I never feel quite sure of myself when I speak English in ESL class.	14.6	43.9	17.1	17.1	7.3
2	I tremble when I know that I am going to be called on in English class.	17.1	31.1	26.8	14.6	9.8
3	I feel panicky when I need to speak without preparation in class.	29.3	31.7	24.4	16.6	14.6
4	In ESL Class, I get nervous, and I forget things I know.	12.2	31.7	19.5	29.3	7.3
5	It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in ESL class.	12.2	22	22	31.7	12.2
6	I feel my heart pounding when I am asked a question in ESL class.	9.8	36.6	22	24.4	7.3
7	I always feel that other students speak English better than I do.	17.1	39	26.8	12.2	4.9
8	I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of students.	22	34.1	19.5	17.1	7.3
9	B/c of the poor pronunciation, I feel speech anxiety when I speak English	12.2	36.6	14.6	24.4	12.2

SN	Statement	SA	A	N	DA	SDA
10	I feel more nervous in my ESL class as compared to other classes.	17.1	29.3	14.6	22	171
11	I get nervous when I do not understand English, the teacher utters.	12.2	29.3	22	26.8	9.8
12	I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I learn to speak English.	14.6	43.9	17.1	19.5	4.9
13	I start to panic when I must speak in front of my classmates.	12.2	39	4.9	34.1	9.8
14	My mind goes blank when I'm called on to respond to a question in English	26.8	17.1	19.5	31.7	4.9
15	I worry about making grammatical mistakes when speaking in ESL class.	22	36.6	22	14.6	4.9
16	It frightens me when the teacher communicates in native like English.	22	195	14.6	31.7	12.2
17	I get upset while presenting projects/assignments on PowerPoint when the teacher gives feedback.	31.7	26.8	31.7	12.2	14.6
18	The more I study for an oral presentation, the more confused I get.	19.5	19.5	22	19.5	12.2
19	SL class moves so quickly, I worry about missing something behind.	17.1	19.5	19.5	36.6	7.3
20	I want to improve my English pronunciation to sound native like.	34.1	34.1	24.4	4.9	2.4
21	I practice speaking with class fellows to enhance my English fluency.	17.1	48.8	26.8	7.3	
22	I read aloud to polish my English pronunciation.	24.4	31.7	26.8	17.1	
23	I take extra classes to work on my speaking skills.	19.5	244	17.1	34.1	4.9
24	I join a language exchange program to practice speaking with others.	14.6	29.3	17.1	34.1	4.9
25	I want to learn how to express myself more clearly in English.	34.1	48.8	7.3	4.9	4.9
26	I wish I could understand the teacher's corrections and feedback better.	22	48.8	12.2	12.2	4.9
27	I want to be able to speak English more confidently and fluently.	41.5	53.7			4.9
28	I hope to improve my listening skills to better understand English.	36.6	43.9	12.2	7.3	4.8
29	I want to learn how to use English grammar rules more correctly.	36.6	51.2	7.3	5.6	4.9
30	I wish I could speak English without feeling nervous and anxious.	41.5	34.1	19.5	2.4	2.4

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Anxiety and Nervousness

Statements 1, 2, 3, 6, 13, 14, and 30 show a significant percentage of feelings such as panic, trembling, and difficulty thinking clearly when required to speak publicly. Responses to these statements indicate apprehension, which is common in the ESL context, with 41.5 percent strongly agreeing and expressing their anxiety while being observed. Analysis reveals that anxiety is prevalent among students when they need to express their ideas in class.

Fear and nervousness are prominent triggers in responses. The table indicates that over 40 percent of students experience considerable anxiety and apprehension when speaking English. Many students agree with statements indicating feelings of nervousness and report consistently feeling apprehensive and overwhelmed when it comes to expressing their thoughts in English, especially during presentations. Despite regular practice and efforts to build confidence, most students still encounter confusion, hesitation, and stress when presenting or participating in ESL activities.

This widespread fear and nervousness significantly hinder their ability to express themselves effectively and confidently in English class, limiting their potential for language development. Additionally, this anxiety affects their oral communication skills and overall learning experience, making it difficult for them to engage fully with course materials and interact meaningfully with peers, particularly in English.

This study identifies physiological and psychological symptoms of speech anxiety in ESL students, including trembling, mind blanks, fear of evaluation, and avoidance. These findings align with existing regional and international research, highlighting both relevance and unaddressed gaps.

#### 4.2. Physiological Anxiety Responses

Kucuk and Daskan (2024) found that increased body temperature and cardiovascular responses are common anxiety markers in ESL settings, supporting the view that speech-related anxiety triggers acute physical reactions. Further psychophysiological research is warranted, particularly in South Asian contexts.

#### 4.3. Emotional and Self-Perceptual Struggles

The students often feel inferior and fear public speaking due to language errors, a trend also observed by Khusnia (2016) and Putri et al. (2020). These studies show that negative self-image leads to anxiety and silence across cultures, highlighting the importance of confidence-building in education.

