

## FACTORS AFFECTING ESL SPEAKING ANXIETY IN HIGHER INSTITUTIONS IN PAKISTAN

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### Abstract

*The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate the intricacies of speaking anxiety among students learning English as a Second language (ESL) at a university in Pakistan. The study investigates the cultural, educational, and linguistic elements that contribute to Speaking Anxiety and finds ways that participants cope with it by conducting in-depth interviews with 28 students from different departments. Results show that language barriers, educational system issues, and social expectations all had a role in making the change to English as the language of teaching a difficult one. The interactions between teachers and students become an important factor, with supportive connections playing a key role in reducing Speaking Anxiety. Some of the coping techniques that are highlighted by the participants include receiving support from peers and participating in extracurricular language activities. The significance of inclusive language practices and targeted language development programs is emphasized in the recommendations for institutional assistance. This research adds to the growing body of literature on the psychology of language acquisition and provides practical recommendations for schools and other organizations that are working to make their campuses more welcoming to students studying ESL.*

**Keywords:** English Speaking Anxiety, ESL learners, ESL teachers, cultural factors, educational challenges, linguistic transitions.

### Introduction

English, which is sometimes referred to be the lingua franca of the world, plays an essential part in many different aspects of life (Malik & Pervaiz, 2023). According to Huang and Flores (2018), its importance goes well beyond language barriers and permeates fields such as education, business, and global communication. An individual's ability to communicate in English is crucial in today's complicated world since it is the language of diplomacy, science, and technology (Akram et al., 2021). It is necessary for an individual to be fluent in this language environment in order to keep up with the most recent advances in their specific line of work. When examining Pakistan's educational system, the policies and practices have far-reaching consequences, as stated by Akram (2020) and Yang (2021). These outcomes stress the importance of approaches that include all students, including those with subject-specific English proficiency (Azar & Tanggaraju, 2020), technology-driven learning (Akram & Abdelrady, 2023), students' interests (Khanam et al., 2022), and learning satisfaction (Abdelrady & Akram, 2022).

The value of English is most stressed in the educational setting, especially at the university level. English is the language of choice for many academic activities, including research and group projects (Zhang & Tsung, 2021). In addition to making effective communication easier, having a strong command of the language enables one to get access to a

vast amount of information and possibilities. A student's educational path is defined by their fluency in English, as it is the medium through which a significant amount of educational discourse occurs (Panhwar & Bell, 2023).

On the other hand, the path to English competency is not always an easy one, particularly for those who are learning ESL. According to Tercan and Dikilitaş (2015), ESL students at Pakistan's higher education institutions frequently struggle with a specific obstacle known as speaking anxiety. Academic performance and the learning process can be severely impacted by this condition, which manifests as anxiety and anxiousness while speaking English (Chen & Hwang, 2020). Teachers and institutions who want to provide an equitable and encouraging atmosphere of learning for ESL learners must have a thorough understanding of the variables that lead to Speaking Anxiety. Understanding the nuances of language learning in a university context is complicated, and this essay explores the many factors that contribute to speaking anxiety among ESL students at Pakistani universities.

The complex issue of speaking anxiety among ESL students at Pakistani universities is influenced by several factors, including cultural norms, language differences, and educational practices (Hussain et al., 2021). The great cultural variety of Pakistan, in conjunction with the preeminence of Urdu as the national language, creates the conditions for a complex linguistic environment in which English frequently plays the role of a secondary or tertiary language (Ali et al., 2020). The linguistic change that is inherent in higher education can be a challenging undertaking for ESL learners, which can set off a chain reaction of difficulties that lead to speaking anxiety.

