

**Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review**

**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

**<https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11>**

**Investigating the sources of English-speaking anxiety among 18-20-year-old university learners: A qualitative case study**



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**Abstract**

This case study, with its association with language learning, aims to search for the main reasons for the level of anxiety among the learners while speaking English at Al-Musaddiq Institute of Higher Education, Kharian Campus. A qualitative method was applied which was completely based on a case study. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis was applied. The sample size of the study was 15 students of different disciplines of BS 1<sup>st</sup> semester. According to the findings of the study under research, the element of anxiety while speaking English includes the communication process, unknown fear of assessment, test anxiety, fear of forgetting lexical items, and shyness in the presence of double-sex education. Additionally, keeping in view the study, the learners facing fear of a high level of anxiety while speaking a foreign language have a personal opinion about themselves and are thinking of their poor performance speaking in front of others like their peers and teachers.

**Key words:** foreign language anxiety, English as second language, language learning and use, learners' experiences

**Introduction**

It is a matter of fact that English is an international language which is being spoken and taught around the world. It is playing a pivotal role in daily life communication. It has a great significance in present culture. Consequently, it opens new vistas of academic and professional opportunities and offers a chance of success to the learners in every walk of life. According to Harmer (as cited by Aydin, 2008), there are various significant reasons to learn English as a foreign language, including teaching learning curricula, advancement in one's career, moving abroad for different reasons, inclusion in elite culture and other desired goals. At the end of the learning process, learners are usually estimated to be well versed in different domains of the targeted language, like reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills and conversation ability, grammar, lexicon, pronunciation, fluency, etc. A number of English language learners are assumed to experience anxiety. Anxiety linked to second language acquisition is common among English learners (Lileikiene & Danilevicene, 2016). According to Horwitz (2001), weakness in the learning process is directly linked with anxiety. Such learners have a lot of apprehensions about learning a foreign language, and they suffer many academic as well as learning challenges. Anxiety is characterised as a negative feeling. It can occur in the circumstances of worry, dread, distress, panic, fright and unease (Zhiping & Paramasivam, 2013; Lashari & Umrani, 2023). Toubot and Seng (2018) are of the view that there are various means by which communicating publicly or presenting something orally anxiety reveals itself, like shooting blood pressure, trembling hands, weaknesses, uneasiness, disremembering what is learnt and having poor eye contact with the audience. Three main reasons for anxiety in foreign language classrooms have been mentioned by Horwitz's Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which categorises three primary grounds of foreign language classroom anxiety: (1) fear of speaking among the peers; (2) a negative self-evaluation of performance; and (3) fear of failure in language-related evaluation. Speaking English as a second language at Al-Musaddiq Institute of Higher Education, Kharian Campus,

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**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

often causes foreign language anxiety despite proficiency in the language being a key to success in the modern era. Working as an instructor at Al-Musaddiq Institute of Higher Education, Kharian Campus, the researcher has observed that the majority of SL students face anxiety problems while speaking and frequently forget relevant vocabulary and sentence structure. They often face a lack in the application of correct tense. Mantilla & Guevara (2018) state that anxiety entails a number of issues with oral output; when learners are under pressure and speaking a foreign language, they are assumed to forget vocabulary or basic grammatical structures. Furthermore, the learners can be worried that they won't be able to express their point of view effectively or speaking the foreign language will make them uneasy (Lashari et al., 2023). The primary objective of the study is to perceive the learners' personal opinions on whether they experience language anxiety in their respective classrooms among their peers. This is the main research problem.

## **Literature Review**

Among the communication skills – reading, writing, listening and speaking – the speaking form is the most efficient and basic form for human communication. Communication through speaking fulfils the process of verbal communication. Learners make an efficient endeavour to enhance their communication skills, mainly focusing on speaking what they learn or listen to, according to a study by Zaremba (2006). Speaking is the fundamental and an efficient ability which dominates the other abilities, including reading, writing and listening (Lashari, Umrani & Buriro, 2021; Lashari & Umrani, 2023). The British arrived in the subcontinent with the English language. Before the partition between India and Pakistan, educated and foreseeing personalities in our history encouraged the Muslims to learn this dominating language. As they were well aware, the English language was a strong weapon in the communication process. They viewed the English language as the future of the subcontinent. Presently, the English language is being used as a second language not only by students but also by other learners who belong to different walks of life. English has proved itself as a bridge for international communication, and the need for it is increasing day by day. It has become an effective tool for communication at different platforms and through different means. Mehmoodzadeh (2012) says that the need for the English language has increased worldwide for an effective communication skill among non-native speakers.

