

THE IMPACT OF ANXIETY AND COGNITIVE LOAD ON ENGLISH SPEAKING PERFORMANCE AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL

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Abstract

Speaking English is now a mandatory academic and professional aspect among university students especially in countries where English is not the first language like in Pakistan. Nonetheless, a lot of students have difficulties in speaking fluently because of psychological and cognitive challenges. This paper explores the interaction between anxiety and cognitive load in the performance of the English speaking students in the university level. This study is informed by the constructs of the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) by Gardner to examine the effect of emotional factors, mental effort, and instructional conditions on the fluency, accuracy, and confidence of spoken English. Ten university students in various semesters were interviewed using a qualitative research design approach where semi-structured interviews were used. The results show that the anxiety related to language, which has been provoked by fear of negative judgment, lack of confidence, and social comparison, causes significant disruptions in fluency, vocabulary recognition and the desire to speak. On the same note, difficulties of high thinking, including complicated grammar processing, real-time speaking multitasking, explaining instructions, and vague instructions strain working memory and declines speaking performance. This paper also determines the major coping options among the students and they are preparation, relaxation, positive self-talk, peer support and in a few instances resignation. In sum, the study demonstrates the necessity of favourable classroom conditions, minimal extraneous cognitive demands and anxiety-decreasing pedagogic interventions in order to enhance English speaking proficiency during the university stage. The results present useful implications to teachers, curriculum developers and language instructors as a way of tailoring more effective and psychologically accommodating learning experiences.

INTRODUCTION:

Since English has become essential to commerce, science, and international understanding, higher education has become increasingly valuable in English-speaking countries over the past century. English has become the primary academic and business language worldwide, despite its origins in colonisation and the exchange of goods (Ridge, 2011). As a result, university students worldwide, including those in non-English-speaking nations, are expected to speak English to participate in global affairs, scholarly conversations, and presentations. For this reason, it is crucial to understand what factors affect students' capacity to communicate in English, especially at the university level. This study examines the impact of anxiety and cognitive load on the performance of university English-speaking students.

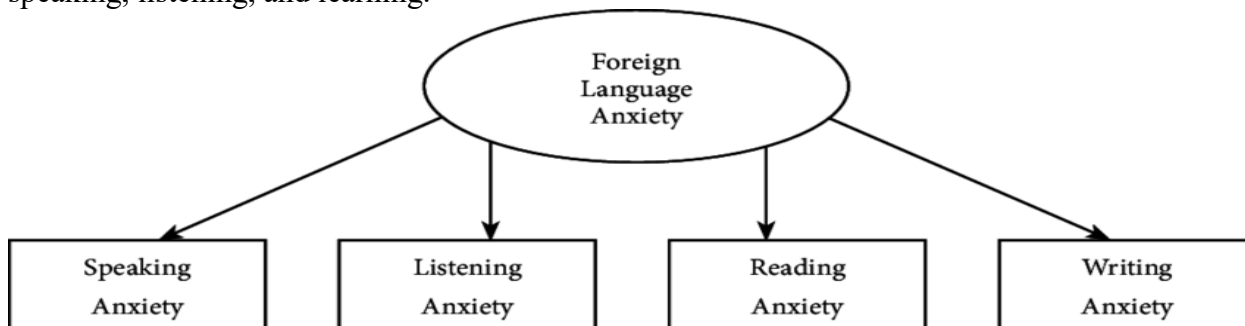
Learning a Language as a Cognitive and Psychological Process

Language acquisition involves psychological and cognitive components in addition to linguistic elements. Speaking demands the immediate integration of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency, often in the presence of an audience, which distinguishes it from reading or writing. The psychological stress associated with these requirements makes speaking one of the most challenging language skills to master (Brown, 2008).

According to Horwitz and Cope (E. Horwitz, 2001; E. K. Horwitz et al., 1986a), foreign language anxiety is a unique collection of self-perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behaviours related to language learning in the classroom. Language anxiety hinders language production and acquisition, claim (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). (Young, 1991) asserts that speaking anxiety, which reduces pupils' willingness to communicate, is caused by a fear of receiving a poor grade. (Sweller, 1988) defined cognitive load as the mental process of processing information in working memory. Paas and van Merriënboer (F. G. W. C. Paas et al., 1994)

further separated cognitive load into three categories: intrinsic (task complexity), extraneous (ineffective instructional design), and germane (mental effort focused on learning).