When it comes to efficiently offering English language instruction, the educational system in Pakistan has several challenges, even though it strives to achieve multilingual abilities. Teachers can use collaborative strategies (Ramzan et al., 2023) being mindful (Javaid et al., 2023). Diversity of roles in teachers can help reduce interaction problems (Khan & Javaid, 2023). Attitude and classroom environment of ESL learners affect anxiety levels (Ramzan et al., 2023, Ikramullah et al., 2023). Social support plays a role in the adjustment of students (Maqbool et al., 2021). Peer pressure and injustice may impact and expressive therapy reduces anxiety and experienced Embitterment (Javaid & Mahmood, 2023). Mental health improves if stigmatization is less (Gull et al., 2023). ESL students may acquire language skills to avoid speaking anxiety (Javaid et al., 2023). According to Akram et al. (2020), students might acquire Speaking Anxiety due to a lack of engaging language learning experiences, outmoded teaching methods, and insufficient resources. Mahboob (2020) agrees. Adding a layer of uncertainty to the evaluation process is the fact that the conventional emphasis on writing skills in examinations could not adequately reflect a student's ability in spoken language (Rehman & Khan, 2021).

It is essential to take a holistic strategy to address the issue of speaking anxiety among ESL students in Pakistan's higher education system. An inclusive classroom is one that actively promotes student engagement via the use of technology, a wealth of supplementary materials to help students with language acquisition, and an atmosphere that values and honors students' unique language backgrounds (Kim & Aguskin, 2022). Social media increases learning motivation leading to less anxiety and more confidence (Ramzan et al., 2023). Students can develop their self-assurance in their ability to express themselves in English through the implementation of programs that aim to broaden their exposure to and chances for practice, both within and outside of the classroom.

To sum up, speaking anxiety is complex and multi-faceted among ESL students in Pakistani universities due to a confluence of academic, cultural, and linguistic variables. The

recognition and resolution of these difficulties is very necessary for educators, institutions, and policymakers to guarantee the comprehensive development of ESL students. Pakistani universities may help their students overcome Speaking Anxiety and succeed in an English-medium classroom by creating a welcoming and accepting community that recognizes and addresses the many factors that contribute to the disorder.

1. What are the primary cultural, educational, and linguistic factors contributing to Speaking Anxiety among ESL learners in higher education institutions in Pakistan?
2. What strategies can be implemented to create a more supportive and inclusive atmosphere for language development in the Pakistani higher education context?

### **Review of Literature**

A common psychological hurdle for students of ESL (ESL) is speaking anxiety, which manifests itself in feelings of unease and fear whenever the target language is required for oral presentation (Horwitz, 2010). This type of anxiousness can exhibit itself in a variety of settings, including classroom debates, presentations, or even informal chats (Horwitz, 2001). According to Maher and King (2023), anxiety over public speaking is caused by a complex intersection of a number of elements, including cultural influences, linguistic difficulties, and the learning environment.

One of the most common topics that appears in the research literature is the impact that cultural influences have on speaking anxiety. Anxieties among ESL students are heightened, according to research, by societal expectations of language competence as well as by the fear of social and peer criticism. Understanding the cultural subtleties and expectations becomes necessary in the setting of Pakistan, which is characterized by a wide range of languages. Researchers like Abdullaev (2021) and Russell (2020) have looked at how cultural dynamics affect speaking anxiety and how to develop therapies that are responsive to different cultures.

Another important factor to consider is the influence that the school system has in either fostering or alleviating the condition of speaking anxiety. The Pakistani higher education system has several obstacles, including a lack of resources, antiquated teaching approaches, and engaging language learning experiences. To foster an atmosphere that is favorable to the development of attitudes towards language learning and the reduction of fear, prominent publications such as (Maher & King, 2023) and (Lubis, 2015) examine the systemic concerns and advocate for changes in the design of curricula and teaching methods.

An additional layer of complication is added to the problem of speaking anxiety as a result of the move from regional languages to English in higher education. Research by Abdullaev (2021) on the difficulties encountered by Pakistani ESL students in their language acquisition has brought attention to the necessity of providing individualized language assistance. To establish successful interventions, it is essential to demonstrate an understanding of how this shift affects the students' confidence in their ability to vocally express themselves in English. Ramzan et al. (2023) have explained that in the ESL domain motivation determines the priority of second language learning. Further Ramzan et al. (2023) elucidate in the sense of oral proficiency that entertainment mostly operates in English. So Ramzan et al. (2023) have suggested that the incorporation of authentic language use can be helpful in this aspect. Furthermore, Ramzan et al. (2023) that for the enhancement of oral proficiency in the ESL domain, the use of social media is a dynamic educational tool. Finally, Ramzan et al. (2023) suggested imperative aspects are useful in academic writing.

