

English Speaking Anxiety among Secondary School Students in Peshawar: Gender Differences and Coping Strategies

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Received: 12-01-2025	Revised: 14-02-2025	Accepted: 18-02-2025	Published: 06-03-2025
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ABSTRACT

This study examines English-speaking anxiety among secondary school students in Peshawar, focusing on gender differences and coping strategies. 60 students from four institutions participated, with equal gender representation. Questionnaires, adapted from Woodrow (2006), and semi-structured interviews were utilized for data collection. Findings reveal moderate to high anxiety levels, particularly among females. Various coping strategies were identified, including internal motivation and physical and cognitive techniques. Students reported increased nervousness during speaking tests and vivas. Pedagogical implications emphasize the importance of teachers addressing students' anxiety to support their academic and social well-being. This study underscores the need to create a supportive learning environment by addressing anxiety among secondary school students in Peshawar.

Keywords: English speaking anxiety, Secondary school students, Gender differences, Coping strategies

INTRODUCTION

In Pakistan, English holds considerable significance as both the official language and the preferred medium for written communication. This dual status suggests that English isn't just a language but a shaping force in education, governance, and overall societal communication. It is integrated into the structure of Pakistan's national education system. English serves as the medium of instruction not only in higher education but also in the majority of private and public schools (Haidar, 2016). English instruction begins at the pre-school level in Pakistan. Children learn basic English like the alphabet and simple words. This continues through high school and university, where they take several mandatory English courses (Samad et al., 2023). It's now a key part of the national curriculum.

However, according to Hussain et al., (2020), Most schools in Pakistan assess students' language skills only through written examinations. This limits students from demonstrating their speaking abilities effectively. The heavy emphasis on written examinations likely plays a role in the high occurrence of English-speaking anxiety among secondary school students. Emphasizing written skills over oral communication may leave students feeling unprepared to express themselves verbally. This can lead to heightened anxiety levels.

The present study aims to investigate English-speaking anxiety among secondary school students in Peshawar, with a particular focus on gender differences and coping strategies. While existing research highlights the role of written assessments in shaping language proficiency, limited attention has been given to how this emphasis affects students' confidence in spoken English. Given the significant role of English in education and professional settings, it is crucial to understand the factors contributing to students' anxiety in oral communication. Therefore, this study not only examines the prevalence and causes of English-speaking anxiety but also explores the coping strategies employed by students in Peshawar, Pakistan.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although English is a crucial medium of instruction in Pakistan, still many students struggle with speaking it. Despite its importance in both academics and professional settings, oral proficiency is often overlooked in favor of written assessments, which leads to lowering students' confidence in oral communication. Previous research indicates that this imbalance normally contributes to heightened anxiety among students. However, there is a lack of research on English-speaking anxiety among secondary school students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, specifically in schools where English is the medium of instruction. Additionally, there is lack of study about the coping strategies these students use in managing their anxiety. This study focuses on examining the extent of English-speaking anxiety among secondary school students in Peshawar, explore gender differences and identify coping strategies. These findings can help educators develop a more supportive learning environment for students.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What are the levels of English-speaking anxiety among secondary school students in Peshawar?

Are there differences in the levels of anxiety experienced by male and female students when speaking English?

What coping strategies do students employ to manage English-speaking anxiety?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language serves as a primary medium of communication, facilitating human interaction through sounds, symbols, and gestures. It exists in both written and spoken forms, allowing for complex expressions through grammar, syntax, and semantics (Crystal, 1997). While written language has been widely emphasized in educational systems, spoken communication plays an essential role in social interactions. However, despite its significance, many learners experience anxiety when speaking a foreign language, a phenomenon commonly referred to as speaking anxiety (Brown, 2000).

Language learning anxiety, particularly in speaking, has been widely explored in second language acquisition research. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) define language anxiety as a form of tension linked to learning and using a second language, affecting speaking, listening, and writing skills. Among these, speaking tends to be the most anxiety-inducing due to its spontaneous nature and the immediate need for interaction (Bashir et al., 2011). Speaking anxiety can arise from multiple factors, including limited vocabulary, grammatical errors, fear of public speaking, self-doubt, and lack of exposure to the target language (Ansari, 2015). A few researchers, including Woodrow (2006), developed scales to measure this anxiety, commonly known as Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA).