Language Anxiety: (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991) define language anxiety as “the sensation of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning.”



Symptoms of anxiety when speaking English may include stuttering, disengagement, physical discomfort, or difficulty recalling vocabulary. Such anxiety is often triggered by specific situations, including oral presentations or classroom assignments (E. Horwitz, 2001). At the university level, factors such as social comparison, academic expectations, and the pressure to demonstrate competence can intensify anxiety. (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991) notes that anxiety can impair fluency by shifting attention from communication to self-monitoring and fear of errors, resulting in reduced confidence and the adoption of avoidance strategies

Anxiety refers to the mental strain experienced by students when speaking English, while cognitive load denotes the mental effort imposed on working memory during speaking tasks. Together, these factors can diminish students’ confidence and fluency in expressing themselves (Gülçiçeği & Alişah, n.d.).

Cognitive Load: According to (Sweller, 1988), cognitive load is “the total amount of mental effort being used in the working memory.” The hypothesis of cognitive load is also very significant. According to Sweller’s hypothesis, working memory is constrained (Sweller, 1988). One needs to manage multiple daily activities to speak English, including word recall, sentence construction, grammar, and mental organisation. Students may hesitate or make mistakes if they are overburdened by expectations exceeding their working memory capacity (Chandler & Sweller, 1991).



Types of Cognitive Load:

Intrinsic cognitive load: (Sweller, 1988) defines intrinsic cognitive load as the mental effort required due to the task’s inherent complexity. For example, compared to conversational chats, abstract or technical English conversations have a higher intrinsic load. According to (F. Paas, Renkl, et al., 2003, 2003), the inherent load also depends on the interactivity of the pieces being processed (e.g., grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation).

Extraneous Cognitive Load: (Chandler & Sweller, 1991) coined the phrase “unnecessary mental effort” to characterise the diversions that result in undesired mental energy because of poor instructional design or irrelevant distractions. This can occur in oral activities due to background noise, unclear directions, or peer pressure. According to (Kalyuga et al., 2003), extraneous load slows down learning since it can reduce working memory without requiring further learning.

Germane Cognitive Load: According to (Sweller et al., 1998a), Germane Cognitive Load refers to the constructive mental effort involved in processing, creating, and automating schemas (long-term knowledge structures). In contrast to intrinsic and extraneous load, Germane load is productive since it helps students improve their skills. According to (F. G. W. C. Paas & Van Merriënboer, 1994), effective instruction should maximise germane load and decrease superfluous load.

The interaction between anxiety and cognitive load significantly increases the difficulty of speaking English. If unaddressed, high cognitive load can contribute to anxiety, and vice versa, ultimately impairing performance (Eysenck et al., 2007). Examining these factors together offers a clearer understanding of the challenges faced by university students.

Problem Statement:

Even though academic success and foreign communication skill heavily depend on English fluency, most college students especially those who are not English speakers, especially those of non-English speaking countries such as Pakistan, cannot manage to communicate articulately and fluently. This issue is usually enhanced by language anxiety, such as fear of errors, negative assessment, and social anxiety, and cognitive load, which compels students to learn vocabulary and grammar, pronunciation, and meaning simultaneously. The problems affect fluency, hinder their learning to take part in classroom conversations, and reduce their own confidence in their ability to speak English as a second language. Although the relevance of English competence has been accepted, little is known about the joint effect of anxiety and cognitive load on actual performance of the students in English speaking in real classroom situation.

Research Gap:

Past studies of language learning have investigated the concept of anxiety and cognitive load as largely independent variables, typically based on surveys, questionnaires, or controlled laboratory programs instead of conducting an examination of the actual speaking experience, feelings and thoughts of students. Further, there have been a very limited number of studies that have concentrated on the university students in Pakistan and minimal attention has been given to the joint influence of anxiety and cognitive load on the real English-speaking performance. This gap has been filled by conducting the study on the two factors in qualitative interviews where both factors are explored at the same time to see the problems they face in real classroom contexts and what strategies are adopted by students in dealing with such challenges.

Significance of the Study

This research is very useful in understanding psychological and cognitive issues of university students who are speaking English. It has some practical implications to teachers, curriculum developers, and language instructors through studying the synergistic impact of anxiety and cognitive load on actual speaking performance. The results may be used to develop instructional strategies, in-class interventions, and favorable learning conditions that decrease anxiety, regulate the cognitive load, and promote fluency, confidence, and desire to engage in English-speaking activities among students. Finally, this study can enhance the quality of the English language teaching in general at college level.