Another important factor that determines the nature of the language learning experience is the dynamic that exists between the instructor and the learner. The effect of teacher-student

connections on Speaking Anxiety has been investigated in studies by (Russell, 2020) and (Alshuraiaan, 2023) among others. Anxiety levels are consistently lower in classrooms where teachers are helpful and encouraging, highlighting the significance of pleasant interactions in language acquisition.

As we move on with the assessment of the relevant literature, it becomes clear that several approaches have been suggested to provide an environment that is encouraging and welcoming for the development of language skills. Maher and King (2023) emphasize therapies that tackle the psychological components of Speaking Anxiety, chances for extracurricular language practice, and interactive instructional approaches. Educators and organizations can get practical insights from these ways to help ESL learners overcome Speaking Anxiety.

Ultimately, the literature review on Speaking Anxiety among ESL students in Pakistani universities demonstrates a multifaceted interaction of linguistic, pedagogical, and cultural elements. The research offers a wealth of ideas and treatments that might guide practices for building more supportive learning environments, even while problems continue. The combination of these findings establishes the framework for additional research and practical implementations in the pursuit of improving language development and reducing speaking anxiety among ESL learners in Pakistan.

### **Methodology**

In order to get a deeper understanding of Speaking Anxiety among ESL learners at a university in Pakistan, the research used a qualitative technique (Hollstein, 2011). To ensure that participants could freely express their thoughts and feelings using their own words, semi-structured interviews were used as the main tool for gathering data. The 28 undergraduates who took part in the study were drawn from a variety of academic programs at a university in Pakistan. For the purpose of ensuring variety in terms of academic fields, degrees of language competence, and demographic factors, purposeful sampling was utilized (Rai & Thapa, 2015). Participants had to be full-time university degree-seeking students who were also proficient in ESL.

### **Data Collection**

In a confidential and comfortable setting on university grounds, participants were interviewed face-to-face using semi-structured interviews to gather data. The purpose of the interview guide was to elicit information on participants' cultural backgrounds, educational backgrounds, and language abilities in relation to their experiences with Speaking Anxiety. Because the questions were open-ended, we were able to go deeply into the issue at hand. In order to capture the genuine and in-depth answers from the participants, the interviews were audio-recorded with their agreement. In order to record contextual information and non-verbal clues, field notes were also recorded before, during, and after each interview. Each participant also gave their informed permission, which emphasized their autonomy, secrecy, and the freedom to stop at any point without penalty.

### **Data Analysis**

The interviews that were recorded were transcribed word for word so that the data could be more easily analyzed. Using thematic analysis, we were able to classify the data according to recurrent themes (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019). We started by generating some basic codes, and then we sorted them into more general topics. To guarantee the quality and dependability of the results, the analytic process was iterative, with themes constantly compared and refined. Throughout the course of the study, the researcher upheld the principle of reflexivity,

recognizing and accepting their preconceived notions and limitations. To keep track of the researcher's ideas, reflections, and any outside impacts on the study, they used reflective journaling. This method enhanced the study's overall rigor by promoting openness and self-awareness.

## Results

A complex picture of Speaking Anxiety emerged from an examination of 28 interviews conducted with students from different academic areas at a university in Pakistan. A thorough comprehension of the cultural, educational, and linguistic elements impacting Speaking Anxiety is provided by the results, which are structured into important themes. Additionally, these findings offer insights into possible assistance measures.

### 1. Cultural Factors

Speaking Anxiety was found to be significantly impacted by cultural factors. When asked about the factors that impact their confidence when speaking English, participants mostly mentioned societal expectations and the fear of judgment. Speaking anxiety among ESL learners was shaped in large part by the social stigmatization of linguistic mistakes and non-native accents. Some of the participants who took part stated that:

"Oh, it's a big deal here. Everyone seems to be under the impression that you need to speak flawless English since any slip-up would be picked up on."

