

LEARNER'S ANXIETY AND SELF-EFFICACY IN ESL CLASSROOMS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the connection between learners' anxiety and self-efficacy in ESL classrooms with a focus on their effects on speaking and writing. Anxiety has been identified as a major obstacle to language acquisition, especially in speaking situations. It is characterized by stage fright, fear of being judged, and the lack of language knowledge. Speaking tasks caused participants to feel more anxious because they are evaluated in front of a huge crowd, whereas writing tasks caused them to feel less anxious since they were private and delayed. Self-efficacy was found as a pivotal repellent to language learners' to overcome obstacles. To control their nervousness, participants used techniques like self-motivation, deep breathing, rehearsing, and practicing before the tasks. Moreover, listening to fluent speakers and peer-supported practice help them boost their confidence. The study shows how important teachers are in fostering a positive learning environment, providing constructive criticism.

Keywords: Second Language Learning, English as a Second Language (ESL), Anxiety, Self-Efficacy, Learner's anxiety

Introduction

The procedure of learning a second language is complicated and impacted by a range of educational, social, and psychological variables. Among these, self-efficacy and anxiety have emerged as crucial concepts influencing how English as a second language (ESL) learners experience language acquisition. Feeling of anxiety can negatively impact your language work, while self-efficacy overcomes the anxiety faced by language students. Anxiety and self-efficacy in learners are important variables that affect the learning process, especially in classes where English is being taught as a second language (ESL).

The notion of anxiety is summarized by Oxford as "a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease about something within a certain outcome". Anxiety is a feeling of fear, excessive concern, and unpleasant emotions that come from the belief that negative will occur (*Berutu & Mutiawati, 2023*). The need for English competence has increased along with globalization. Leading researchers to investigate the psychological hurdles that impact language acquisition. Learner's anxiety can seriously impair a student's capacity for efficient communication and participation in class activities. Test anxiety or communication anxiety are some of the causes of anxiety or fear of receiving a bad grade and sometimes being negatively judged by others. These anxieties can impede participation and the overall goal of learning. (*Gardener & MacLynre, 1993*) mention that feelings of uncertainty, extreme concern, and self-doubt when using a second language are all included in the complicated and multidimensional construct of language anxiety. Learner anxiety is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon that arises from the interaction of individual instructional and contextual factors (*Ellis, 2008*).

Daly and Miller (1975) introduced the term "writing anxiety" which refers to the tendency of an individual to avoid writing, particularly when it is evaluated. Second language writing anxiety (SLWA) is defined as "a general avoidance of writing and of situations perceived by the individuals to potentially require some amount of writing accompanied by the potential for evaluation on the writing" (*Hassan, 2001, p. 4*).

Listening to a second language is an important skill that enhances students' ability to engage with the speakers of another language in their daily and real-life communications. However, most students feel anxiety while listening to a second language, this is listening anxiety. "Anxiety, tension, and worry associated with the human nerve system are known as listening anxiety". (*Rahimi and Soleymani, 2015, p. 153*)

Speaking anxiety is defined as the subjective experience of tension, fear, uneasiness, and worry resulting from autonomic nervous system activation while using a second language.

"Reading anxiety is a complex emotional state characterized by feelings of tension, apprehension, and avoidance behaviors related to reading." (*Sparks and Javorsky, 1993*)

Self-efficacy is especially important in ESL classes because it affects how students approach speaking, listening, reading, and writing assignments. "Self-efficacy is a person's belief in their ability to succeed at a particular task or a goal". From Bandura's (2019) perspective self-efficacy is that one can exert control over difficult demands and accomplish desired results. As for student's self-efficacy, it is their judgment of their capability to perform a certain task. Higher self-efficacious learners are more inclined to welcome communication chances, try out different language usage, and accept that mistakes are a necessary part of learning. People have a better probability of attaining better learning outcomes and higher competence over time because they are more skilled at overcoming language-related difficulties. Students have a greater sense of their abilities and are better able to control their anxiety because they are more likely to think they can overcome obstacles. On the other side, students who have poor self-efficacy could find it easy to get upset, avoid taking chances that are necessary for language practice and growth, and shy away from involvement.