## **Speaking anxiety due to less opportunity for speaking**

In the environment of teacher-centred learning, learners can't nurture their critical and analytical thinking. As a result, the learners get fewer chances of speaking or participating in the speaking process. When they are encouraged to speak in English, they observe complications and face anxiety (Awan et al., 2010; Lashari & Umrani, 2023). Ahmed et al. (2017) conducted a survey study on Baluchistan University English language learners and found that understanding of connotative and denotative meaning systems was the leading cause of learners' anxiety.

Salehi and Marefat (2014) investigated that anxiety affected the test of English language proficiency. The findings of the research proved a statistically significant association between test anxiety and English language. Therefore, to enhance the academic performance of the learners, concerned teachers were suggested to solve the anxiety issue of the learners by altering the teacher-centred learning into student-centred learning. Waseem and Jibeen (2013) researched the link between Pakistani learners' motivation and anxiety for learning the English language.

According to Horwitz (2001), anxiety in learning English as a foreign language is a psychological issue which definitely has a negative impact on learners' personal psychology. Anxiety negatively affects the personal and interpersonal abilities of learners. Anxiety is a psychological factor affecting learners' academic performance in a classroom. Excessive anxiety gives birth to many other physical, mental and psychological issues, like low breathing, hypertension, stress, losing memory, heart palpitations, sweating, trembling hands and body, dryness in the mouth, headaches, digestive system issues, etc.

Anxiety is an intimidating mental state that reveals itself as stress, tension and fear (Ozturk & Gurbuz, 2014). Lacking in classroom discussions and not overcoming the anxiety level impacts negatively both national and international professional opportunities (Hassania & Rajab, 2012). Several research studies have revealed that anxiety in learning the English language negatively affects students' achievement and success. Ewald (2007) proclaims that students who face issues of anxiety while speaking are believed to fail because of having fear of failure, and the main cause is their own personal anxiety. They become worried about any error or mistake while communicating with others. This fear increases their anxiety level more and more. Mobarak (2020) found the causes of anxiety among students. The research revealed that communication anxiety, shyness, hesitation from the peers, criticism from other fellows and fear of the oral exam were the primary factors affecting the students' anxiety while speaking.

In the study by Kalsoom et al. (2021), in learning the English language, anxiety incitement is common, and speaking is one of the general skills that worsens it. To avoid such anxiety, the researcher recommended that the learners should encourage the importance of speaking skills. Fluency, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation in learning the English language can lead to better learning outcomes and enhance self-confidence. According to McCroskey (2015), a fear of peers is directly linked to an inability to trust and have confidence in one's own personal abilities and capabilities of conversation. There are many other issues affecting and impacting language use, but anxiety is the most crucial.

According to Ellis (2015), lack of knowledge in learning language may cause anxiety among students. However, a list of other factors is there which contribute to increasing students' anxiety levels, like assignment tasks, lack of peer work, teacher-centred learning, poor teaching methodologies, lack of a conducive learning environment, time management issues, and irrelevant teaching and learning materials. Furthermore, K & Alamelu (2020) explored the major causes and effects of anxiety. The findings highlighted the internal and external causes and effects of anxiety. External variables included language, grammar, peers and pronunciation, whereas stage fright, anxiety, insecurity, lack of confidence and shyness were considered internal factors.

Abbasi et al. (2019) explored the variables internal as well as external influencing the speaking skills of undergraduate students. He identified the complications and defined the solutions for how to overcome these barriers while speaking. It was observed that students feel uncomfortable and disturbed while learning and speaking the second language. It was suggested that the speakers having anxiety must speak in front of their peers to mitigate the level of anxiety. Teachers as facilitators must create a conducive learning environment and ought to encourage their students to participate in the 'Daily English Talk Programme' in the respective class among other peers. Here self-motivation and initiative both play a crucial role in improving speaking skills and

# **Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review**

**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

removing anxiety. Moreover, the learners should enhance their English vocabulary through different sources. Sari (2017) researched that uneasiness is the major cause faced by the students while speaking in English in a lecture hall. As a result of fear, which is due to many factors, they can't communicate confidently in front of others. The researcher of the study found four anxiety variables affect students' hesitation and nervousness while speaking in front of others: lack of expected outcomes in communication, test fear before tests, unknown fear of poor performance on evaluations and anxiety regarding English classes. According to Dundar (2013), there are many ways and classroom activities which can enhance the communication skills of students, like imitation, replication, reproduction, readers' theatre, frozen picture construction, scriptwriting, dramas and skits. All these methodologies and techniques offer a wide range of learning options, as evinced by the numerous emphases and purposes of the mentioned activities to enhance learners' communication skills in learning the English language.