*Participant 2:* "Yeah, exactly! Not sounding like a native speaker is something that many people are afraid of. It makes speaking English a nerve-wracking experience."

### 2. Educational System Challenges

The effects of Speaking Anxiety on educational system issues were shown through interviews. Recurring themes included a lack of engaging language learning experiences, limited resources, and teaching approaches that were becoming obsolete. As a means to foster language acquisition and alleviate anxiety, participants called for changes to the educational system's pedagogy and curricula. A few participants said:

"The resources are restricted. The textbooks are out of date, and there are not enough opportunities for us to practice our speaking skills through interactive workshops".

"The instructional approaches do not emphasize communication, according to another Participant".

Furthermore, participants repeatedly underlined the significance of positive and encouraging connections between teachers and students in reducing anxiety. Higher levels of Speaking Anxiety were linked to situations where there was a lack of support or when criticism was very critical. Only a small percentage of those who took part in the study included:

"The impact is enormous when instructors are encouraging. However, if they are overly critical, it could make you feel timid and hesitant to speak up".

"One of my teachers really pushed us to express our minds without worrying about what others would think of us if we made a mistake. It switched things up. All educators should be more like that".

### 3. Linguistic Transitions

One of the most difficult things for ESL students to do was to make the linguistic leap from their native tongue to English. Respondents expressed feelings of inadequacy and increased worry due to challenges in adjusting to English as the language of teaching. Crucial components in overcoming these language hurdles were immersion experiences and targeted language help. Few of the participants stated:

"When English is not one's native language, there is this persistent sense of not being good enough. It makes it harder to communicate effectively".

## 5. Coping Strategies

Participants discussed coping mechanisms that have shown to be useful in managing their anxiety when speaking in front of others, despite the difficulties. Effective tactics were found to include having supportive peers, joining language groups, and taking part in extracurricular activities that promoted English communication. People who took the survey also wanted to see more communicative and participatory approaches to language instruction that encourage students to improve their skills gradually. Few of the attendees stated that:

"A participant said that it helps to speak with buddies who are also studying English."

"I became a member of a language club where we meet to practice speaking English in a relaxed environment. You'll feel more confident and there'll be less strain. "

In addition, the findings highlighted the need to implement linguistic practices that are inclusive within the context of the institution. The significance of acknowledging linguistic diversity and fostering an environment that welcomes a variety of accents and language varieties was emphasized by participants. They stressed the need to create a welcoming and accepting atmosphere for ESL students, and the necessity for a change in public perceptions about language acquisition. A few of the participants specified:

"A wider diverse range of accents should be tolerated, according to the participant. We hail from all over the world, so our English could sound a little different—and that's just fine."

People who took part in the study shared their thoughts on how institutions may help those suffering from Speaking Anxiety. Among these were efforts to increase cultural awareness, programs to help students strengthen their language skills, and professional development for educators on how to foster inclusive classrooms. The results highlighted the importance of the school in creating a welcoming and supportive environment for ESL students. Few of the participants stated that:

"Appropriate language development programs for ESL students would be fantastic, according to the participant. It could provide a secure environment where one can enhance their skills."

## Discussion

The findings of the current study are consistent with and build upon the existing body of literature on the topic of speaking anxiety among ESL learners. This debate expands our knowledge of the cultural, pedagogical, and linguistic aspects that impact Speaking Anxiety in a Pakistani higher education environment by drawing linkages to earlier studies.

It is consistent with previous research that the cultural factors that have been identified as contributing to speaking anxiety are cultural. Research conducted by Maher and King (2023) and Mahboob (2021) has brought attention to the fact that Speaking Anxiety is a problem among ESL learners, and that societal expectations and the fear of judgement play a part in this. Learners of ESL have additional challenges in Pakistan due to cultural norms that link high levels of English ability with social status. When it comes to restricting the use of English, Akram et al. (2020) addressed another problem that is connected to the cultural norms that are prevalent in rural regions.