Observing others can lessen a learner's anxiety. Studies have indicated that solutions targeted at mitigating language anxiety, like fostering a good learning environment in the classroom, encouraging positive interactions between students and teachers, and utilizing low-stakes communicative tasks, can greatly increase learners' self-efficacy. Similarly, reducing fear and increasing self-efficacy through techniques like goal-setting, feedback, and self-reflection can enable students to engage more fully in class activities and take charge of their language-learning process.

Yashima et al. (2004) recommended that later studies of oral communication in English as a second language should focus both on situational positive and negative factors plus situational positive and negative factors which make it better for people to communicate orally inside or outside of class lessons. In other words, it is important to study how both positive and negative emotions are related to communication because they influence communicative behavior.

Researchers explore a complicated relationship between learner anxiety and self-efficacy. In ESL classrooms, anxiety and self-efficacy have a reciprocal and intricate relationship. Learner's anxiety leads them to become a low confident student while self-efficacy aids them in becoming a fluent second-language learner. Massive level of language anxiety reduces learner's confidence in their capacity to perform effectively in language activities, which in turn weakens self-efficacy. Students who suffer from anxiety regularly may begin to believe that their difficulties are a reflection of their general language proficiency, which lowers their self-efficacy.

This study will focus on writing and speaking anxiety and self-efficacy in ESL classrooms while learning a second language.

Significance

The study emphasizes how anxiety and self-efficacy affect one's ability to learn a language. Teachers may modify their lesson plans to increase student confidence and decrease anxiety by knowing how these characteristics interact. This will improve learning results. Reduced

anxiety and increased self-efficacy in learners can lead to better language competency, especially in speaking and listening—the language domains where many students struggle the most.

One important indicator of academic performance is learner engagement. Through the identification of the ways in which anxiety impedes participation and self-efficacy fosters active involvement in the learning process, this study offers important new insights into how to motivate students to take initiative and participate fully in language activities. In ESL courses, where communication competence is fostered via constant practice and engagement, this is especially important.

This study has applications for ESL teachers who want to establish classroom cultures that lessen anxiety in their students and encourage positive self-perceptions. The study's findings may be used by educators to create curriculum and activities that foster a growth attitude in language learners, lower their fear of being judged, and increase confidence. For students who may normally suffer from fear of failing or low confidence, teachers can greatly enhance the learning experience by creating a psychologically supportive classroom.

Objectives

The objectives of this study are;

1. To identify the specific anxiety problems that ESL students encounter.
2. To investigate the anxiety in language learning that impacts speaking fluency, and writing proficiency.
3. To explore the connection between learners' anxiety and self-efficacy.
4. To identify and assess strategies that support self-efficacy and reduce learner's anxiety.

Research Questions

1. What are the specific anxiety problems that ESL students encounter?
2. How does anxiety in language learning impact speaking fluency, and writing proficiency?
3. What is the connection between learner's anxiety and self-efficacy?
4. How to identify and assess strategies that support self-efficacy and reduce learners' anxiety?

Literature Review

A literature review offers a framework for considering the potential outcomes of original research while summarizing and evaluating the writing on a particular issue. A literature review's primary purpose is to present information from earlier studies that are relevant to the work being done now (*Azhar Ahmad, Maitlo, & Rao, 2022*). It also reveals past research by providing sophisticated ideas for fresh studies. Additionally, it assists researchers in repurposing their work in bigger contexts to demonstrate improved research outcomes. The present study's literature review includes information on the study's theoretical background, linguistic anxiety about the four language skills, some earlier relevant studies, and research gaps. ESL students frequently lack confidence, self-assurance, and fear of making mistakes these feelings are related to their anxiety related to learning and using a second language. If ESL teachers implement efficient teaching approaches to teach a second language effectively, it may considerably reduce ESL learners' stress.

