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Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**Language Anxiety among Undergraduate English Learners: An Exploratory and Empirical Study****Danish Adeel**

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danishadeel190@gmail.com**Muhammad Ishtiaq**

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ishtiaqm48@yahoo.com**ABSTRACT**

The present study explores the issue of English language anxiety among undergraduate students at Government Degree College Takhte Nasrati, Karak. The study uses both surveys and interviews to understand how students feel about learning and speaking English. Results gained from the findings of the study show that most students experience moderate to high levels of anxiety, especially when asked to speak in front of others. The main causes of anxiety include fear of making mistakes, lack of speaking practice, negative classroom environments, and low self-confidence. The study highlights the emotional and psychological side of language learning and suggests that teachers and institutions must work to create a more supportive environment. Key recommendations include the use of more speaking activities, positive feedback, English clubs, and teacher training on anxiety-sensitive methods. The findings aim to help teachers, students, and college administrators understand and reduce language anxiety to support better learning outcomes.

Keywords: *Language anxiety, undergraduate learners, English as a foreign language, classroom fear, student confidence*

INTRODUCTION

Many students feel nervous when learning a new language especially English. This is called language anxiety. This is especially the case in the context and situation where the language concerned has the status of being a second language and gets more worse in case of foreign language as is the status of English in Pakistan. It is a common problem for students in Pakistan. In Pakistani context, English, despite having the status as a foreign language has the advantage of being an official language as well, is important for education and jobs. But despite its importance for education and jobs, in many rural areas, students have little chance to use English outside the classroom. This makes them feel even more anxious when they try to speak or write in English during class (Mahmood et al., 2021).

Government Degree College Takhte Nasrati is in a far-off area of Karak, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Most students here speak Pashto at home and have limited exposure to English. Because of this, they often feel shy, scared, or unsure when learning English.

According to Horwitz et al. (1986), language anxiety is a type of fear that only happens when learning or using a second language. It can make students avoid speaking, stop participating in class, or lose interest in learning. If teachers and researchers understand how this anxiety works, they can help students learn better. That is why it is important to study the issue at hand at this particular college.

Statement of the Problem

Even though English is the official language and used in higher education in Pakistan, many students still find it hard to learn and use. This is often because of anxiety. At Government Degree College Takhte Nasrati, mostly students hailing from the department of English come from a Pashto-speaking background and do not use English much in daily life. Also, teachers have noticed that many students hesitate to speak in English, stay quiet during class, and score low on tests. They seem to be afraid of making mistakes or being laughed at and become the butt of fun.

However, no proper study has been done at this college to understand the causes and effects of this problem. The present research attempts to find out why students feel anxious while learning English and how it affects their studies.

Objectives of the Study

The present study tries to:

Find out what causes language anxiety among English students at Government Degree College Takhte Nasrati, Karak.

Study how this anxiety affects students' class performance and confidence.

Suggest ways teachers can help reduce this anxiety in the classroom.

Research Questions

1. What are the main reasons for language anxiety among undergraduate English students at Government Degree College Takhte Nasrati?
2. How does language anxiety affect students' performance and participation in class?
3. What steps can teachers take to help students feel less anxious and more confident in learning English?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language anxiety means the worry or tension students feel when they are learning or using a new language, be it an L2 such as Urdu or a foreign language such as English. It can happen in many forms, such as fear of speaking in class, feeling unsure about grammar, or being scared during language tests. This anxiety can stop students from doing their best in learning English, a foreign language in our Pakistani context.

According to Horwitz et al. (1986), language anxiety is a different kind of problem that affects language learners only. Students may have no problem talking in their first language, but when they try to speak the foreign language, English, they may become shy, nervous, or quiet. These feelings are not because they are weak students, but merely because language learning puts them in unfamiliar situations.

Research shows that language anxiety affects all parts of language learning—speaking, listening, reading, and writing. But speaking seems to be the most difficult and fear-inducing activity for most students (Toth, 2010). Students often say they feel “frozen” when asked to speak in front of the class. Some even prefer to stay silent rather than risk saying something wrong.

It is worth noting that in rural areas like Takhte Nasrati, students usually don’t get enough chances to use English in real life. They mostly use their mother tongue (Pashto) and rarely hear or speak English outside of class. This adds to their anxiety when they suddenly need to use English in a formal academic setting.