Some research studies also focused on the psychological and linguistic aspects of foreign language anxiety (FLA). For instance, Mahdalena and Muslem (2021) found that students struggle with vocabulary and fear of mispronunciation, that leads to their lack of self-confidence and ultimately to Speaking Anxiety. On the other hand, a study conducted by Mariam (2018) found that foreign language anxiety (FLA) persists even as students improve their language skills. She further mentions that there are psychological factors that play a significant role beyond just linguistic ability.

Other research studies have also looked at gender differences in language anxiety. Some studies have reported that male students' level of FLA was higher. Hasan & Fatimah, (2014) where as other studies, Öztürk and Gürbüz (2013), noted a higher level of anxiety among female students. Fatima et al. (2020) studied female students and reported higher levels of anxiety, which emphasized the university cultural context and social expectations surrounding women's behavior. Naudhani et al. (2017) studied female university students and highlighted linguistic problems with vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation as the driving factors for anxiety among women's anxiety levels in Pakistan. There is still a need of research to the current contradictory findings to explain the levels of language anxiety in students and the factors that cause stress and anxiety level in male and female university students across countries, regions, areas, and varied educational contexts.

Apart from gender differences, other researchers have examined strategies for dealing with speaking anxiety. Kondo and Ying-Ling (2004) indicated that Japanese students emphasized five strategies:

preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer support, and avoidance. However, research regarding this area in Pakistan is limited, especially with respect to secondary school students. This study attempts to fill this gap by assessing coping strategies, examining the different levels of speaking anxiety, and investigating whether there are any differences between gender among secondary students in Peshawar, Pakistan.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods for reliable results. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) suggest that this approach strengthens validity by using the strengths of both methods. The data collection process was divided into two phases: quantitative and qualitative. In the quantitative phase, questionnaires were administered to 60 secondary school students from four institutions in Peshawar, including Islamia Collegiate School Peshawar, Wisdom House Public School Peshawar, University Model School Peshawar, and Government Girls High School Islamia Collegiate Peshawar, with 15 students selected from each school to ensure equal representation. A standardized questionnaire adapted from Woodrow's (2006) research, employing a five-point Likert scale, was used to assess English-speaking anxiety (see Appendix). After obtaining permission from school authorities and using purposive sampling techniques, the researcher supervised the questionnaire distribution during class hours and collected the completed forms for analysis. In the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of 5 to 10 students from each school, who volunteered for this part of the study. The interview questions, adapted from Hussain et al. (2021b) and cited in Kalwar et al. (2022), focused on the causes and coping strategies for English-speaking anxiety. Ethical approval was obtained, and detailed information about the study's purpose and confidentiality was provided to participants. Each interview, lasting approximately 8-10 minutes, was audio-recorded with consent to ensure accurate data capture for subsequent analysis.

ANALYSIS

In the quantitative phase of this study, the Second Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (SLSAS) questionnaire designed by Woodrow (2006) was employed. It consists of 12 Likert-scale items ranging from 1 to 5. A score of 5 indicated an extremely high level of English-speaking anxiety, while a score of 1 indicated a low level of English-speaking anxiety. Participants needed to answer all 12 questions, with the highest possible score being 60 and the lowest possible score being 12.

Their responses were then interpreted proportionally to determine the degree of anxiety experienced. Based on their self-reported anxiety levels, participants were categorized into one of three groups: low (scores 1-20), moderate (scores 21-40), and high (scores 41-60).

Table 1 Anxiety level of students when speaking in English

Level	Male		Female	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
High (41-60)	6	20%	11	36%
Moderate (21-40)	24	80%	19	63%
Low (1-20)	--	--	--	--

Table 1 Anxiety level of students when speaking in English displays English-speaking anxiety levels for male and female participants. 20% of males reported high anxiety, while 80% reported moderate anxiety. In comparison, 63% of females reported high anxiety, with 36% reporting moderate anxiety. Neither male nor female participants reported low anxiety levels.