There are different kinds of anxiety: first-hand anxiety in communications, which is visible when speaking and listening to others; second-hand anxiety linked to fear of negative valuation which is related to ESL students' beliefs; and third, fear of negative valuation, which is a type of anxiety linked to ESL students' perceptions that other viewers, such as teachers, colleagues, or other people, are viewing their linguistic skill negatively. The ESL students' anxiety levels are rising as a result of these three categories of variables. Foreign language anxiety has an impact on ESL students' self-assurance and confidence in Pakistani ESL courses.

There are four linguistic abilities in any standard language, and all four of these talents are equally harmed by foreign linguistic anxiety. From a theoretical standpoint, it should be highlighted that Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (*Fredrickson, 2001*) can support the relationship between L2 learners' emotions and cognition, as expressed in anxiety and self-efficacy. According to this hypothesis, a person's good emotional experiences can expand and build their cognitive capacity and belief systems. Because speaking ability (oral communication) has historically been examined in the context of SLA mostly as a result of anxiety and self-efficacy.

Bandura (*2001 p. 10*) stated, "unless people believe [that] they. . . by their actions. . . can produce desired results. . . they have little incentive to act or to preserve in the face of difficulties". A growing body of research has examined self-efficacy in learning environments for both students and instructors (Ghonsooly et al., 2012; Elahi Shirvan et al., 2018; Fathi and Derakhshan, 2018; Fathi et al., 2020b, 2021; Seifalain and Derakhshan, 2018; Fathi and Derakhshan, 2019). As suggested by additional analysis, anxiety is a major factor in the field of second language learning (Elahi Shirvan and Taherian, 2018; Fathi et al., 2020b; Saghafi and Elahi Shirvan, 2020; Kasbi and Elahi Shirvan, 2017). Consequently, our study shows that anxiety is a substantial individual-difference variable.

Anxiety usually harms L2 knowledge and makes it worse (Dörnyei, 2005). *Arnold and Brown (1999)* refer to "anxiety is quite possibly the affective factor that most pervasively obstructs the learning process" (*p. 8*). *Dornyei and Stephen (2015)* contend that anxiety is a complicated construct consisting of several different components rather than a single, comprehensive cause. Research has indicated that several factors have been associated with anxiety related to second language acquisition. These factors include low levels of self-efficacy (*Bensalem, 2018*), low levels of grit (Liu and Wang, 2021), inadequate practice (*Bárkányi, 2018*), low language proficiency levels (*Teimouri et al., 2019*), low levels of emotional intelligence (*Chen et al., 2021*), excessive use of one's native tongue, cultural background factors (*Shan et al., 2020*), socioeconomic status (*Ali et al., 2021*), and negative opinions about students' academic performance by teachers (*Liu and Wu, 2021*).

According to *Rebecca (1990, 164)*, "anxiety can play a strong role, short-circuiting potential learning in any of the four skills". Speaking a new language is usually when learners are the most anxious. But they also suffer remarkably high levels of anxiety when they are required to use other language abilities, such as listening, reading, and writing. Language instructors and language learners are familiar with the four language abilities, speaking, reading, writing, and listening. These linguistic skills are required of learners when they acquire a second language. Furthermore, grammar is a crucial component of learning a second language. On the other hand, grammar touches on and overlaps speaking, writing, listening, and reading.

Rebecca (1990, 6) stated that "the term skill simply means ability, expertness, or proficiency". These skills are gained incrementally during the language development. Additionally, 66 Malaysian University students participated in a study by *Farah and Parilah (2012)* to ascertain the type and severity of anxiety that Malaysian university students experience. According to the study, role-playing and responding to questions from the teacher were the two most difficult tasks students had to complete in a classroom. Oral presentations came in second. Conversely, when speaking with multiple native speakers outside of the classroom, pupils have the greatest fear, followed by formal conversations with professors and staff. The majority of the pupils showed signs of moderate anxiousness.

It's interesting to note that *Pappamihiel (2002)* examined anxiety related to English language use in two distinct settings: classes with English as a second language and classrooms without English as the primary language. 178 middle school students from Mexico who were enrolled in American schools were the subject of the study. Data on English language anxiety levels in

regular and ESL classrooms were collected using the English Language Anxiety Scale. The data was also used to look at the relationships between academic success levels, gender, length of stay in the nation, listening and speaking skills, and reading and writing skills, as well as the degrees of English language anxiety in ESL and mainstream schools. As a result, the study also used exploratory factor analysis to find other factors influencing anxiety. The study's findings showed that students' feelings of anxiety related to the English language were higher in regular classrooms than in ESL ones. It is hypothesized that the presence of native English speakers among the pupils causes those students to feel anxious in regular classes. The study also showed that three factors—gender, reading and writing proficiency, and success level—significantly influenced students' anxiety over the English language.