Sources of Language Anxiety

There are many reasons why students feel anxious in English classrooms. These reasons are usually linked to their personal background, classroom experiences, and social pressure. Below are some common causes:

Lack of Confidence

Many students believe they are not good at English. This belief may come from poor past results, lack of speaking practice, or low self-esteem. They feel that others are smarter or better than them, which leads them to stay silent in class.

Fear of Making Mistakes

Students often worry that they might use the wrong words, mispronounce something, or use incorrect grammar. This fear of being wrong becomes so strong that they avoid speaking altogether. This is especially common in classes where teachers or peers make fun of mistakes.

Negative Classroom Environment

If a teacher is too strict, or if classmates laugh at other’s errors, students may become afraid to participate. A competitive classroom can increase anxiety, while a friendly and supportive classroom can reduce it.

Previous Bad Experiences

If students had negative experiences with English in school—such as being scolded for wrong answers or failing language tests—they may carry that fear with them to college. These past experiences can strongly shape their attitude towards English.

Ali and Mehmood (2019) found that students who were constantly corrected in front of the class developed a long-term fear of speaking in English. Similarly, students from rural schools, where English was not used much, feel more anxious when asked to speak in college-level English classes.

All the above-mentioned facts work together and can make learning English very stressful. Understanding these factors/reasons can help teachers and parents support students better.

Effects of Language Anxiety on Learning

Language anxiety does not only make students uncomfortable—it directly affects how well they learn English. Below are some ways in which anxiety harms language learning:

Low Participation

Anxious students are less likely to join in classroom activities like discussions, debates, or oral presentations. Even if they know the answer, they may choose to stay quiet because of fear.

Poor Academic Performance

Anxiety can block the brain's ability to think clearly. A student might know the grammar rules or vocabulary but fail to use them correctly when feeling nervous. Studies show that students with high anxiety often get lower grades in language tests (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993).

Avoidance Behaviors

Some students may find ways to avoid English altogether. They may skip English classes, sit at the back, or pretend to be sick on presentation days. These behaviors reduce their chances of improving in the language.

Lack of motivation

If students always feel scared and unsure, they may lose interest in learning English. Over time, they may stop trying and believe that they will never become good at the language.

These effects show that language anxiety is not just a small problem—it has a serious impact on students' learning and success. Teachers need to find ways to help students feel more relaxed and confident in the classroom.

Studies on Language Anxiety in Pakistani and International Contexts

Many studies around the world have looked at language anxiety. These studies help us understand that this is a global issue, not just a local one. Let's look at a few examples:

In Japan, Toth (2010) found that students were very quiet in English classes because they feared being laughed at. They had the vocabulary but lacked the confidence to speak.

In Turkey, Aydın (2008) discovered that students felt extreme stress before language tests. Test anxiety was their biggest worry. Teachers there started using fun classroom games and open discussions to help students relax.

In Pakistan, many researchers have also studied language anxiety. Mahmood et al. (2021) found that female university students in urban areas felt more anxious than males. This was mostly due to cultural pressure and fear of being judged.

Another study by Khan and Akhtar (2017) looked at rural students in Punjab. They found that these students had strong anxiety because their schools did not prepare them for college-level English. The lack of early exposure to spoken English was a major reason.

These studies help us see that anxiety is affected by local culture, teaching style, and student background. However, most of the research has been done in cities or private universities. There is very little research on smaller colleges in areas like Karak.

The present study is based on the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) theory introduced by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986). According to this theory, language anxiety is not just regular stress or nervousness. It is a special type of anxiety that only happens in the context of learning and using a second (L2) e.g. Urdu or a foreign language e.g. English in Pakistani context.

The above three authors explain that language anxiety is made up of three main parts: communication apprehension, fears of negative evaluation and test anxiety.

This means feeling scared or uncomfortable when speaking in another language e.g. in L2 context (Urdu) or foreign language context (English). Some students may know the words but still fear speaking because they think they might make mistakes or not be understood.

This is the worry students have that others—like their teachers or classmates or general public etc.—will judge them badly for making mistakes. This fear can stop students from trying to speak or write in English at all.

This kind of stress comes from being afraid of tests or being asked questions in class. Students may worry about failing, forgetting words, or giving the wrong answers.

This theory is important because it helps us understand the reasons behind students' nervousness in English classes. It also helps teachers and researchers design better tools to measure and reduce this anxiety. In this study, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), created by the same authors, is used to measure the anxiety levels of the students/participants of the present study.