Purpose of the Study

Three variables were examined in this study: "attitudes toward the learning situation," "motivation," and "language anxiety" (Bluestein, n.d.). The constructs described in Gardner's AMTB—Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (Tennant & Gardner, 2004) were used in this investigation. AMTB has continued to have an impact on SLA research since it was created to gauge learners' motivation and affective orientation to the target language (Bier, 2015). It was intended that the results of this study would advance knowledge of the learners' affective needs.

The following research objectives served as the basis for this investigation:

- To investigate the impact of anxiety on the students' English speaking skills
- To investigate the impact of cognitive load on students' English speaking skills
- To find out the strategies to cope with anxiety and cognitive load

Research Questions

- How does the cognitive load affect the English-speaking skills of students?
- How does anxiety influence students' fluency, accuracy, and confidence in spoken English?
- How to cope with anxiety and cognitive load in English-speaking environments?

Literature Review:

Changes in the Study of Language Learning

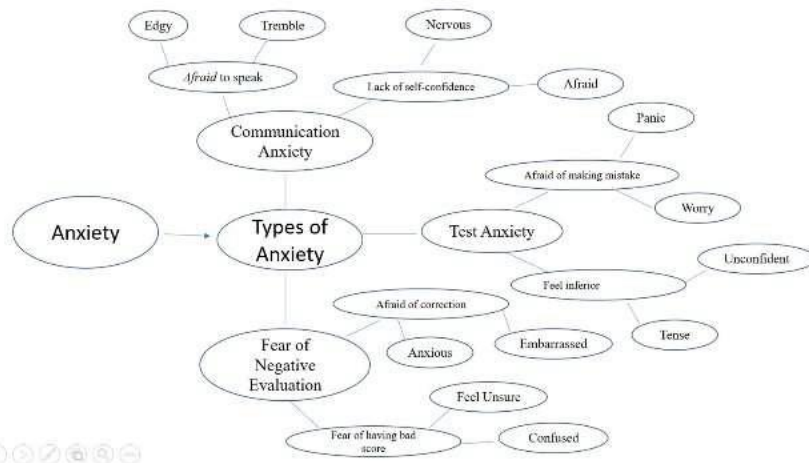
Over time, the study of language learning has undergone significant evolution. Grammar and structural competence were prioritised in earlier studies (Richards & Rodgers, 2001); however, communicative competence and interaction have gained greater attention since the 1970s (Communicative_competence_and_language, n.d.).

This shift led to a greater focus on psychological barriers such as anxiety. The emergence of cognitive psychology in the 1980s and 1990s further emphasised the importance of language performance (Sweller, 1994). Currently, integrating these perspectives offers a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges students encounter when speaking before an audience.

1. Language Anxiety

One of the most well-known and pervasive emotions is anxiety, which is characterized as a state of uncertainty and uneasiness (Zhou et al., 2024). It has been the subject of foreign language education research since the 1970s.

State anxiety, trait anxiety, and situation-specific anxiety are the three primary schools of thought in anxiety research (Liu, 2006). Trait anxiety typically stays constant and is difficult to alter, whereas state anxiety exhibits ephemeral characteristics and changes over time. Among situation-specific anxieties (E. K. Horwitz et al., 1986b), conducted one of the most well-known studies on anxiety in foreign language classrooms, which eventually led to the development of a theory of foreign language classrooms (Elaine K. Horwitz, Michael Tallon, and Han Luo, n.d.); they contend that learners' negative emotional responses during the foreign language acquisition process are caused by anxiety related to the language.



More significantly, they distinguished and enumerated three subsets that deal with anxiety in foreign language classes. The three subgroups were test anxiety, dread of receiving a poor grade, and communication apprehension (the worry or fear that something unpleasant may occur during conversation). They created the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) questionnaire to gauge classroom anxiety. The three subsets are precisely matched by the elements (E. K. Horwitz, 2010).