Regarding academic accomplishment, the data indicated that a decrease in anxiety levels in ESL classrooms was correlated with an increase in achievement. Furthermore, pupils who thought they were proficient in reading and writing also reported being less worried than those who thought they were not. The study found that when utilizing the English language, female students had significantly more anxiety than male pupils. Overall, the study's findings indicated that ELL students' experiences with English language anxiety are multifaceted and vary according to the circumstances.

A multifaceted perspective of anxiety and its impact on language learners was established by Cheng (2004). He classified writing anxiety into three categories: bodily anxiety, psychological anxiety connected to tension and suspense, and behavioral anxiety related to avoidance and withdrawal. Additionally, according to Sparks, Ganschow, and Javorsky (2000), pupils' cognitive deficits lead to subpar performance, which then turns into anxiety. Additionally, it was discovered that gender was the root cause of writing anxiety. While Zorbaz (2010) concludes differently and shows that men complain more than women about experiencing anxiety when working on written composition, Herrington, Matheny, Curlette, McCarthy, and Penick (2005) found that men experienced less anxiety than women.

The degree of writing anxiety increases as language difficulty rises (Bruning & Horn, 2000; Schweiker-Marra & Marra, 2000). Both positive and negative effects of anxiety on performance have been documented (Lehrer, Goldman, & Strommen, 1990; Alpert & Haber, 1960). Because of this, it is essential to ESL students' writing skills and poses some of the biggest obstacles in language instruction. However, occasionally, some anxiety is beneficial for students' improved attention to detail and correctness in their writing. It is vital to forbid anxiousness since previous research (e.g., Young, 1991; Aida, 1994; Macintyre & Gardner, 1994) suggests that anxiety has a detrimental influence on ESL instruction.

However, Brown's (2007) research demonstrated that anxiety may improve people's performance at work. Developing the work of Brown (ibid) According to Negari et al. (2012), individuals who experience stress throughout any kind of learning activity may do better. The degree of writing anxiety increases as language difficulty rises (Bruning & Horn, 2000; Schweiker-Marra & Marra, 2000). Both positive and negative effects of anxiety on performance have been documented (Lehrer, Goldman, & Strommen, 1990; Alpert & Haber, 1960). Because of this, it is essential to ESL students' writing skills and poses some of the biggest obstacles in language instruction. However, occasionally, some anxiety is beneficial for students' improved attention to detail and correctness in their writing.

It is vital to forbid anxiousness since previous research (e.g., Young, 1991; Aida, 1994; Macintyre & Gardner, 1994) suggests that anxiety has a detrimental influence on ESL instruction. Self-efficacy, as defined by Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) (1977), is the belief that one can carry out a certain task or activity with success. In many areas, including motivation, accomplishment, and decision-making, the idea of self-efficacy is crucial. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), which was put forward in 1986, places emphasis on

this idea. Four main information sources were noted by (*Bandura & Watts, 1996*) as having a role in the building of self-efficacy beliefs. These sources include verbal persuasion, physiological and emotional states, vicarious experiences, and enactive mastery experiences.

An individual's assessment of their talents is greatly impacted by the availability of knowledge resources, which in turn influences their propensity to participate in a certain activity. It is critical to remember that self-efficacy beliefs are domain-specific and might differ depending on the task or activity under consideration in terms of specificity and intensity (*Bandura, 1997*). A corpus of research by *Stajkovic & Luthans (1998)* indicates that there is a favorable association between self-efficacy beliefs and modifying health-related habits, succeeding academically, and functioning effectively in professional situations. The degree to which information resources are readily available influences how well someone judges their abilities, which in turn influences how likely they are to participate in a certain activity. Remembering that self-efficacy beliefs are domain-specific and can change depending on the difficulty and level of effort involved in the job at hand is crucial.

