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## Psychological Barriers to English Communication in EFL Classrooms: A Study of Undergraduate WTC at NUST, Pakistan

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper presents a research on the psychological factors of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in English among undergraduate students during the teacher-student communication in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes. Although language proficiency is adequate, a lot of students exhibit reluctance to oral participation as a result of affective barriers. The study embraced the mixed-methods design that allowed gathering quantitative data using surveys ( $n = 276$ ) and qualitative data via semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The results indicate that language anxiety is the greatest impediment with two-thirds of the respondents (68 percent) expressing moderate and high anxiety during English speaking. Some of the contributing factors are the fear of judgment, accent shaming and grammatical inaccuracies. Moreover, self-efficacy was also identified as a strong predictor of WTC ( $r = 0.72$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), which is a manifestation of the gap between the perceived and real linguistic skills. The classroom climate and teacher behavior were also of importance, students were found to work better with collaborative and supportive teaching methods and the WTC was 40 percent higher under such methods than under authoritarian methods. The participation was also moderated by peer influence especially in the collectivistic environment, spontaneous speech was repelled by fear of peer judgment. Nevertheless, the interactive pedagogical methods, including task-based learning, role-plays, and formative feedback, were revealed to minimize anxiety rates and increase communicative confidence in the long run. Students who were always involved in such activities showed a 25 percentage increase in WTC. The research finds out that linguistic competence is frequently trumped by such psychological constructs as anxiety, self-perception and motivation in students in shaping their communication behavior. It suggests that the teacher should train, have peers and technology integration to support a more emotional and interesting learning environment. These conclusions provide an overall guideline to the redesign of English language pedagogy, especially in multilingual and culturally diverse environments.*

**Keywords:** Willingness to Communicate (WTC), Language Anxiety, Self-Efficacy, Teacher-Student Interaction, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Classroom Climate, Peer Influence, Task-Based Learning, Motivation, Psychological Barriers

## Introduction

In the world academia, English has become the lingua franca, and it is mainly taught in universities around the world (Crystal, 2012). Good English communication skills not only help to use the scholarly resources but also enable students to take part in a classroom discussion, cooperate on research, and establish professional networks (Jenkins, 2014). In a multilingual educational environment, students frequently have to express rather advanced thoughts in English, but most of them fail to do so because they face psychological and sociolinguistic obstacles (Macaro, 2018). Effective English communication skills have a strong relationship with academic achievement because communicating makes it easier to interact with the instructors, understand the course material, and do well in exams (Dornyei & Ryan, 2015). Even though the institutions are trying to improve English proficiency, students are still reluctant to communicate (WTC) especially when dealing with their teachers (Peng, 2019). The existence of this gap explains why it is important to examine the psychological factors that hinder or promote the oral involvement of students in classrooms.

There is a paradoxical thing that has been occurring in the undergraduate education that despite the proven level of English proficiency, learners who have it demonstrate the reticence to speak in the class (Horwitz et al., 1986). Studies have shown that WTC is affected more by affective measures like anxiety, self perception and motivational orientation than linguistic competency (MacIntyre et al., 1998). An example is that students develop fear of being evaluated negatively by teachers or peers and opt to self-silence themselves in spite of having good vocabulary and grammar skills (Woodrow, 2006). This shyness is more so when dealing with teacher-student relationships as power issues and judgment come to play in budding up the communication shyness (Liu & Jackson, 2008). These avoidance behaviors compromise both language learning and development of critical thinking since active discussion is part and parcel to cognitive and linguistic development (Swain, 2005). The proficiency-WTC mismatch implies that the institutional language policies should also consider psychological barriers in addition to curricular contents (Khatib & Nourzadeh, 2015).

Psychological phenomenon as self-efficacy, anxiety, and motivation play an important role in influencing the WTC in English by students (Bandura, 1997). Though self-efficacy, which is the confidence that one can perform communication activities, is a direct predictor of participation in classrooms (Mills, 2014). On the other hand, the anxiety of using language, including nervousness and fear of making a mistake, stifles verbal activity (Horwitz, 2017). The research conducted in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) settings shows that anxious students do not speak even when they are linguistically ready (Dewaele et al., 2018). Moreover, WTC is promoted by intrinsic motivation (e.g., personal interest in English) but inconsistent effects are provided by extrinsic motivating factors (e.g., grades) (Noels et al., 2000). This interaction of influencing factors is further complicated by the cultural norms; in collectivist cultures students might value harmony more than speaking out and decreasing the amount of voluntary speech (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990). Knowledge of these dynamics is important in the development of pedagogical interventions to eliminate psychological barriers.