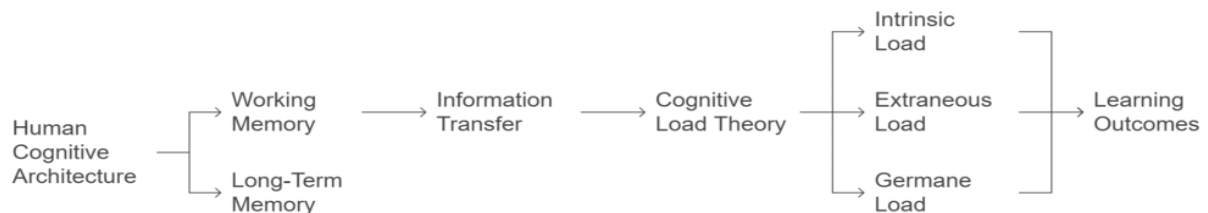
Greater anxiety when learning a foreign language was indicated by higher scores. To be more precise, communication apprehension refers to anxieties or fears when speaking with peers and teachers, and it reflects the degree of anxiety brought on by actual communication acts (Elaine K. Horwitz, Michael Tallon, and Han Luo, n.d.); test anxiety is a physiological condition brought on by extreme stress or discomfort during and/or before taking an exam (E. K. Horwitz et al., 1986) and fear of negative evaluation is a physiological construct that reflects anxieties or apprehension about external evaluations, distress from others' negative evaluations, and expectations about others' potential negative evaluations (E. K. Horwitz et al., 1986a). Regarding anxiety and online learning, (Pichette, 2009) proposed that since anxiety related to foreign languages causes students to become less engaged and reluctant to engage in class discussions and communication, it makes sense that these students would resort to online learning as a way to avoid in-person interactions with their peers. Nevertheless, the reality remains that online language teachers and tutors often report feeling anxious and lacking confidence. According to a study by (Burge & Howard, 1990) that examined the function of tutoring, nearly one-fifth of participants said they would be open to receiving motivational assistance from their tutors in the form of encouragement and positive feedback. . These were even more significant than the tutors' occupation and subject-matter expertise. (Pichette, 2009) also noted that the bulk of anxiety related to learning a foreign language was caused by vocal interactions in the classroom. Online or offline, peer-to-peer oral interactions are an essential part of foreign language studies.

Thus, anxiety related to learning a foreign language online did not differ significantly from that of learning a language in a classroom (Coryell & Clark, 2009); in this regard, (E. K. Horwitz et al., 1986b) Horwitz's FLCAS gave us a straightforward method of measuring anxiety related to online foreign language acquisition. In terms of the connection between anxiety and self-control, English language learners who had less writing anxiety employed a greater variety of writing techniques than those who experienced more writing anxiety (Liu, 2006). Self-regulation is a helpful conceptual strategy to mitigate the detrimental effects of anxiety (Zimmerman, 2002).

2. Impact of Cognitive load

The structure and characteristics of cognitive architecture suggest that the primary purpose of instruction is to facilitate schema construction in long-term memory and to reduce the limitations of working memory. Instructional designs that fail to address long-term memory modification or disregard working memory constraints during the processing of novel information are unlikely to be effective (Wong et al., 2012).

Cognitive Architecture and Load Theory



In addition to human cognitive architecture, cognitive load theory distinguishes between two primary types of cognitive load (Sweller, 2010): intrinsic, extrinsic and germane load. Intrinsic cognitive load is inherent to the material itself and depends on the learner's ability to process specific information simultaneously in working memory (Marcus et al., 1996; Sweller, 2010). This type of load is closely related to the complexity of the target information and is generally difficult to modify. Cognitive load effects are minimal for highly automatic information that does not involve explicit learning objectives, such as routine daily communication among family members, which requires little cognitive effort. In contrast, the unfamiliar, complex, and advanced English language learning materials examined in this study impose a substantial working memory load. Therefore, the findings of this study apply only to materials that demand significant working memory resources. Extrinsic cognitive load, by contrast, results from instructional strategies and can be controlled or modified by instructional designers. It typically arises from additional elements introduced by instructional design that must be processed in working memory. Most research on cognitive load focuses on reducing extrinsic elements in instructional design to minimize the burden on working memory (Sweller, 2010, 2011; Van Merriënboer & Ayres, 2005). The concept of germane cognitive load, often described as an independent type of cognitive load, is also frequently discussed. Germane cognitive load refers to the mental resources devoted to schema construction during learning and teaching (Wiebe et al., 2010). Some researchers argue that, because germane cognitive load is dependent on and assimilates intrinsic cognitive load, it may be more accurately categorized as a subset of intrinsic cognitive load (Sweller, 2010). Germane cognitive load involves the allocation of working memory resources to manage intrinsic cognitive demands during the learning process. Working memory is also required to process extrinsic cognitive load. Reducing extraneous cognitive load can increase germane cognitive load, thereby freeing working memory capacity for learning (Sweller, 2010).