For language learners, these include providing helpful criticism, setting realistic goals, providing examples of success, and showcasing role models for imitation. By means of the development of self-efficacy, educators may effectively support the growth of learners' motivation and self-confidence, ultimately enabling them to succeed in the domain of language acquisition. Speaking and writing are two productive abilities; they are essential to communication processes since they help convey messages and information (*A Ahmad, Iqbal, & Rao, 2023*).

According to *Horwitz et al. (1986)*, speech difficulties are typically noted when a client is speaking a second language in counseling sessions at the University of Texas. In ESL classes, students frequently struggle with speaking a foreign language, are hesitant to speak in front of others, and are reluctant to ask questions of the professors. In Pakistan, this reason is frequently observed since, in addition to the events that take place in ESL classrooms, the instructional environment seems to accept precisely the concerns and speaking abilities of ESL pupils. Regarding ESL students, learning attitudes have a big influence on how well they pick up the language and adjust to living in a different language and culture. For ESL students to be motivated and engaged, positive learning attitudes like curiosity and excitement are essential (*Al-Adwan, Al-Debei, & Dwivedi, 2022*).

When students approach language learning with a positive mindset, they are more likely to practice often, participate enthusiastically in educational events, and actively look for chances to improve their English. A person's overall development and eventual success in learning the language are greatly influenced by their level of motivation and involvement (*Akram & Abdelrady, 2023*). Furthermore, learning attitudes have a big impact on how confident and risk-taking ESL students are while using English. Adopting positive attitudes helps students overcome their fear of making mistakes and gain the confidence to take on the risks involved in speaking, writing, and interacting with others in the English language. Examples of these attitudes include developing a growth mindset and a strong belief in their ability to learn. Teachers can help ESL students gain confidence and fluency in English by providing a supportive atmosphere and encouraging a positive attitude toward language learning (*Shahzad et al., 2020*). This self-assurance is necessary for both integrating into the new culture and communicating effectively.

Research Methodology

The research methodology is given below.

Research Design

Quantitative research uses numerical data collecting and analysis to explore research issues or hypotheses. It seeks to measure variables, find correlations, and evaluate hypotheses.

Quantitative research includes questionnaires, surveys, experiments, and observation studies. Qualitative research that explains and gains insight and understanding of particular phenomena through intensive collection. It includes interviews, content analysis, and in-depth observational studies. While mixed-method research focuses on meaningful integration of both quantitative and qualitative data. Due to the complexity of the problem, mixing both quantitative and qualitative methods in a single study to get extensive details of the phenomena. A qualitative research technique is used to collect data for this research. This research design has many advantages, including the collection of data in-depth. This research method picks out problems linked with students' anxiety and self-efficacy in ESL classrooms.

Interviews

To get a thorough view of students about their anxiety and self-efficacy in ESL classrooms, semi-structured interviews were conducted with students.

Population

Population is a large group of people you specify to conduct your research. Students of the Department of English at COMSATS University Lahore made up the population for this research.

Sample

Interviews were taken from 8 students from the CUIL English department.

Saturation

Interviewed data showed that ESL students face more anxiety during speaking rather than writing. Their self-efficacy, peer support, and teacher's positive feedback help them to overcome anxiety in speaking and writing situations.

Statement of Problem

Despite the global and academic importance of English language proficiency many ESL learners' experience anxiety in classrooms which leads them to their poor academic results but in a mean while their self-efficacy motivates them to overcome their anxiety.