When it comes to the educational system, the issues that were highlighted in this study are similar to those that were discovered in earlier studies. Limited resources and obsolete teaching approaches have a significant influence on language learning results, as pointed out by Russell (2020). According to Amerstorfer and Frein von Munster-Kistner (2021), the need for improvements in curriculum design is in line with the larger debate on the necessity of communicative and student-centered methods to language instruction.

Research conducted by Alharbi (2022) is consistent with the language difficulties that were encountered during the process of switching to English as the medium of education. All around the world, ESL students face similar difficulties; the Pakistani environment is no exception. The literature stresses the necessity of language assistance programmes throughout these transitions, which aligns with the participants' experience of inadequacy (Zen & Apriana, 2015).

Findings from the study by Alshuraiaan (2023) corroborate the importance of teacher-student interactions in the development of Speaking Anxiety. There has been a continuous correlation between positive and supportive teacher-student interactions and decreased levels of anxiety as well as greater language competency. The significance of cultivating a supportive learning atmosphere is highlighted by the participant's account of a teacher who supported them without worrying about making errors (Zhang, 2019).

This study's coping tactics are in line with previous research on peer support, which has found that students benefit from increased communication and extracurricular language practice (Ellison, 2015; Dörnyei, 2020). These methods add to the expanding corpus of research that highlights the importance of social support networks in language learning settings and function as adaptive mechanisms for dealing with Speaking Anxiety. Additionally, teachers should pay attention to their students' feelings rather than engaging in anxiety-inducing behaviors (such as raising hands or asking questions aloud) (Akram et al., 2019).

A request for more welcoming language policies on college campuses is in line with the larger conversation on language diversity (Gardner, 2019). An inclusive atmosphere that recognizes and supports multiple linguistic expressions is fostered when people embrace different accents and language variances, which accords with the concepts of linguistic human rights.

Research has shown that institutions play a significant role in making classrooms and other learning spaces suitable for language acquisition, therefore the suggestions for institutional assistance make sense. According to Cheng (2021), there is research that supports learner-centered and needs-based language education, which is in line with the recommendation for focused language development programs. Additionally, children should be encouraged to engage in physical activity, participate in extracurricular activities, and support one another in their efforts to overcome anxiety (Akram et al., 2022). (Li & Akram, 2023) In addition, in order for educators to be able to deal with these issues, they need to be provided with professional trainings.

Finally, this study adds to our knowledge of speaking anxiety as it pertains to ESL students in Pakistani universities. The discussion gains a new depth with the inclusion of cultural characteristics particular to Pakistan, which, when aligned with prior studies, emphasize the universality of the difficulties encountered by ESL learners. The suggestions for institutional assistance highlight the power of schools to promote inclusive language practices and help ESL students overcome their fear of public speaking.

## Conclusions

Examining the complex interplay of cultural, educational, and linguistic variables, this study delves into the complexities of Speaking Anxiety among ESL students at a university in Pakistan. While the findings are consistent with previously published research, they also provide a fresh viewpoint that is contextually relevant to Pakistan. Educators, legislators, and institutions can gain practical insights from the discovered coping techniques and suggestions for institutional assistance to build a language learning environment that is more inclusive and empowering. By recognizing and tackling the issues brought up in this study, colleges may help ESL learners in the long run by creating a welcoming environment that promotes language variety and reduces the effects of Speaking Anxiety.

## Limitations

While this study did provide some useful insights, it does have several drawbacks that need to be pointed out. Because of the limited sample size and the fact that the research was conducted at a single institution, the findings may not be able to be generalized. It is also possible that the findings may not be relevant to all situations because the research was qualitative in nature. Longitudinal research may shed light on the ever-changing character of Speaking Anxiety, in contrast to cross-sectional studies that only capture a moment in time for participants. In addition, the research is based on self-reported data, which opens the door to the presence of social desirability bias. Notwithstanding these caveats, the results do provide the groundwork for more studies and highlight the need of investigating Speaking Anxiety among ESL students in a variety of classroom settings.

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