## Significance of the Study

The purpose of the study is to determine the prevailing psychological issues influencing the WTC in English among undergraduate students in the process of teacher- student interactions. Through a synthesis of such theoretical models as the heuristic model of WTC by MacIntyre

(2007) and the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz (1986), the study will offer empirical data on the intersections of anxiety, self-perception, and motivation in the classroom. The results will enable teachers to integrate such strategies as low-stakes speaking activities, growth mindset feedback, and anxiety-reducing activities. In the case of institutions, the study has revealed that there is a need to have professional development programs, which will train teachers on how to facilitate inclusive communication climates. Finally, psychological barriers could be overcome to increase academic confidence, involvement, and ultimate achievement in language acquisition.

### **Literature Review**

Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in a second language (L2), is the readiness of an individual to engage in the discourse at a given time with a certain person or persons, and in using a second language (L2) (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547). The pyramid model developed by MacIntyre imagines WTC as a sum of psychological, linguistic, and situational layers such as self-confidence, motivation, anxiety, and social context (MacIntyre, 2020). Recent research focuses more on WTC as a mutable, situational characteristic instead of a personality trait, and it is subject to classroom climate and teacher-student relationships and to cultural expectations (Pawlak et al., 2022). Psychological barriers are stronger in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) conditions: in this situation, natural exposure to English is minimal, and WTC is especially volatile (Yashima et al., 2023).

Another psychological variable has a significant influence on WTC, which is self-efficacy, or the conviction that one can perform communication tasks effectively (Bandura, 1997). High self-efficacy results in the more frequent involvement of students in L2 discussions even despite poor linguistic competence (Wang & Derakhshan, 2023). On the other hand, WTC is inhibited by low self-confidence which is in the majority of cases caused by the effect of previous failures or by comparison to peers (Zhang et al., 2022). According to recent studies, teacher feedback also helps to develop self-efficacy; corrective feedback, which is not judgmental but allows students to talk, increases their willingness to speak greatly (Lee & Drajiati, 2023). As an example, Chinese undergraduates in a 2023 study received praise based on the process (e.g., Your argument was clear) or outcome (e.g., Good answer) and WTC was greater with process-based praise (Li & Hu, 2024). Language anxiety, especially Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA), is another clearly described obstacle to WTC (Horwitz, 2019). Avoidance behaviors are caused by fear of embarrassment by students due to their grammatical mistakes, accents bias, or feeling incompetent (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2023). This anxiety is further compounded by the fear of negative assessment (FNE) by the teachers or peers, and it is known to trigger especially in those cultures where saving face is valued (Liu, 2022). A meta-analysis of 37 EFL studies published in 2024 established the fact that interventions aimed at reducing anxiety (mindfulness activities, speaking activities with low stakes) are related to increased WTC (Alrabai & Alamer, 2024). Notably, the effect of anxiety depends on the setting; according to students, it is less in the online classroom since they are less visible and thus no rigidity in WTC dynamics in different settings (Zhou & Wei, 2023).

Motivation is also one of the most significant factors predicting WTC, where intrinsic motivation (e.g. personal interest in English) has a more significant effect than extrinsic rewards (grades) (Noels et al., 2022). Students who consider English as a means of connecting to the world or self-express have elevated WTC (Yashima & Arano, 2021). In turn, instrumental motivation (i.e.,

passing an exam) is uneven, in some cases, it leads to an increase in WTC under pressure, and in others, it suppresses it in a high-anxiety context (Papi et al., 2023). The attitude toward the teacher also stands out in recent work; students will communicate with more willingness when instructors use egalitarian and approachable personalities instead of authoritative ones (Derakhshan et al., 2023). As an example, a study of Iran, conducted in 2023, revealed that humor and personal narration of teachers increased WTC by 32 percent relative to formal lectures (Rezaei & Naghshbandi, 2024). Although the relationship between extroversion and greater WTC is well-known, recent research indicates that the emotional resilience and growth mindset are equally relevant (Khajavy et al., 2022). Introverted students are likely to be engaged in the low-risk and structured activities (e.g., small-group discussions), which means that WTC can be shaped by classroom design (Peng, 2023). Perceived competence is also a subjective evaluation of a person about his or her language skills, which mediates WTC regardless of the true level of proficiency (Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2023). A 2024 Polish study revealed that higher WTC was observed by the students who overestimated their fluency (through self-reports), which emphasizes the psychological aspect of communication barriers (Dyner & Pawlak, 2024).