Even though language anxiety has been studied in many parts of the world, there are still gaps that need to be filled. Most of the available studies focus on university students in cities. There is very little research on students in rural colleges, especially in regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Government Degree College Takhte Nasrati, Karak is in a remote area where students come from poor and traditional backgrounds. Their experience of language anxiety might be very different from those in urban areas. But there is no published study yet that has looked at their specific problems and classroom needs.

Also, many studies talk about anxiety in general terms. Very few try to listen to students' personal stories or understand the small things that make them anxious in daily class life. This study aims to fill that gap by focusing on a college situated in a rural region, using real student experiences, and giving practical suggestions for improvement.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The above section explains how the study was planned and carried out. It describes the research design, participants, tools used for collecting data, how the data was collected, and how it was analyzed. It also talks about the ethical steps taken to keep the participants safe and respected.

Research Design

The present study uses a mixed-method research design. That means it combines both numbers (quantitative data) and words (qualitative data). The main reason for using the stated method is to get a complete picture of language anxiety among English learners.

The quantitative part of the research is based on a survey using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). This helps to find out how common language anxiety is among students and how strong it is.

The qualitative part includes short interviews with some students. These interviews help us understand the students' feelings and experiences in their own words.

The simultaneous use of mixed-method research design, i.e. both quantitative and qualitative methods gives deeper and clearer results. The numbers tell us "how much" anxiety there is, and the words explain "why" students feel anxious.

Population and Sample

The study was conducted at Government Degree College Takhte Nasrati, Karak, a public-sector college in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The population for this study includes all undergraduate students enrolled in English language courses at the college.

From this population, a sample of 60 students was selected. These students were chosen using a method called convenience sampling, which means selecting students who were easily available and willing to participate. This method was chosen due to time and resource limitations.

The sample included all- first-year, second-year, third-year and fourth-year students. Most of the participants came from a Pashto-speaking background and had studied in government schools where English was taught as a subject but not used for speaking.

Out of the 60 students, 45 were male students and 15 were female. The age range of these students were between 17 and 21 years.

Research Instrument

The main tool used in this study was the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986). This scale is widely used in research to measure language anxiety. It includes 33 statements related to classroom fear, nervousness, and performance pressure.

Each statement is answered on a 5-point Likert scale:

1 = Strongly Disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neutral

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly Agree

Some sample statements from the FLCAS include:

"I feel nervous when I speak English in class".

"I worry about making mistakes in English".

"I feel confident when I use English".

The total score shows the level of anxiety. A higher score means more anxiety. Some negative statements were reverse-coded during analysis.

To add a qualitative dimension, the researcher also conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 students. These interviews included open-ended questions such as:

"What makes you nervous about speaking English in class?"

"Can you share a moment when you felt anxious during an English lesson?"

"What do you think teachers can do to help reduce this anxiety?"

These questions helped collect personal stories and deeper insights into student experiences.

Data Collection Procedure

The researcher first got permission from the college administration to conduct the study. After that, the students were invited to participate, and their consent was taken. They were told about the purpose of the study, and it was made clear that their names would not be used in any report.

The survey (FLCAS) was given during English classes to avoid disturbing their study routine. The students were guided on how to fill out the form, and the researcher remained present to answer any questions.

After the surveys were completed, the researcher selected 10 students randomly from the survey group for short interviews. These interviews were done in a quiet room at the college, and each one lasted about 10–15 minutes.

The whole data collection process took about two weeks.

Data Analysis Procedure

For the quantitative data (survey responses), the researcher used basic statistical tools. The answers were added up to calculate the total anxiety score for each student. Then, the average score, highest and lowest scores, and patterns in responses were analyzed using Microsoft Excel.

The FLCAS results were divided into three levels:

Low Anxiety (score 33–66)

Moderate Anxiety (score 67–99)

High Anxiety (score 100–132)

This helped the researcher understand how many students had low, moderate, or high anxiety levels.

For the qualitative data (interviews), the researcher read through the answers and grouped them into themes. For example, if many students said they felt nervous during oral presentations that was counted as a common theme. Other common themes included fear of grammar mistakes, lack of speaking practice, and fear of teacher correction.