## **Material and Methods**

To grasp the factors affecting the learning of EFL learners which produce anxiety while learning the English language, a qualitative case study approach was applied. The central focus of the study remained on the learning experiences of learners while learning English as a foreign language in a specific context (Al-Musaddiq Institute of Higher Education, Kharian Campus) and a regular learning environment (English language classroom). As it is considered that public and social veracity are not inert and peripheral, it was decided to approach this case study qualitatively. Instead, it reflects being exceptional, vibrant and adaptable for every individual (Burton & Bartlett, 2009; Duff, 2008; Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2009; Silverman, 2010).

To search for comprehension, understanding and perceiving reality, qualitative case studies share with other forms of qualitative research. It is applied as an instrument to collect the data and then analyse the collected data as an inductive exploration approach, the result being elaborately descriptive (Merriam, 2009; 39).

Considering the significance as well as the scope of the study, it was delimited to the participants of four departments: BS Computer Sciences, BS Psychology, BS Nursing, and BS Business Administration of Al-Musaddiq Institute of Higher Education, Kharian Campus.

As a part of the qualitative research, semi-structured interviews were conducted in the first language (L1) of participants for the data collection. L1 was included in the semi-structured interviews so that the participants could understand and comprehend the asked questions and feel comfortable while answering. It was expected, as the participants will feel no anxiety while conversing in the first language (L1) as compared to the foreign language (L2). The participants were supposed to communicate in the presence of the interviewer, who was their language instructor, but it went against the expected outcomes. The conduction of interviews in (L1) was decided, keeping in view the findings of Gass and Mackey (2000), who explored that interviewees often provide fewer, insufficient and incomplete responses in (L2) because of having anxiety, fear of errors in communication and other language deficiencies related to foreign languages. The main objective of the study was to find out the personal experiences, fear, perspectives and opinions regarding the causes of anxiety while learning the English language.

Furthermore, before the conduction of semi-interviews, the participants were told not to feel any fear, as the interviews were not for the sake of jobs but to find your issues

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and reasons for anxiety while learning the English language. This assisted the interviewees to answer questions freely and naturally, not logically (Friedman, 2012).

## **Participants**

As it was small-scale qualitative research, a purposive sampling technique was applied for data collection through semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis was applied. It was keenly observed that the students from the four departments were shy and tense to a great extent, having a hidden element of anxiety; hence, this approach was chosen. Merely 7 males and 8 females presented themselves voluntarily to participate in the semi-structured interviews, which assisted the researcher in qualitative data collection from 15 students belonging to participants of four departments, i.e., BS Computer Science, BS Psychology, BS Nursing, and BS Business Administration of Al-Musaddiq Institute of Higher Education, Kharian Campus.

## **Ethical Considerations**

The type of the study was clarified to the potential participants of the study. They were told about their voluntary participation in the research, and it won't affect their grades or sessional marks, as students are much concerned about their sessional marks to grab from the institutions. It was also clarified that their participation will not affect their academic relationship with their concerned and subjective teacher. Apart from this, the participants were assured about their privacy and self-esteem. After perceiving the whole discussion, they signed the consent form for audio-recorded interviews without exposing their identity. They were provided a cell phone in a room; according to their own choice, one by one, they attended the interview. The interviewer was in a separate room. He did not know who was answering the questions which were being recorded. Who gave what answer, the researcher didn't know. Using one cell phone/SIM, the process got completed with complete privacy.

## **Results and Discussion**

This section comprises the comprehensive analysis of the results based on both the themes that occurred from the data and the a priori themes. Two foci were incorporated, i.e., fear of negative assessment and test anxiety, out of the four priority themes, i.e., communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety, the reason being the same results were obtained. Ensuring the prior themes mentioned above, two developed themes were discovered, i.e., fear of the opposite sex and anxiety of losing the relevant lexicon while speaking, which includes relevant vocabulary and sentence structure.