Codes and themes

| No. | Themes | Emerging codes |
|-----|--|---|
| 1. | Experience learning English | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning involuntarily • Learning since childhood in schools • Acquired in academic situations • Less interested in English |
| 2. | Anxiety in Writing English and how it affects their writing performances | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less anxiety as compare to speaking • Felt anxiety at the start of their academic career • Exam fear • Forget common words spellings, vocabulary • Fear of evaluating • Less because no fear of judgmental people, have time to think and recall the process |
| 3. | Anxiety in Speaking | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More anxiety as compare to writing • Stuttering • Getting evaluated by instructor • Stage fear, large audience, |
| 4. | Speaking situational anxiety | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentations • Group discussions |

| | | |
|----|--|---|
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large audience settings |
| 5. | Self-efficacy to overcome anxiety | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using relaxation techniques • Take deep breath • Self-motivates • Comfort with mistakes are the part of learning |
| 6 | Strategies that help them to overcome anxiety | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice more frequently • Rehearsing before the task • Observing fluent speakers • Watching English TV shows • Practicing self-talk • Practicing with peer and family |
| 7. | Role of instructor or teacher in reducing students anxiety | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a friendly environment • Positive criticism • Avoid harsh criticism • Student engaging tasks to improve to boost up their confidence |

Explanation

- **Experience learning English language**

Participant discussed their experiences learning English language. Learning English involuntary in formal settings.

For instance: English medium schools.

“I have always been in an English medium school. So, I never learned language voluntarily in a classroom setting. It just acquired, like my English language is acquired since I have been studying it since childhood.”

- **Anxiety in writing English and its effect on writing performance**

Writing anxiety was found less as compare to speaking anxiety. Participants only mentioned their struggles when they suddenly forgot common spellings and vocabulary due to the fear of evaluation and their racing thoughts.

“Yeah, sometimes when we are in exam, it's our exam time and we just get blocked and we didn't even get a single word and we just forget. So, on that moment, we are just like, what to do?”

- **Anxiety in speaking**

Participants discussed about their higher anxiety level in speaking due to the large audience and stage fright.

“Whenever I have to speak English in front of a large crowd or on a stage in front of a very large audience, then I think I feel anxious. But other than that, during the normal use, I don't think I felt anxiety.”

- **Speaking situational Anxiety**

Participants discussed about different situation in which they feel speaking anxiety such as presentations, group discussions and addressing to large number of audience.

“Most of the time during presentations in classrooms, when everybody is looking at me and the teacher is evaluating my speaking skills, then I feel a little anxious. And other than that, whenever I have to speak English in front of a large crowd or on a stage in front of a very large audience, then I think I feel anxious.”

- **Self-efficacy to overcome anxiety**

Participants cited different relaxation techniques to overcome anxiety such as self-motivation, deep breathing.

“You can, you take control over yourself, you relax yourself, you motivate yourself and then you push yourself to do better and that you can do it and then you do it. Also when you motivate yourself that you can do it, you actually push yourself that you can do it and you overcome your anxiety and you can actually do better.”

- **Strategies to overcome anxiety**

Practicing before the task help learner' to overcome anxiety. Observing fluent speakers, watching TV shows, ted talks, practicing with peer and family these strategies help them to boost up their confidence.

“I think watching English TV shows, podcasts, shows contributes a lot to your English as well as speaking or communicating with your family and your friends within English makes you comfortable even though if you're wrong, if you are not correctly speaking it but do it, you'll learn from it.”

- **Role of teacher in reducing learners' anxiety**

Teachers play a crucial role in helping students; to overcome their anxiety by creating a positive environment and giving them positive criticism.

“I think teachers should appreciate their students more while they are speaking or writing English. And they can do that by correcting their English politely rather than scolding them or judging them. Other than that, they should not criticize their students negatively.”

Conclusion

The qualitative study highlights the intricate relationship that exists between learner fear and self-efficacy in ESL classrooms. It emphasize how self-efficacy acts as a vital balance to fear, which can hinder language acquisition and help students overcome difficulties when speaking and writing. Because of things like stage fright, lack of practice, fear of being judged, participants often reported higher anxiety levels when speaking than when writing. Writing caused less anxiety as it was more private and less urgent.

The results shows that students who have a higher level of self-efficacy are better able to control their nervousness, frequently using techniques like practicing, watching or listening fluent speakers and positive self-talk. Teachers play a critical role in influencing these results by creating comfortable learning settings, giving them positive criticism, an helping students see mistakes as an essential to the learning process.

Ultimately, lowering anxiety and increasing self –efficacy boost students' confidence while simultaneously increasing their participation an output in language tasks.

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