Recently, the measurement of mental cognitive load has become a focus of interest among educational psychologists, particularly in the context of computer-assisted learning (Mayer, 2003; F. Paas, Tuovinen, et al., 2003). Many studies are grounded in the theoretical framework of cognitive load theory (F. Paas, Tuovinen, et al., 2003; Sweller et al., 1998b). Cognitive load is defined as a multidimensional construct representing the mental effort required to perform a specific task imposed on the learner's cognitive system. The amount of cognitive load measured at a given time serves as an indicator of the level of information being processed in working memory. Assessing perceived cognitive load or stress on working

memory can provide insights into a learner's cognitive capacity for learning (Wiebe et al., 2010). In this study, the NASA-Task Load Index (NASA-TLX), which comprises six component scales, is employed. The weighted average of these six scales, reflecting the contribution of each factor to the cognitive load of a specific activity as rated by the participant, is proposed as an integrated measure of overall cognitive load ("Development of NASA-TLX (Task Load Index)," 1988).

3. STUDENTS' STRATEGIES TO COPE WITH ANXIETY

Student anxiety can be managed through specific coping strategies. Each student may employ different approaches to reduce or address anxiety. This research identifies five strategies, based on: Preparation, Relaxation, Positive Thinking, Peer Seeking, and Resignation (Kondo, 2004).

3.1. PREPARATION

(Kondo, 2004, p. 263; "The Nature and Phenomenology of Test Anxiety," 1998, p. 66) states that preparation, which is task-relevant, is used by both highly anxious and less anxious students. Active or problem-focused coping is generally more effective than emotion-focused or avoidance-oriented coping in reducing stress, and is preferred by most individuals. Both active coping and preparation foster a sense of mastery over stress, redirect attention from the problem, and help release energy after exposure to threats. Students can manage anxiety by preparing before learning and speaking English in class. Preparation is a crucial component of the teaching and learning process, particularly in English-speaking activities.

3.2. RELAXATION

(Grasha, 1990) suggests that deep breathing for three to five minutes is an effective method to reduce tension. If students are well prepared but continue to experience anxiety or fear, relaxation techniques can be employed to alleviate symptoms. Students are encouraged to use breathing exercises or calming strategies when speaking English. The purpose of this strategy is to reduce students' fear during English class participation.

3.3. POSITIVE THINKING

This strategy is related to relaxation, as both are influenced by students' self-esteem. Positive thinking involves students attempting to reduce anxiety when speaking English. As a psychological factor, positive thinking helps manage language anxiety and diminishes the fear of experiencing anxiety in class. According to (Horwitz et al., 1986; cited in Ravica 2016) language anxiety is associated with mental characteristics such as fear of ridicule, shyness in communication, and concern about underperforming compared to peers.

3.4. PEER SEEKING

According to (Kondo, 2004) Peer Seeking is distinguished by students' willingness to look for other students who seem to have trouble understanding the class and/or controlling their anxiety. For the anxious student, the realisation that others are having the same problem may serve as a source of

3.5. RESIGNATION

Resignation is characterised by students' reluctance to address their language anxiety, such as giving up or disengaging in class (Kondo, 2004). Some students may choose to accept their anxiety rather than attempt to overcome it, often due to fear of repeated failure and increased stress. This tendency is further supported by (Ely, 1986; Ravica: 5), who notes that anxious learners are often reluctant to take risks. Thus, resignation represents one possible coping strategy.

Methodology

There are three major types or forms of research approaches or types exist: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. Qualitative research can be defined as the act of uncovering and attempting to articulate complex social phenomena; it is intended to learn about the

thoughts, behaviors, or experiences of people through tools such as interviews, observations, and content analysis. Quantitative research is connected with the information that is represented by numbers or general numeric analysis. It is quite helpful in research, especially when the researcher is interested in a huge sample and measurable outcomes; it measures variables and seeks patterns. Mixed methods research is a form of research that incorporates the use of both qualitative and quantitative research methods in order to exemplify a more comprehensive and, thus, exhaustive perspective of a research issue. It incorporates the strengths by making the method more balanced in addressing the numerical information and subjective insights. But in the current study, I used a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews to investigate the actual experiences, thoughts, and difficulties of students in detail. The number of participants was ten university students representing various semesters and with different experiences of utilizing the English language. I approached each participant at the campus and via call and informed them about the purpose of the study and obtained verbal consent, as I promised them that their identity and responses would remain confidential. I recorded the interviews in a notebook and on my mobile phone, but only took written notes and nothing more.