#### 4.4. Performance Pressure and Cognitive Load

Many participants faced mental blocks and forgetfulness during presentations, even when prepared. This aligns with Liu and Huang (2011), who observed similar articulation issues in Pakistani intermediate students under academic pressure. Together, these findings suggest that pre-presentation anxiety management training may help address cognitive-affective overload.

#### 4.5. Classroom Dynamics and Teacher Influence

The study finds that rapid instruction and a focus on accuracy increase anxiety, echoing Yalçın and İnceçay (2014), who note that high-pressure correctional settings hinder spontaneous communication. This supports a move toward process-oriented ESL teaching that encourages safe, student-centered speaking. By connecting their results to broader research, Rajpar and Abbasi (2025) contribute to understanding ESL speech anxiety as part of a wider trend, providing a basis for targeted pedagogical and policy recommendations.

#### 4.6. Negative Self-perception

Some students perceive themselves as less proficient in English compared to their peers, believing that others speak better English. Statements 7 and 8 indicate that students become self-conscious and believe others excel in English, which leads to heightened awareness when speaking in front of classmates. Statements 9, 15, and 16 suggest that students experience anxiety during speaking due to poor pronunciation, grammatical mistakes, and interacting with native speakers.

#### 4.7. Performance Pressure

Statements 4, 5, 17, and 18 indicate that many students feel pressured and overwhelmed when presenting projects in ESL class. They sometimes forget their material and experience mental blocks despite preparation, which affects their participation in ESL classes.

#### 4.8. Efforts to Improve English

Statements numbered 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, and 25 show that students are keen to improve their speaking skills. For language improvement, they follow various strategies, including practicing with classmates, taking extra classes, participating in exchange programs, and reading out loud. These statements reflect their enthusiasm for improving their English language proficiency.

The second theme is closely aligned with the first one, indicating a desire to enhance the target language. The table shows that over 40 percent of students are motivated to improve their English-speaking skills. To achieve this goal, they are willing to put in extra effort by taking additional classes, practicing regularly, and focusing on mastering English grammar rules. Effective learning strategies adopted by these students include reading aloud to improve pronunciation and practicing English with classmates.

These initiatives demonstrate students' commitment and willingness to overcome language barriers hindering their ability to improve their English skills.

The table reveals that more than 20 students lack motivation to enhance their English proficiency, struggling with self-doubt and comparing themselves unfavorably to peers. This group exhibits characteristics such as a lack of motivation, confidence, and feeling overwhelmed by grammar rules and vocabulary, as evident from their responses.

#### 4.9. Understanding and Feedback from Teachers

Many students find ESL classes challenging, struggling to keep up with teachers and feedback.

#### 4.10. Desire for Mastery of Language Skills

The table outlines fear, nervousness, desire, and motivation. Students feel insecure and nervous, sometimes pushing them to work harder. Teachers are aware of this and aim to provide frequent exposure and motivation to boost their confidence.

**Table 2.** Comparable Findings

Symptoms in the Current Study	Comparable Findings in Recent Literature
Trembling, heart pounding, mind going blank during public speaking	Kucuk and Daskan (2024): Noted increased body temperature, sweating, and accelerated heartbeat as markers of classroom anxiety. These mirror physiological distress signals found in this study.
Fear of speaking due to grammatical mistakes and pronunciation errors	Putri et al. (2020): Learners feel anxious when speaking/answering in class due to fear of errors; Abbasi et al. (2019) highlight phonetic and cognitive insecurities as triggers.
Self-comparison and perceived inferiority to peers	Khusnia (2016): Emphasizes students' hypersensitivity to peer performance, often resulting in diminished classroom participation.
Mental blocks and forgetfulness during presentations	Liu and Huang (2011): Pakistani intermediate students experience memory issues and poor idea articulation under evaluation pressure.
Overwhelm from fast-paced ESL instruction and excessive correction	Yalçın and İnceçay (2014): Students report less anxiety when given time, autonomy, and safe space for speaking—highlighting the role of instructional style in exacerbating stress.

Thematic analysis was conducted in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Interview transcripts were manually coded using Excel, and codes were systematically organized into themes, including 'fear of evaluation,' 'teacher influence,' and 'peer perception,' informed by the frameworks proposed by Krashen and Horwitz. Inter-coder reliability was ensured through cross-verification by members of the research team.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Students in ESL class often experience self-doubt and anxiety, which can result in performance pressure, poor pronunciation, and grammatical errors. Interviews and survey results indicate that many students have a strong desire to improve their English language skills. They adopt strategies such as practicing with classmates, taking extra classes, and reading aloud to enhance their proficiency. Despite these efforts, many students struggle to speak English fluently and express themselves effectively in the ESL classroom. They frequently face challenges due to low confidence and the complexity of grammar rules and vocabulary. The findings suggest that addressing self-doubt and anxiety is crucial for these

students. Providing a welcoming and supportive learning environment, along with constructive feedback and motivation, can help them overcome language barriers. Notably, 40 percent of the students expressed a willingness to improve their speaking skills.