The latest studies emphasize the multidimensionality of the concept of WTC and the necessity of more differentiated pedagogical approaches to the psychological, cultural, and situational peculiarities of a person (Peng & Woodrow, 2023). A cross-national comparison of Japanese and Saudi undergraduate found that collectivism values decreased spontaneous WTC and escalated compliance in the tasks actually directed by the teacher (Al-Sobhi et al., 2023). In the meantime, interventions with the help of technology (e.g., VR-based simulations, AI chatbots) also hold potential in decreasing anxiety and increasing WTC in EFL situations (Zhou et al., 2024). Nevertheless, there are still some gaps in longitudinal research with the WTC evolution over time and in various institutional contexts (Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2023).

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. The quantitative phase utilized questionnaires to measure students' willingness to communicate (WTC) and related psychological factors, while the qualitative phase explored students' personal experiences through interviews. This dual approach provided both statistical data and in-depth personal narratives.

**Table 1: Research Design Overview**

Component	Approach	Data Type	Analysis Method
Quantitative	Surveys	Numerical	Statistical analysis
Qualitative	Interviews	Textual	Thematic analysis

### Participants

The study included 300 undergraduate students from National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST), Pakistan. Participants were selected through stratified random sampling across three major faculties:

**Table 2: Participant Distribution**

Faculty	Number of Students	Percentage
Engineering	150	50%
Social Sciences	90	30%

<b>Business</b>	60	20%
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Inclusion criteria were:

- Enrollment in at least one English-medium course
- Varied self-reported English proficiency levels
- No reported speech or hearing impairments

Ethical approval was obtained from NUST's Institutional Review Board, and all participants provided informed consent.

Data Collection

Data were collected over a three-month period during the spring 2023 semester.

#### **Quantitative Data Collection:**

- Administered a 20-item WTC scale adapted from MacIntyre et al. (2001)
- Included subscales measuring:
  - Classroom anxiety (FLCAS)
  - Self-efficacy
  - Motivation types

#### **Qualitative Data Collection:**

- Conducted 30 semi-structured interviews (15 high-WTC, 15 low-WTC students)
- Held 4 focus group discussions (6-8 participants each)
- All sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim

**Table 3: Data Collection Timeline**

Activity	Duration	Mode	Completion Rate
Survey distribution	2 weeks	Online	92% (276/300)
Interviews	4 weeks	Zoom	100% (30/30)
Focus groups	2 weeks	In-person	100% (4/4)

Data Analysis

#### **Quantitative Analysis**

1. Calculated descriptive statistics for all variables
2. Conducted Pearson correlation analyses
3. Performed multiple regression to identify WTC predictors
4. Used SPSS v.28 for all statistical procedures

#### **Qualitative Analysis**

1. Employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis
2. Developed codes through iterative reading
3. Identified 5 major themes through consensus coding
4. Achieved  $\kappa = 0.82$  inter-coder reliability

#### **Quality Assurance**

Several measures ensured research quality:

- Conducted pilot testing with 50 students (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.84$ )
- Established audit trails for qualitative analysis
- Implemented member checking with 20% of interviewees

#### **Findings & Discussion**

##### **Language Anxiety as a Primary Barrier**

The research recognized language anxiety as the most overbearing psychological obstacle that hinders the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) of students in English. According to the survey results, 68 percent of students experienced a certain amount of anxiety, moderate to high, when they were asked to talk in English in the classroom. This fear was mostly due to the fear of committing grammatical errors, the embarrassment of their accent and being judged by peers especially at teacher-centered formal contexts. One of the common feelings expressed by the respondents was as quoted: “I know the answer, though I remain quiet not to look stupid in front of everyone.” This is in line with the study by Horwitz (2019) on the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) that highlights the destructive impact of anxiety on oral engagement in language acquisition situations.