The combined results from both the survey and interviews gave a full picture of the problem.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

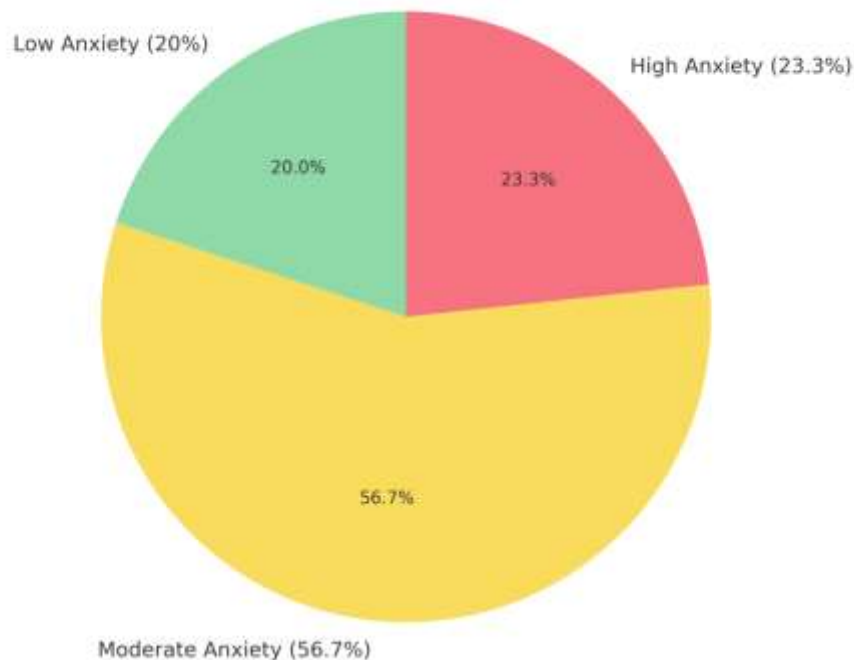
This section presents a detailed analysis of the data collected through the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and interviews with selected students. The goal is to understand how common language anxiety is among English learners at Government Degree College Takhte Nasrati, Karak, what causes it, and how students experience it. The chapter is divided into two main sections: (1) Quantitative Data Analysis based on the survey, and (2) Qualitative Data Analysis based on interviews.

Quantitative Data Analysis**Total Anxiety Scores and Distribution**

To begin with, each student's responses to the 33-item FLCAS were added to calculate a total anxiety score. The lowest score possible was 33 (if a student answered "strongly disagree" to all items), and the highest was 165 (if they answered "strongly agree" to all). The actual scores of the 60 students ranged from 58 to 129.

Figure 1.