Furthermore, responses from the questionnaire were combined and averaged to determine an overall level of English-speaking anxiety among secondary school students in Peshawar. The summarized results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Gender	Average Level	Anxiety Level
Male	34.5	Moderate
Female	37.395	High

These results suggest that female students tend to experience higher levels of English-speaking anxiety compared to male students. Additionally, the researcher categorized respondents into two groups based on anxiety levels by analyzing responses to each item in detail. The outcomes of this analysis are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

English Language Speaking Anxiety Score for Each Item

Statements	Male Score	Female Score
The teacher asks me a question in English in class	2.73	3.50
Speaking informally to my English teacher out of class	2.50	2.70
Taking part in a group discussion in class	2.53	2.40
Taking part in a role-play or dialogue in front of my class	3.16	3.53
Giving an oral presentation to the rest of the class	3.00	4.10
When asked to contribute to a formal discussion in class	2.86	2.46
Talking to the administrative staff of my Language school in English	2.43	3.36
Taking part in a conversation out of class with more than one native speaker of English	2.40	3.33
Starting a conversation out of class with a friend or colleague who is a native speaker of English.	1.83	2.06
A lecturer/supervisor in my intended university faculty of study asks me a question in English	2.96	3.60
Asking for advice in English from a lecturer/supervisor in my intended university faculty of study	3.06	2.80
A native speaker I do not know asks me questions in English	2.23	2.56
AVERAGE	2.64	3.03

The average English language anxiety score for male students is 2.64, while for female students, it is 3.03. Female students generally have higher anxiety scores across most scenarios compared to male students. Specifically, female students tend to have higher anxiety scores when giving oral presentations to the class, talking to administrative staff in English, taking part in conversations with native speakers of English out of class, and interacting with lecturers/supervisors in English in their intended university faculty of study. In contrast, male students have slightly higher anxiety scores in scenarios such as starting conversations with native speakers of English out of class and being asked questions by unknown native speakers in English. This data suggests that female students generally experience higher levels of English language anxiety compared to male students, particularly in formal speaking situations and interactions with native English speakers.

After analyzing the quantitative data, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews during the qualitative phase of the research. The data from these interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. The interview questions were adapted from a study referenced by Kalwar et al. (2022), specifically from the work of Hussain et al. (2021b). The tool was originally designed to explore the causes and coping mechanisms of English language-speaking anxiety among Pakistani students. However, these questions were modified to better suit the present study's objectives. The data was analyzed on a per-item basis.

Q:1 How do you feel when you speak English in front of your class?

Response	Frequency
Very comfortable	0
Comfortable	1
Neutral	7
Uncomfortable	12
Very uncomfortable	5

Most students, 12 out of 25, feel uncomfortable, and 5 of them feel very uncomfortable. Only one student feels comfortable, while 7 are neutral on the matter. This suggests that a considerable number of students experience some level of discomfort or anxiety when speaking English in front of their class.

Students mentioned feeling uncomfortable because they fear being judged for their mistakes. Some expressed that they wouldn't feel uncomfortable speaking to unfamiliar audiences.

A few of the answers provided include:

- "I wouldn't be uncomfortable if I were speaking in front of people who don't know me."
- "I feel uncomfortable because of my grammatical errors and accent."

Q:2 Do you have uncomfortable feelings when you know you are going to be called for an English-speaking activity in a language-speaking class? How do you cope with it?

Response	Number of students
Yes	23
No	2

Answers by students who responded yes:

- "I'm scared of difficult questions but I comfort myself that once the teacher calls me, I'll speak well."
- "I recite duas before starting."
- "I speak to my best friend to comfort myself."
- "I tell myself that I can do it."
- "I convince myself into believing that even if I don't perform well, it's not going to affect my life"
- Answer by students who responded No:
- "I don't feel anxious because I always feel confident about my speaking skills."
- "I'm not afraid to be called for speaking activity because I always practice in front of a mirror at home."

Students mentioned various coping mechanisms such as self-motivation and seeking encouragement from friends. These diverse responses show the significance of both internal motivation and external support in managing English-speaking anxiety.

Q:3 During English Speaking class, do you find yourself thinking about things that has nothing to do with your course? How do you tackle with it?

Response	Number of students
Yes	25
No	0

Answers:

- "I tell myself that these thoughts are irrelevant so I try to take them out of my mind."
- "I tell myself if I don't learn anything in class, nobody will teach me ever again."
- "I sit in the front seat and focus on the teacher's voice to avoid getting irrelevant thoughts."
- "I look at the bright colors around me in the class to regain my focus."
- "I start speaking to bring my focus back."

Q:4 Do you keep thinking that the other students are better at English language speaking than you? If yes, how do you motivate yourself?

Response	Number of students
Yes	17
No	8

Answers by students who responded yes:

- "I make a determination to start practicing English today."
- "I start speaking in English with them to learn."
- "I make myself believe that everybody learns at a different pace and that's okay."
- "I convince myself that fluency in a language doesn't make me less intelligent than them."
- Answer by students who responded No:
- "I only focus on my own learning journey."
- "I don't have this habit of comparing myself to others."
- "I believe in myself even if I am not perfect"

Students who worry about their English-speaking abilities find different ways to cope. Some start practicing more, while others remind themselves that everyone learns at their own pace.