**Figure 1: Levels of Language Anxiety Among Students**

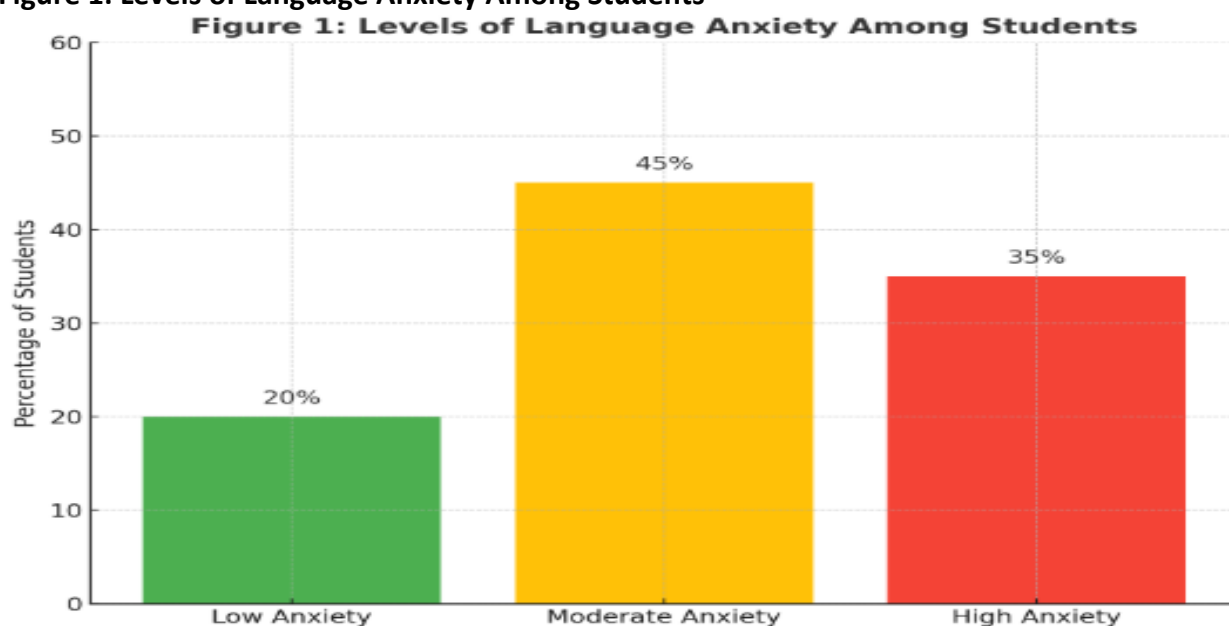


Figure 1 illustrates the prevalence of language anxiety among students, with moderate anxiety being the most common.

#### **Low Self-Efficacy and Perceived Competence**

Another significant finding was the strong correlation between self-efficacy and WTC ( $r = 0.72$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), indicating that students' perception of their language ability was often more influential than their actual competence. Interestingly, 62% of participants self-rated their English proficiency as “below average”, despite standardized test results (IELTS) showing a more balanced proficiency range. This misalignment highlights the psychological impact of negative self-perception, often rooted in prior negative feedback experiences. One participant shared: “My teacher corrected me harshly once, and now I overthink every sentence.” This supports Bandura’s (1997) theory that belief in one’s capability plays a more critical role than actual ability in initiating communicative behavior.

#### **Self-Efficacy vs. Actual Proficiency**

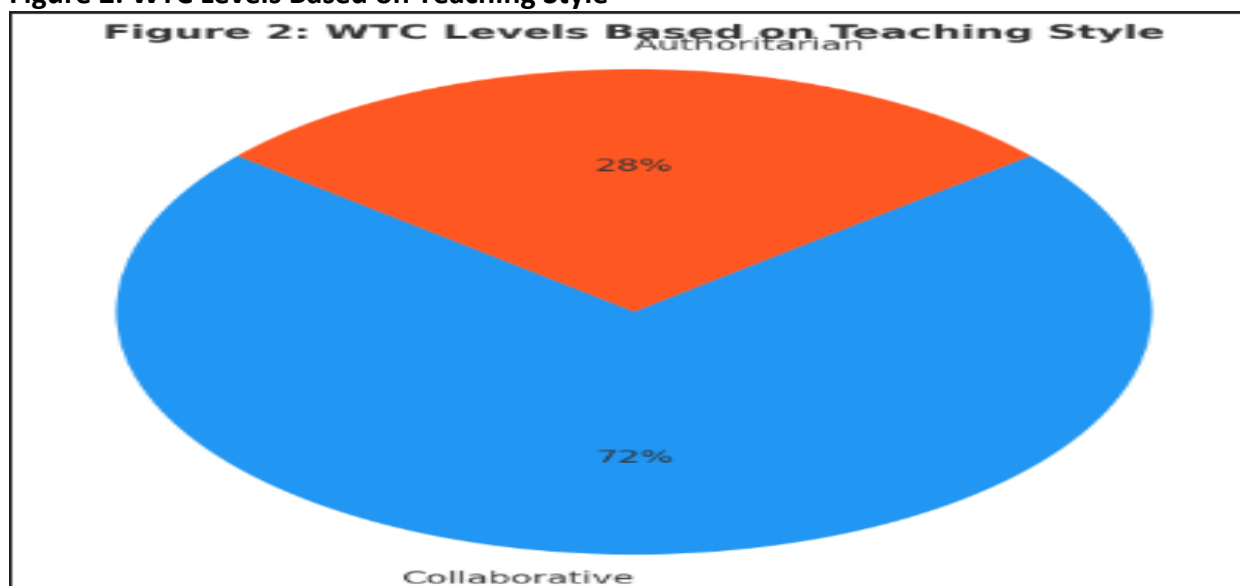
Self-Rated Proficiency	Actual IELTS Band Score	WTC Frequency (Scale 1–5)
High	6.5	4.2
Medium	5.5	3.1
Low	4.0	1.8