In conclusion, many students experience self-doubt, anxiety, and performance pressure due to peer perception. Statements 7, 8, 9, 15, and 16 indicate that students feel overwhelmed, pressured, and depressed, and suffer mental blocks caused by poor pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and interactions with native speakers who possess high proficiency. Over 40 percent of the students, however, demonstrate determination, enthusiasm, commitment, and love for speaking English. They exert considerable effort and employ techniques such as reading aloud, conversing with classmates, and attending extra classes. Findings also show that over 20 percent of the students lack motivation and struggle with self-doubt, believing their English skills are inferior to those of their peers. These students feel highly self-conscious and fearful when speaking in English. Anxiety is a common experience, even among those proficient in English. It's normal to feel anxious, and students should be supported with a welcoming and healthy learning environment. Many hardworking students face anxiety despite their efforts and practice. It should be acknowledged that feeling anxious and empty-minded is okay. Over 20 percent of students admit feeling inferior about their English skills compared to their peers. They need continuous attention and motivation to feel valued and stay balanced in language learning. To improve English fluency, two techniques are highly effective: listening to English through movies, clips, broadcasts, and news; and speaking in English regularly. These methods quickly enhance language skills.

## 6. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Many ESL students face anxiety, self-doubt, and pressure in speaking English. A supportive classroom is essential. Teachers can reduce anxiety by using interactive learning, like small-group discussions, paired activities, and voluntary participation, to help students practice speaking confidently and reduce the fear of mistakes. To combat speaking anxiety, it is vital to add effective-oriented modules to the curriculum. Sessions on communication strategies, stress management, and self-reflection can help students overcome emotional barriers. Additionally, lowering the stakes of oral assessments and using regular, low-pressure formative assessments can enhance students' speaking skills and linguistic competence.

The study's results suggest that teacher training programs should include components aimed at identifying and reducing student anxiety. Educators should be trained to offer constructive feedback, employ positive reinforcement, and modify their teaching methods to suit various comfort levels. By understanding the psychological aspects of language learning, teachers can develop intervention strategies that address diverse student needs and assist them in overcoming self-consciousness. Students wanting to improve their English-speaking skills benefit from extra practice outside the classroom. Programs like language exchanges, conversation clubs, and online platforms provide informal environments for practice. These activities boost fluency and connect classroom learning with real-life communication. Reducing speech anxiety in Pakistan can greatly enhance English proficiency, which is essential for academic and professional success. Better oral skills increase students' confidence, allowing them to engage more in academic and workplace discussions. This promotes equitable education and effective lifelong communication, crucial in a diverse and interconnected world.

The study suggests several future research directions: examining long-term effects of anxiety-reduction on language fluency, using a larger and more diverse sample, and comparing anxiety across different educational institutions or cultures. Additionally, qualitative studies on individual experiences can refine interventions and adapt teaching methods for ESL learners.

### 6.1. Implications for Teachers-Students and for the Institutional Stakeholders

#### 6.1.1. Teachers

To reduce speech anxiety and foster confident communicators, teachers can:

Use low-anxiety teaching methods: Facilitate participation with approaches such as small group discussions, think-pair-share, and voluntary speaking turns instead of cold-calling. Offer process-focused feedback: Focus on progress, recognizing effort, ideas, and improvement rather than emphasizing grammar and pronunciation mistakes. Redesign assessments: Incorporate alternative oral evaluations, including video

submissions, peer interviews, or reflective speaking journals, to lower real-time pressure. Establish emotionally safe classrooms: Apply affective scaffolding strategies, like warm-up routines, humor, and norm-setting, to help normalize imperfection and alleviate fear of judgment. Demonstrate vulnerability: Share personal experiences of learning difficulties to present the teacher role as relatable and reduce stigma around making mistakes.

### 6.1.2. Students

Support learners by focusing on self-regulation and confidence: Graduated exposure: Begin with non-verbal participation, then advance to brief verbal responses. Audio diaries/shadowing: Record and imitate fluent speakers to improve delivery at your own pace. Cognitive reframing: Use affirmations to shift negative thoughts about language or accent. Peer support: Join conversation groups where mistakes are accepted. Monitor triggers: Keep a log of anxiety moments to recognize patterns and plan coping tactics.

### 6.1.3. Institutional Stakeholders

Universities can support students beyond academics by: Hosting speech anxiety workshops: Partner with psychology or counseling departments to teach resilience, visualization, and public speaking skills. Creating safe speaking zones: Set up informal campus spaces for relaxed English conversation. Including confidence goals in curricula: Make oral confidence-building a clear outcome in communication courses. Training language instructors: Provide ongoing CPD on trauma-informed teaching and inclusive speech practices. Valuing multilingualism: Run campaigns that challenge native-speaker bias and celebrate linguistic diversity.

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