The interview questions were based on the difficulties the students face when they speak English, the effects of anxiety on the grades, the influence of the cognitive load on fluency, and the ways that can help the students increase their confidence. Some of the main questions were: what are the problems a student can face while speaking English? How does cognitive load/cognition play a role in fluency and confidence in spoken English? What is the impact of anxiety in English-speaking skills? How can we reduce these problems that we face while speaking English? What are the strategies to cope with anxiety and cognitive load? How can confidence and fear of accuracy can be dealt with? How can you encourage students to speak English and ignore the fear and anxiety? I used the mobile phone's voice recorder and call recorder as an instrument to record participant thoughts and experiences and then transcribe them into MS Word. The saturation came after the seventh interview, and no new information or ideas were observed. I also did another interview to verify this and terminated data collection.

Major Themes and Codes

Theme	Codes	Insights from Interviews
Problems/problems in English Speaking	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lack of confidence 2. Limited vocabulary 3. Grammar difficulties 4. Pronunciation issues 5. Fear of mistakes/judgment 6. Limited practice opportunities 	Participants highlighted that students often struggle with vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and confidence. Social pressure, fear of ridicule, and limited real-life speaking practice intensify anxiety, making speaking stressful rather than a learning activity.
Role of Cognitive Load in Fluency and Confidence	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mental effort in processing vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation 2. Overload reduces fluency 3. Automatization through practice 4. L1 interference 	Cognitive load affects fluency because students must process multiple aspects simultaneously (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation). High cognitive load leads to

		hesitation and reduced confidence, while regular practice and automatization reduce mental effort, allowing smoother and more confident speaking.
Impact of Anxiety on Speaking Skills	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hesitation and pauses 2. Reduced fluency 3. Memory lapses 4. Avoidance of speaking 5. Negative emotional impact 	Anxiety acts as an affective filter, reducing participation, causing mental blocks, self-censorship, and avoidance. Fear of negative evaluation further reduces fluency, pronunciation accuracy, and confidence.
Strategies to Reduce Problems	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Regular speaking practice 2. Safe, supportive learning environment 3. Peer interaction 4. Positive reinforcement 	Participants emphasized creating low-stress, encouraging environments. Practice through peer groups, small activities, and interaction with teachers helps students overcome anxiety and gradually improve fluency and confidence.
Coping with Anxiety and Cognitive Load	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Positive self-talk 2. Preparation and rehearsal 3. Task simplification 4. Group support 5. Relaxation techniques 	Strategies include cognitive rehearsal, visualization, breaking tasks into smaller chunks, practicing with peers, and relaxation methods like deep breathing. These reduce mental effort and alleviate anxiety, helping students speak more naturally.
Dealing with Confidence and Fear of Accuracy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Focus on communication over grammar 2. Gradual exposure and achievable goals 3. Teacher encouragement and feedback 4. Mistakes treated as learning opportunities 	Confidence grows with practice and supportive feedback. Emphasis is on expressing ideas rather than grammatical perfection. Gradual exposure to speaking tasks and understanding that mistakes are normal helps reduce fear of accuracy.
Encouraging Students to Speak English	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Non-judgmental classroom environment 2. Interactive activities (games, discussions, role-plays) 	Participants suggested motivating students by creating positive, friendly, and safe environments, providing structured

	<p>3. Small group practice 4. Teacher modeling and peer support</p>	<p>speaking opportunities, interactive activities, and supportive feedback. Encouragement and role modeling help reduce anxiety and promote fluency</p>
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RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Data analysis in the interview showed that speaking English is not an easy and at times stressful process among students in the university due to the conflicting nature of linguistic, psychological and cognitive factors. Students reported that the lack of ability to recollect vocabulary and use the correct grammar and an appropriate pronunciation was the greatest problem that disrupted their speech flow and made a speech sound unnatural. An enormous fear of making mistakes and being judged by their peers or a teacher increased these language challenges and caused most students to lose their confidence, become diffident or defiant in refusing to talk at all.