The table highlights the inverse relationship between self-perception and actual performance.

### 3. Teacher-Student Dynamics and Classroom Climate

The role of the teacher in shaping classroom climate emerged as a critical external factor influencing WTC. Students described significantly higher participation rates in classes where teachers adopted a collaborative and empathetic approach. Specifically, students in such classes reported 40% higher WTC compared to those with authoritarian or corrective-centered instructors. Participants emphasized that positive reinforcement and open-ended questioning encouraged them to express themselves without fear. For instance, phrases like *“Take your time”* or *“Your effort matters more than accuracy”* were seen as motivational. In contrast, students noted that frequent interruptions for corrections discouraged further speech: *“When the teacher interrupts to fix every mistake, I just shut down.”* These findings echo the research by Derakhshan et al. (2023) on the importance of emotional scaffolding in EFL environments.

**Figure 2: WTC Levels Based on Teaching Style**



This figure shows a clear preference for collaborative teaching methods in enhancing WTC.

### Peer Influence and Social Comparison

The study also revealed that peer dynamics play a pivotal role in shaping WTC, particularly in collectivist cultures such as Pakistan's. Survey responses indicated that 55% of students refrained from speaking English in class due to fear of negative peer judgment, with some feeling that speaking English might be perceived as *“showing off.”* However, group work with familiar peers notably improved WTC by up to 30%, suggesting that familiarity and trust reduce social anxiety. In contrast, competitive academic environments where peers are seen as rivals tend to suppress WTC. One student shared: *“Everyone here is so good at English—why would I speak?”*

**Table 2: Peer Influence on WTC**

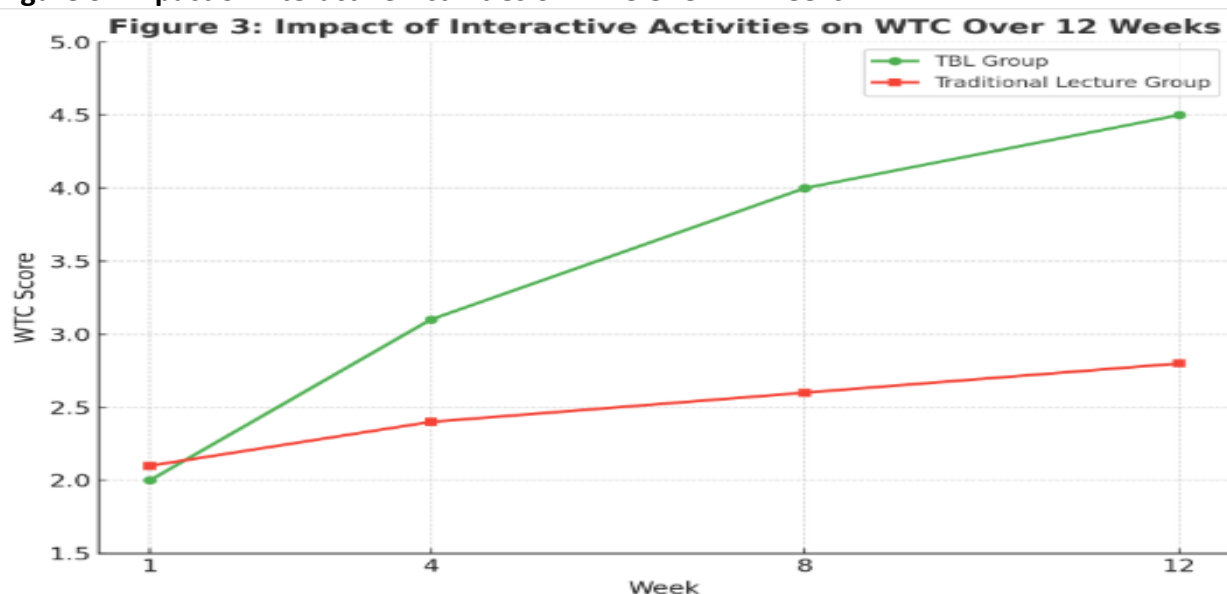
Scenario	WTC Score (Scale 1–5)
Speaking in front of friends	4.0
Speaking in mixed groups	2.5
Presenting to entire class	1.8