4.1.1 Total Anxiety Scores and Distribution

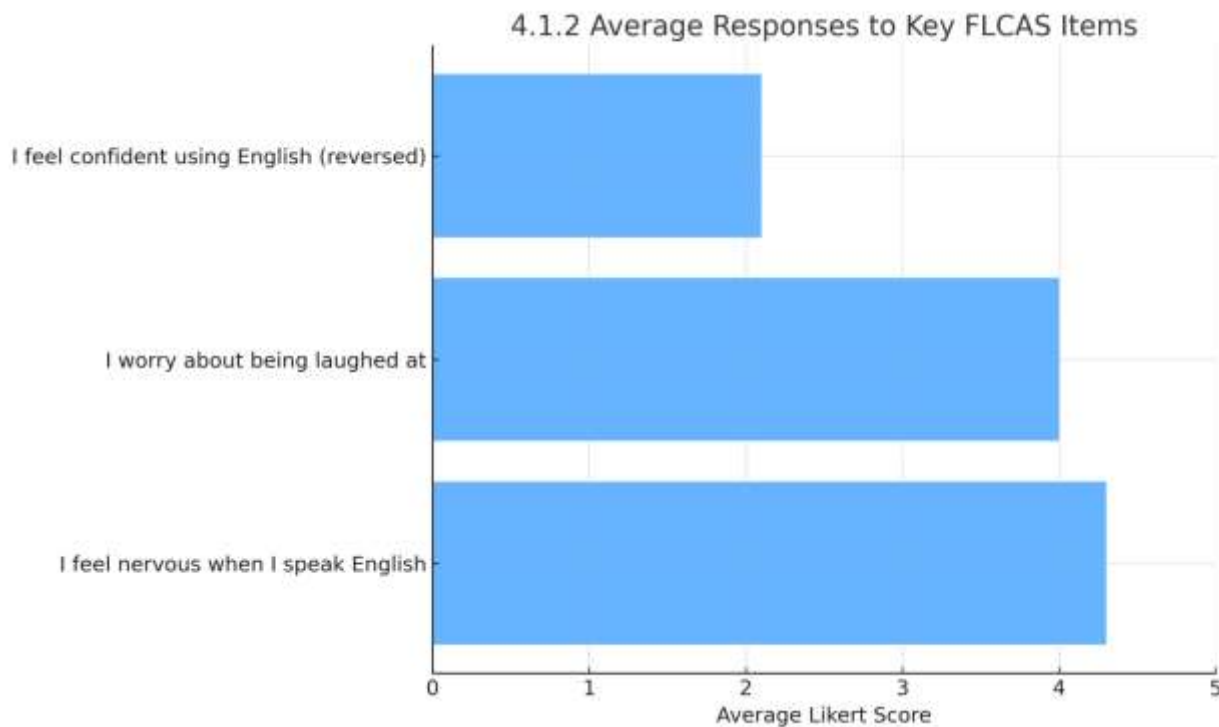


Interpretation: More than half of the students (56.7%) experienced moderate anxiety, which means they often felt nervous or unsure in English classes but not to an extreme level. However, 23.3% had high anxiety, which could negatively affect their performance. Only a small group (20%) had low anxiety.

Average Responses to Key FLCAS Items

To understand which specific classroom situations caused the most anxiety, average scores were calculated for each item in the FLCAS. To identify specific classroom situations that triggered the highest levels of anxiety, the average responses to selected key items from the FLCAS were calculated. The analysis showed that the highest anxiety was reported for the item “I feel nervous when I speak English in class,” with an average score of 4.3 out of 5, indicating that most students either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Similarly, the item “I worry about being laughed at by my classmates” received a high average score of 4.0, highlighting social fear as a major barrier to classroom participation. Conversely, the item “I feel confident using English,” which was reverse-coded, had a relatively low average score of 2.1, suggesting that a majority of students lacked self-assurance in their language use. These results reveal that the most intense anxiety stems from speaking activities, peer judgment, and a general lack of confidence.

Figure 2.