Anxiety was the major hindrance to effective communication. It was discovered that, the participants always claimed mental blocks, forgetfulness and difficulty in making sentences when speaking English especially in front of fluent speakers or listeners. Some of the students cited physical symptoms such as increased heartbeat rate and a sense of shakiness to indicate the level to which the anxiety influences the emotional and thinking processes. This anxiety limited their desire to do this and gave an affective filter that inhibited fluency.

Cognitive load was another key element that predetermined the performance at the speaking. Students explained that, they experience a problem in trying to deal with vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and meaning at the same time. The outcome of this intellectual burdens was fluency, short sentences and lack of fluency. They also observed that they can talk more naturally with less cognitive load i.e. they are relaxed, prepared or even even well-informed of the subject matter which leads to the significance of automatisisation via repetition practice.

Despite these problems, students believed that they can acquire speaking skills with the assistance of the common practice and the favorable environment in the classroom. They have emphasized that the non-judging atmosphere in which mistakes are considered a part of the learning process and not a defeat reduces anxiety and generates confidence. The respondents noted that it should not be focused on strict grammar accuracy but on communication especially among the beginners as excessive correction overloads the mind. They also found out other coping strategies that were positive and include positive self-talk, relaxation, taking simple tasks, rehearsal, and interaction with peers.

Overall, the findings indicate that students experience English-speaking problems, which are not only in the restriction of linguistic abilities but also in the feeling of anxiety and additional stress. However, they also show that fluency, confidence, and desire to speak can be significantly developed with the aid of practice discipline, the promotion of feedback and positive atmosphere.

Conclusion

English as the Second Language (ESL) has become essential to academic, social, and special achievement in the world that is getting more and more global, particularly in the multilingual societies such as Pakistan. Along with serving as the medium of instruction in most Pakistani colleges, English is an essential necessity to obtaining engagement, access to information of the world as well as being an essential part of international discourse. Nonetheless, even with its extensive significance, a large number of higher education

institutions continue to experience a high number of students, who fail to understand the language. These challenges hampering their presentation in academics and confidence level are characterized by challenges with grammar, vocabulary practice, writing fluency, pronunciation, and comprehension.

This paper provides an in-depth understanding of the complex nature of determinants that influence performance of university students in English speaking and the fact that anxiety and cognitive load are inseparable and indispensable. Anxiety as fear of error, negative appraisal and social criticism emerge as one of the key psychological inhibitors and will lead to the development of the feeling of hesitation, reduced fluency, forgetfulness and even avoidance of speaking tasks. These difficulties of learning are typically supported by corporeal indicators such as increased cardiac rate, nervousness, shakiness, this clarifies the reason why learning a language is not only a cognition process but also an emotionally difficult one.

The cognitive load also contributes to these problems since students need to decide between vocabulary retrieval, grammatical structuring, pronunciation and meaning. Excessive thinking overwhelms the working memory resulting to the disjointed sentences, muffled speech and loss of confidence in the communicative skill. On the one hand, students are more advanced, better prepared in their expressions, and not hesitant in case the cognitive load is handled; they prepare, rehearse, and know the topic. The findings indicate that the two variables (anxiety and cognitive load) are mutually dependent, thus, the higher the cognitive load the higher the stress and anxiety and vice versa as anxiety impairs the cognitive ability leading to a vicious cycle that may significantly impair speaking performance.

It is important to note that the paper can also discover effective methods in which they can be conquered. Preparation and rehearsing, relaxing and deep-breathing, positive self-talk, peer support, and non-judgmental learning environment can help students reduce anxiety, handle cognitive load and build confidence, relax, and deep-breathe, use positive self-talk, and be supported by peers. Explaining in the way presented rather than working on grammatical excellence, assigning sequential speaking tasks and initiating enabling classroom activities were found to enhance the motivation level and willingness to contribute. Speaking activities where the students are introduced progressively and the mistakes they commit should be used as a learning experience can help the students to be more actively involved and intuitively in the English speaking activities.

The issues of the English-speaking in the university level are complex and they involve linguistic, cognitive, and psychological problems. The integrative approach that is to consider not only language skills but also emotional state and cognitive control of students should be used to address these issues. In a structured practice, facilitative teaching and anxiety and load minimization skills, teachers can get a significant impact on fluency, confidence and overall communicative competence of the students. As has been emphasized in this paper effective language acquisition does not only mean acquisition of grammar or vocabulary skills alone but the establishment of a positive environment where the students can process information, to overcome stress and to develop confidence in their abilities to communicate in English.

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