The table clearly shows that comfort with peers significantly boosts willingness to speak.

### Positive Influences: Feedback and Interactive Pedagogy

Amid the psychological and social challenges, the study also highlighted positive pedagogical strategies that significantly enhance WTC. Students exposed to weekly interactive speaking tasks combined with formative feedback demonstrated a 25% increase in oral participation over a semester. Activities such as role-plays, classroom debates, and digital storytelling were particularly well-received, with students describing them as “low-pressure” and “fun ways to learn.” Quantitative analysis supported these claims, showing a negative correlation between task-based learning and anxiety levels ( $r = -0.61$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). This finding aligns with Peng’s (2023) advocacy for experiential and communicative teaching methods in EFL classrooms.

**Figure 3: Impact of Interactive Activities on WTC Over 12 Weeks**



*This line graph demonstrates the steady improvement in WTC for students engaged in task-based learning compared to those in traditional lecture settings.*

The findings underscore the multifaceted nature of students’ willingness to communicate, shaped by both internal psychological factors (like anxiety and self-efficacy) and external social factors (such as teacher behavior and peer influence). While anxiety and negative self-perceptions serve as major barriers, positive classroom environments, empathetic teachers, and interactive teaching practices can play a transformative role in promoting communicative confidence among EFL learners.

### **Implications & Recommendations**

This study has identified some important psychological variables that affect willingness to communicate (WTC) in English amongst undergraduate students. These findings have important implications on the teachers, the institutions, and the students themselves, providing practical courses of actions to make learning environment more supportive and engaging. There are six main recommendations to be made in the light of the study outcomes, which are given below; Among the most vivid results, there was the negative effect of language anxiety on the participation of students. The educators should also be instrumental in reducing this fear by inculcating a classroom culture that does not punish mistakes but normalizes them. Teachers can demonstrate patience and listening skills instead of jumping at the opportunity to correct a mistake, giving students the chance to self-correct and finish what they are saying before they warn them. Such expressions as Take your time or I like your effort can help to decrease fear of



embarrassment greatly. Moreover, the teachers must not point out students who made errors in the presence of the classmates because this strengthens the fear. A more positive solution is a one-on-one feedback or comments in writing, which would not break the confidence of the students but still provide the direction of correcting the areas that need to be improved. The researchers found out that students were more ready to talk in low-stress, cooperative environments as compared to whole-class discussion. This can be seized by the teachers by using ice-breakers, pair work, and small groups work at the beginning of the lessons. A case in point, give students think-pair-shares so that they can practice responses with a partner before presenting to the whole group. Another way is to desensitize the students against the fear of talking through structured activities such as role-plays or even debates on familiar issues. Such practices may slowly start to instill confidence and students will feel at ease with spontaneous communication. The teachers must also change the group composition to avoid cliques and to promote flexibility in various social situations.

In addition to classroom methods, it is the role of universities to deal with the wider psychological impediments towards WTC. Colleges such as NUST can also include compulsory speaking classes which will deal with overcoming this anxiety and developing communication skills. Such workshops could involve activities like the use of mindfulness, breathing exercises, and hypothetical situations of speaking to make the students deal with nervousness. There is also a possibility of having special language anxiety support groups in the counseling centers where the students share experience and coping strategies in a safe environment. Moreover, teacher-training should focus on student-oriented learning methodologies, where the faculty development programs will equip teachers with skills on empathy and emotional support in language learning.