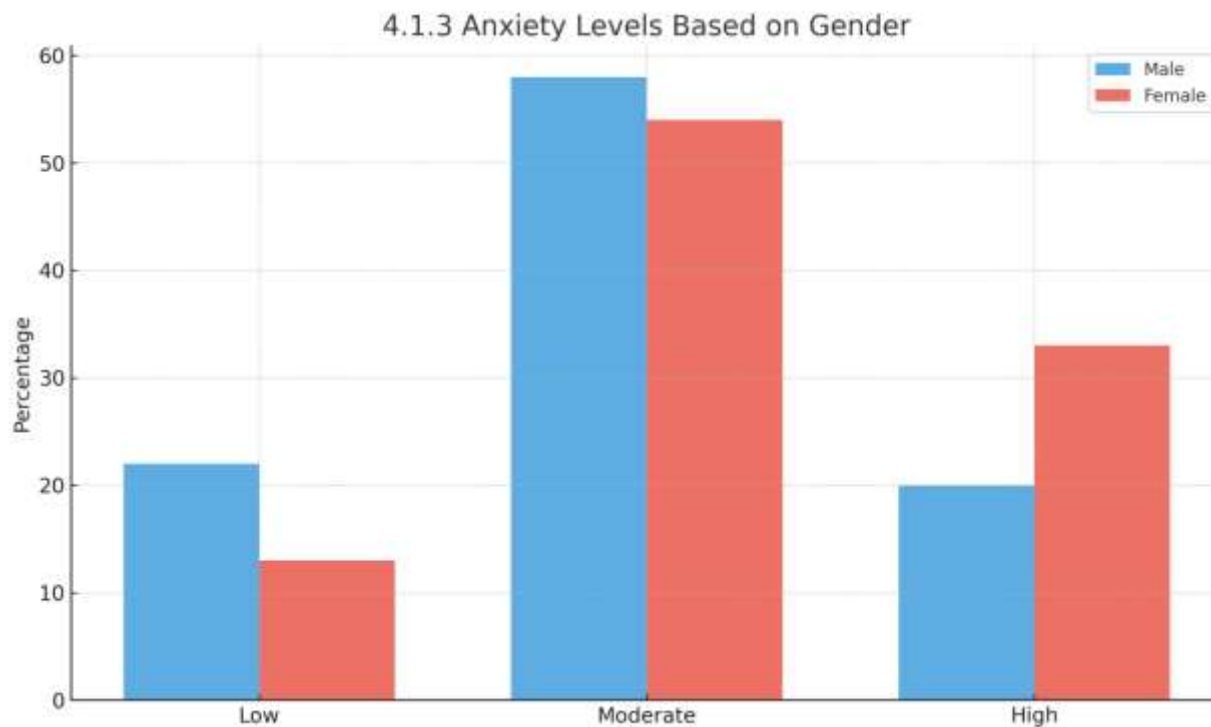


Interpretation: Speaking in English in front of others is clearly the biggest source of anxiety. Students also show high fear of being wrong and being laughed at by classmates. These social fears often stop students from participating actively.

Anxiety Based on Gender

For the obvious purpose to explore any gender-based variation in anxiety levels, the data were categorized by gender. Out of the total 60 participants, 45 were male and 15 were female. When their total anxiety scores were analyzed, it was found that 33.3% of female students exhibited high anxiety levels, compared to 20% of male students. On the other hand, moderate anxiety was the most common category for both groups, with 58% of males and 54% of females falling into this range. While the data suggest that female students may be slightly more anxious, especially in terms of high anxiety levels, the small sample size for females requires cautious interpretation. These trends may reflect broader social or cultural pressures that impact female students' comfort levels in language learning environments.

Figure 3.

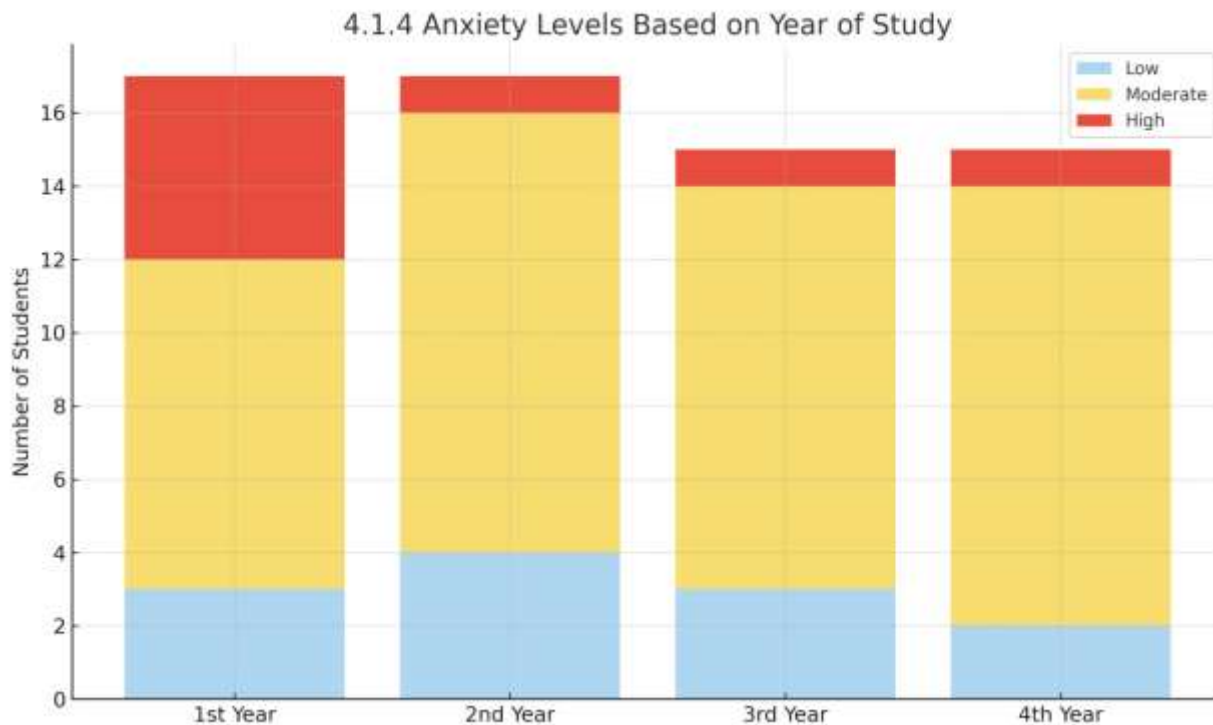


Interpretation: Female students had a slightly higher rate of high anxiety (33.3%) compared to male students (20%). This could be due to cultural or social pressures, especially in rural areas where female participation in class is more sensitive. However, the small sample size of female students means these results should be interpreted carefully.