### **Communication Apprehension**

Keeping in view the literature reviewed above, the results indicate that learners of EFL could face anxiety and trepidation during communication or conversation, having numerous reasons, for example, lack of vocabulary, wrong pronunciation, less grip on syntax (meaning sentence structure) and other grammatical rules. A smaller number of the learners were found to be innovative and creative in listening and writing skills but not in speaking skills. The learners reported that due to the lack of a language lab, their speaking skill is so pathetic. Consequently, the learners consider them weak in the speaking area as compared to others (Toth, 2012).

**Comparison between M (male) and F (female) respondents during interviews: F showed a low opinion of their ability to communicate in English.**

### **Communication Apprehension**

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No.	Response	Issue of anxiety
F.9	In EFL class, the most irritating aspect for me, while communicating in English, I constantly face hesitation and anxiety when the peers laugh at me.	Peers' laughing
F.15	In EFL class, the most distressing element for me which increases my anxiety level is that due to lack of lexicon, I always make errors. In my inner self, it disturbs me a lot.	Lack of vocabulary

F.12	Generally, during participation in EFL class, there are two components when I converse something with the instructor or peers or in the presence of both or anyone of the both, I can't convey the message, I want to deliver. I can't synchronize the sentence structure. Secondly, after attending the lecture of the instructor, I think that there is no doubt but on inquiring something by the instructor I feel anxiety as didn't perceive anything.	Anxiety diminishes understanding and memory
M.6	In EFL class, when I am in stress or tension, I feel myself blank. I lose completely and solution becomes impossible to find	

**Test Anxiety**

As the literature review narrated above, test anxiety exists among EFL learners. The

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Online ISSN: 3006-5895

findings after the data analysis exposed that respondents were afraid of test anxiety, fear of failure in class assessment, low grading fear, anxiety before assessment and unwillingness or less preparation before participation in assessment. According to Robinson et al. (2013), the learners experiencing a significant level of anxiety are incapable of performing well in the assigned task or given test. Resultantly, they fail the assessment or task.

## Test Anxiety

No.	Response	Issue of anxiety
F.3	It is true that fear of tests creates anxiety in me. I develop premature thinking in me that my grades/scores will be low.	Fear of test and premature thinking
F.11	During exams I feel myself confused. What I memorise, I forget with no time. I can't perform well what is taught and which is not taught if given in the test. Resultantly, my all tests show very bad performance and I get very low grades.	Pressure of tests in taught material or if something given conceptual.

M.13	I feel anxiety when I myself assume that I am prepared but on asking as a surprise test from peers, instructor or presenting something in front of others I get confused.	Surprise tests
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**Fear of Negative Evaluation**

The research review above depicts that the learners of the EFL class may face anxiety due to the fear of negative evaluation. Here 'negative' means results against the expectations of the learners. Sometimes, the learners muster up courage to participate in the EFL class activities but hesitate due to the fear of the element of negative evaluation. This type and level of anxiety affects negatively the communication skills of the learners. As a matter of fact, they become anxious and nervous, which deletes from their minds what they want to express in front of others in an EFL class.

**Views of one respondent:**

Teacher's methodology	Student's response	As a result, under the pressure of anxiety, I can't respond according to the instructor's expectations.
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Questions asked in Cross examination</li> <li>2. Voluntary questioning</li> </ol>	I get quite nervous and anxious.	

**Psychological Barricades**

Irrespective of other issues, psychology also plays a pivotal role in someone's performance. Participants of EFL classes may face psychological issues. After getting students' opinions, it exposed that learning in EFL class is so complicated, as the peers often laugh at us. We feel timid and hesitant in the presence of those peers who can communicate in English. Some respondents expressed that due to the irritating environment of the class, we become hesitant, confused and anxious and can't express our feelings, emotions or point of view which we want to convey. Facing the whole situation of being ridiculed, laughed at, mocked, uncertain and having a high level of

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

anxiety, they are endeavouring with determination and consistency to grip over English language skills. Many respondents claimed that they had the confidence to express themselves in front of others. Some respondents narrated that it becomes completely difficult to cope with the stressful and tense situation. They become unable to find the solution to such problems. Some respondents said that they always find excuses to leave class in such conditions. Anxiety is a mental state where a person becomes uncertain of his goal, objective or skill. It requires that language instructors investigate and consider such a significant problem (Liu et al., 2021). There are various factors affecting test anxiety, among which psychological factors are the most important. According to Pace-Schott et al. (2019), a person's assessment of his psychological state possesses numerous factors such as the following:

1. Tensed body,
2. Stiffness in muscles,
3. Rapid heartbeat,
4. Anxiety,
5. Trembling body and voice.

## Psychological Barricades

No.	Response	Issue of anxiety
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F.9	No doubt, there are fluent classmates I have but when I imitate them and takes flight to be fluent, I start doubting myself. After comparing myself with them, I consider myself that I am unable to achieve the target or touch the destination where they are. I doubt that I will never do it. This situation creates anxiety in me and I lose my self-confidence.	Doubt in "Self"
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**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

F.15	Even I prepare the task before the class, make an effort to grasp the topic and maintain my confidence level. On the contrary, when in the presence of the peers, when the instructor asks any question I abruptly feel myself blank. I can feel my heart beat. I can't speak a single sentence properly according to the sentence structure rules. It doesn't mean that I don't know syntactic rules but anxiety and fear of presence of others deletes everything from my mind.	Surprise questioning or test creates confusion and anxiety
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M.13	I can understand when the instructor is bilingual but when the instructor communicates in one language, I try my level best to grasp what is being inculcated. But I can't get the idea and get confused and anxious. Apart from anxiety, different other factors engulf my mind and abilities.	English to English lecture detracts but GTM works Grammar Translation Method)
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**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

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M.12	When I compare myself with other peers, I rank myself at low level. I have an idea that my classmates are better than me in academics which makes me under pressure. It makes me hesitant, shy and timid. May be more thinking about others and less hard work on my part creates mental tension and stress. I can't speak then because their facial expressions show as my mistakes are being judged and compared by them. May be they don't do so but this perception creates bottleneck in speaking English in the presence of others.	Pre-mature and self-perception of being judged by others
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**Discussion**

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**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

The results above show that among all the factors affecting the speaking skills of the respondents and leading to English language anxiety, losing lexicon was the one that highly affected the level of anxiety, as claimed by almost the maximum respondents of the study. Whereas different opinions were also expressed by the respondents, like test anxiety, oral presentation, unknown fear of low grades, and some psychological talks were also found. A big number of the respondents seemed against talking in front of others in the class when they were asked any question as a surprise test or the other way around. For many causes, the respondents may be reluctant and hesitant to communicate in English in front of their respective classes. The researcher intended to find the factors negatively affecting their English communication skills. Findings of the study have revealed that the students have negative perceptions regarding their being proficient in communication in English in EFL class. According to Liu & Jackson (2011) and Horwitz (2017), those language learners who are very anxious about learning get frustrated soon facing their inability to speak in the presence of others. The study clearly shows that all of the respondents had the common issue of anxiety while speaking English in EFL class.

## **Conclusion**

It is apt to conclude that the major issue of raising anxiety levels among the English language learners in EFL class was fear while communicating in English. This issue gave birth to anxiety. Discussing related review literature, the researcher has already peeped into the other relevant factors which are causes of the anxiety while learning and communicating in English in front of others. The study's conclusions are based on some aspects of anxiety associated with learning a foreign language in EFL class. Firstly, having nervousness and expectation of unfavourable outcomes about speaking English. Secondly, communication in English in the presence of co-education makes the learners anxious, which leads to anxiety. Both of the genders feel hesitation from one another while expressing their points of view in English. As an inference from the results, English language instructors, while teaching English as a foreign language (L2), must perform like a mentor as well as a psychologist, having awareness of the needs, lacks, wants, and interests of the learners. They ought to keep in mind the learners' emotional, cognitive, and physical conditions. Shoshani & Eldor (2016) and Derakhshan et al. (2022) say that instructors who vigilantly work on the learners' emotional and academic needs by showing understanding and positive reinforcement and help the learners as a facilitator, create a supportive hand for them, produce intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and encourage a conducive learning environment are considered effective and purposeful instructors. Beyond the shred of doubt, some learners can find out who are inclined to exchange their knowledge about a certain subject but are unable to do so, the reason being anxiousness, stress and anxiety. No doubt, the instructor can bring such a learner out of the ditch of anxiety, but a learner himself has its solution to try to mitigate the level of self-created or natural anxiety through practice, consistency and determination. The strategies, methodologies and techniques of teaching and learning processes have to be modified so that the learners of the English language in EFL classes can get maximum and fruitful learning benefits. Then, the learners of the EFL class will definitely be able to get educational benefits rather than just attending the class as deaf and dumb.

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**Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review**

**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**