Because peer influence was a possible deterrent and motivator, institutions must look into the idea of organized peer mentorship initiatives. High WTC or high-level students could also mentor their reluctant peers by conducting common conversation practice. This can make the entire process of learning seem normal and also eliminate the intimidation that may be linked to the interaction between the students and the teachers. As an example, a Language Buddy System may be organised in which confident members may be paired with quieter students, to have a weekly informal conversation, where they have a practice friendly environment with no pressure. These programs help a person build a community and remove the feeling of performance when communicating in English because it is not a solo act but rather a skill that is shared.

Although teachers and institutions can establish positive circumstances, students should also make efforts to boost their confidence. They discovered that the beliefs of self-efficacy were not always in line with the real ability, i.e. the students did not realize their abilities. In a bid to overcome this, students may take on self-affirmation activities, this may include writing a journal of successful interactions in communication, or repeating positive mantras before a lesson (e.g., My ideas are worth sharing). Students can also be asked to record and review their own speech (e.g., as voice notes or video journals) in order to stay aware of improvement with time. As well, it is possible to make small, manageable objectives (e.g., speak once a lesson), and this will give a sense of achievement and increase comfort zones with time.

Lastly, the qualitative data of the study indicated that digital tools might provide a less fearful experience of speaking due to the opportunity to rehearse in a secluded space. The institutions

and teachers are supposed to use such platforms as AI language apps (ex. Duolingo, Elsa Speak) or virtual reality (VR) simulations where students may train their English skills in a non-judgmental gamified atmosphere. As an example, VR scenarios can be used to resemble classroom presentations or job interviews and allow the students to get accustomed to high-stress environments. On the same note, the use of asynchronous technologies, such as discussion boards or voice-based social media (e.g., Clubhouse), will allow shy students to participate at their own speed. Through the integration of the two styles of learning, the educator can address the varying comfort thresholds and yet promote verbal learning. The improvement of WTC in the English language among students should also be a multi-faceted process that touches on the psychological, pedagogical, and institutional levels. Emotional safety has to be prioritized in the classroom by the teachers, specific support systems have to be established by the institutions, and students should participate in confidence-building activities. These suggestions would allow stakeholders to turn language learning into a positive experience, instead of being a stressful one. The prospective study may investigate the effects of such interventions on the long-term basis, especially in other cultures, not only in Pakistan.

### **Conclusion**

This paper examines the psychological determinants of undergraduate students willingness to communicate (WTC) in English which provided important information regarding the obstacles and enablers to participation in the classroom. The results reiterated language anxiety, low self-efficacy, teacher student, and peer effects as crucial in developing the communicative behaviors of students. The most important barrier turned out to be anxiety, most students did not want to talk because they were afraid of embarrassment or being judged even having sufficient language knowledge. The study also pointed out that the approachability of teachers and the interactions with fellow students also motivated or disenfranchised the participation and that a positive learning environment was necessary. Such psychological obstacles tended to dominate over linguistic competence meaning that the issue of emotional and social factors is equally relevant to the language proficiency in developing WTC.

The implications of this study are felt in the practical implications of this study on the part of the educators, institutions and even the students. Adopting non-judgmental feedback methods, engaging learners in interactive activities and making speaking activities less pressurizing are some of the ways teachers can make the classroom more welcoming. Students can be gradually introduced to the public speech and the small group discussions, ice-breakers can help them gain confidence in the long run. On the systemic level, institutions are recommended to invest in psychological support programs, i.e. speaking workshops and peer mentorship programs, in order to address anxiety and self-doubt in students. Also, students may take action to enhance their WTC, such as practicing self-affirmation, setting realistic targets, and using technology to do low-stakes language practice. The joint effort of all these will help the classroom to become the place where students are not afraid to express themselves which eventually helps them to not only improve their language but overall their participation in the academic life.

Finally, the present research supports the notion that WTC involves more than the level of language proficiency but it is also psychological comfort and classroom culture. By focusing on emotional and social aspects of communication educators and institutions will be able to enable students to overcome their fears and become more active in English-medium environments. The results presented in the study can be extrapolated in future research studies that consider

longer-term effects of confidence-building interventions or investigating cultural variations in the WTC across a variety of educational settings. Nevertheless, the existing findings already ground considerably the reconsideration of the language teaching process, where the emphasis is on the accuracy but rather on the confidence, clarity, and willingness to communicate. By doing so we will not only teach the students to master the English language, but will also enable them gain the self-confidence to apply the English language effectively in their studies and in their careers.

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