Anxiety Based on Year of Study

In order to examine whether anxiety levels vary by academic seniority, student responses were grouped according to their year of study—first through fourth year. The analysis revealed that first-year students had the highest percentage of high anxiety, indicating that newly enrolled students experience more difficulty adjusting to English language demands at the college level. As students progressed to higher years, a gradual decrease in high anxiety levels was observed. Second-, third-, and fourth-year students showed comparatively lower levels of high anxiety and higher rates of moderate or low anxiety. This trend suggests that language anxiety tends to diminish with increased exposure, classroom experience, and academic confidence. However, the persistence of moderate anxiety even in advanced classes points to the need for sustained support throughout all academic years.

Figure 4.



Interpretation: First-year students experienced more high anxiety than second-year students. This might be because first-year students are still adjusting to the college environment and feel less confident in their English skills. Second-year students have more experience, which could lower their anxiety levels.

Qualitative Data Analysis (Interviews)

To get a deeper understanding of student's personal experiences with language anxiety, 10 students were interviewed. These interviews revealed several key themes:

Theme 1: Public Speaking Fear

Almost all students said they were afraid to speak in English in front of others. A common reason was fear of forgetting words or saying something wrong. One student explained:

"When I stand up to speak, my mind goes blank. I know the words, but they don't come out".

One can easily guess from the above personal statement of the student that anxiety blocks student's ability to perform, even if they know the answer. This is called a "mental block", and it happens under pressure.

Theme 2: Fear of Grammar and Pronunciation Mistakes

Many students feared making grammar errors or mispronouncing words. They felt this would make them look "uneducated" or "foolish" in front of their peers. One of the interviewees responded.

"I'm always afraid that I'll say something wrong. People might laugh or correct me rudely".

Response of the above participant demonstrate the fact that language anxiety is connected to self-esteem. If students think they'll be judged for errors, they stop participating.

Theme 3: Lack of English Practice

Students said that English is only used for writing or reading in class. They don't get enough time to speak or interact in English. This is visible from the response of a participant in the interview.

"We don't talk in English at home or with friends. Even in class, we speak in Urdu or Pashto".

The above statement on the part of the interview participant indicates that without real-life speaking opportunities, students remain unsure of their speaking skills, which increases anxiety when they are finally asked to speak.

Theme 4: Negative Classroom Environment

Some students said that teachers and classmates sometimes made fun of their mistakes, even if it was unintentional. For instance, one of the participants explicitly referenced to it by saying.

"Sometimes, when someone says something funny, the whole class laughs. It makes us more afraid".

The above remarks suggest that a supportive and friendly classroom is very important. Fear of mockery discourages participation and worsens anxiety.

Theme 5: Teacher's Role in Reducing or Increasing Anxiety

Some students praised their teachers for being patient and helpful, while others said that harsh correction made them feel small as can be guessed from the following statement of one of the participants.

"One teacher always corrects nicely. I feel safe in that class. But another one scolds us, and we stop trying".

The above remarks of the student clearly demonstrate the role of teacher behavior in reducing or increasing language anxiety of students/learners of English. The behavior of teachers plays a major role in shaping student confidence. Positive feedback lower the anxiety level, while a harsh feedback definitely increases it.

Comparison of Survey and Interview Results

The survey data showed that speaking in class is the most anxiety-inducing activity. Similarly, the students were worried about mistakes and judgment. Furthermore, moderate anxiety was observed as the most common among the set of participants. The subsequent data gained from the interview confirmed these points and gave more detail. For instance, it showed that majority of the students had the fear of being laughed at or judged by others. In addition to this, it was also made clear that they generally tend to lack practice in the productive skill of speaking. Furthermore, the interview participants also demonstrated the fact that teacher support matters a lot.

Together, both types of data paint a clear picture of the problem: students want to improve in English but feel held back by numerous factors including fear, low confidence, and unsupportive environments.

Summary of Key Findings

Most students at Government Degree College Takhte Nasrati, Karak experience moderate to high levels of English language anxiety. The biggest sources of anxiety are public speaking, fear of mistakes, peer judgment, and lack of practice. Junior students of first-year and female students showed slightly higher anxiety levels compared to senior students from advanced classes.

The analysis of interviews revealed that teacher behavior and classroom environment greatly influence how students feel. Students want more safe spaces and positive feedback to help them overcome anxiety.

Discussion

The results of this study show that language anxiety is a major issue faced by students learning English at Government Degree College Takhte Nasrati, Karak. Most of the students in this study showed moderate to high levels of anxiety, especially when speaking English in front of the class. This finding supports earlier research, which has shown that students often feel nervous when asked to speak in a foreign language in public (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Students in this study described their anxiety as a mix of fear, worry, and even physical symptoms like a fast heartbeat or dry mouth. These feelings were especially strong during oral presentations or when the teacher suddenly asked them to answer a question in English. This shows that language anxiety is not just about language ability—it also involves emotions, self-confidence, and how students think others will react to them. The data also showed that fear of making mistakes is one of the most common causes of anxiety. Many students said they did not want to speak English because they thought they would say something wrong. This was especially true for grammar and pronunciation. Students feared that others—especially classmates—might laugh at them or make fun of their mistakes. This kind of fear can stop students from practicing and using the language, which in turn limits their improvement. As Krashen (1985) pointed out, learners need to feel comfortable and relaxed to learn a language effectively. Anxiety works against this process by creating a mental block.

Another issue revealed by this study is that students do not get enough opportunities to speak English in or outside the classroom. Most of them use Urdu or Pashto in their daily conversations. Even in English class, speaking practice is often limited to reading aloud or answering one or two questions. Without regular speaking practice, students become unsure of their speaking ability. Then, when they are finally asked to speak, they feel anxious because they are unprepared. This aligns with the idea that language anxiety can be linked to a lack of exposure and real-life use (Young, 1991).

Also, the classroom environment plays a major role in how students feel about speaking English. Some students said that their teachers supported them and made them feel confident. Others said that teachers corrected them harshly or ignored them when they made mistakes. The same was true with classmates. If the class laughed at someone's mistake, that student felt discouraged. On the other hand, if classmates listened respectfully and encouraged one another, students felt more comfortable speaking. This finding shows that both teachers and students share responsibility in creating a healthy, encouraging environment.

Finally, the year of study also made a small difference. First-year students felt more anxiety than second-year students. This may be because second-year students are more familiar with college life, classroom rules, and the English learning process. With time and exposure, some anxiety may naturally reduce, but not for everyone. Students who carry their fear from earlier years may continue to struggle if the classroom environment does not support them.

To sum up, language anxiety is a mix of emotional, social, and educational issues. It is not only about not knowing enough English—it is also about how students feel, how they see themselves, and how others treat them when they try to speak.

CONCLUSION

The present research study set out to explore the problem of language anxiety among English learners at Government Degree College Takhte Nasrati, Karak. After analyzing survey responses and personal interviews, it is clear that many students face real and serious challenges when it comes to using English, especially in speaking situations.

The findings show that most students experience moderate or high levels of language anxiety. This means that their fear of speaking English is strong enough to affect their participation, confidence, and learning. Speaking in front of the class, being corrected harshly, and being judged by classmates were all common reasons for this anxiety.

Also, it became clear that language anxiety is not only about language. It also involves how students feel about themselves, how safe or unsafe they feel in the classroom, and how much support they get from teachers and peers. Students need more than just language lessons—they need emotional support, encouragement, and practice in a non-threatening environment.

Another important point is that students want to learn and improve, but they often feel blocked by fear. If this fear is not addressed, it can lead to silence, avoidance, and even giving up. On the other hand, if teachers and classmates are supportive, many students can become more confident over time.

This study also highlighted that students have very few chances to speak English, both inside and outside of class. This lack of practice adds to their anxiety. Regular and friendly speaking opportunities could help students feel more comfortable and reduce their fear.

To conclude, language anxiety is a serious barrier to learning English, especially in rural colleges like GDC Takhte Nasrati, Karak. Teachers, students, and college authorities must work together to build safe, respectful, and active English classrooms. By understanding the causes of anxiety and using helpful strategies, we can create a better learning environment where all students can succeed and grow.

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