Q:5 Do you usually feel at ease during speaking tests in English Language speaking class? If not, how do you attempt the test?

Response	Number of students
Yes	0
No	25

Answers:

- Oral tests and vivas are the hardest but I convince myself that mistakes are normal in speaking tests.
- I hold onto the table or chair to cope with my shaking hands and then start speaking.
- I take deep breaths and say "sorry" if I don't know the answers in viva.
- I just speak confidently even if that's irrelevant and incorrect.
- I translate from my first language or switch to my first language.
- I look down, take a deep breath, and smile to improve my mood and confidence before speaking.
- I recite prayers to calm my nerves.
- Among secondary school students in Peshawar, speaking tests and vivas emerge as the most challenging. One student explicitly states, "I'm afraid of nothing else in my life than viva."

Q:6 Do you start to panic when you have to speak without preparation in English speaking class? If yes, how do you keep yourself calm?

Response	Number of students
Yes	23
No	2

Answers by students who responded yes:

- "I think that the teacher will correct me, and I don't worry because I'm not prepared."
- "Since I'm not prepared, I don't worry about people judging me."
- "I keep myself calm by pretending that the room is empty and there is no audience."
- "I place my hands at my back to avoid people seeing my shaking hands, so I feel better."
- "I try to avoid my feelings and fear and just get blank but try to not lose my focus."
- Answers by students who responded No:
- "I feel confident in my speaking ability even if I have no knowledge of the topic."
- "I manage to speak anyway no matter what it is."

Most secondary school students in Peshawar experience panic when speaking unprepared in English class. They use various techniques including physical techniques to stay calm. Some students, however, exhibit confidence in their speaking ability.

Q:7 Do you worry about the consequences of failing in your English-speaking class? If yes, what steps do you take to make you perform better?

Response	Number of students
Yes	10
No	15

Answers by students who responded yes:

- "I try to keep speaking and spit out all information about the topic."
- "I choose simple words to speak better."
- "I motivate myself that I never failed a test so it's just fear and overthinking."
- "During the test, I recall all the previous information I have and try to put it into words."
- Answers by students who responded No:
- "I have the confidence that I will never fail the test, even if I scoreless."
- "I try to understand the question/topic in the best way so I can speak better and never fail."
- "I watch YouTube videos and movies for better speaking, so I don't think I can fail, but I may not score well"

The majority of students feel confident in their ability to pass but express anxiety regarding achieving lower scores.

Q:8 When you get nervous and forget things you know in English-speaking class. What do you do?

Answer by students:

- "I pause and try to recall those things by trying not to panic."
- "I divert the speech and continue talking on another topic."
- "I conclude my topic quickly."
- "I repeat what I said already and carry on."
- "I go for a substitute or just keep speaking incorrectly."
- "I get silent, feel guilty, and start judging and hating myself."
- "I avoid eye contact with people to avoid getting worried about judgments."
- "I look at my close friend for the reassuring look that it's normal, it's okay."
- "I look at the instructor for help"

Students shared various ways to deal with their nervousness and forgetfulness in English-speaking classes. some of them handle nervousness by seeking support or switching topics, while others experience self-doubt and judgment.

Q:9 Do you feel afraid that your teacher is ready to correct your every mistake? What behaviour of English language teachers is expected by students?

Response	Number of students
Yes	9
No	16

Answers by students who said yes:

- "I get more nervous when the teacher corrects me instantly. They should correct us at the end of the class."
- "I feel disheartened when the teacher corrects me in front of others. They should correct us privately."
- "Correction is scary. I think indirect advice and kind behaviour should be used."

- "I'm afraid of correction because I find it rude. Teachers should show calm behaviour instead."
- "I am afraid of making mistakes so correction is always scary for me"

Answers by students who said yes:

- "I focus on the benefits of correction and learning."
- "I'm not afraid of correction, but it shouldn't look like ridicule."
- "Correction is fine because everybody makes mistakes."

Some students prefer gentle correction away from others, while others see it as a natural part of learning. Sensitivity in correction can positively impact students' confidence in English Language class.

Q: 10 In your opinion, what are the major factors in English-speaking classrooms that make you anxious about speaking English?

Responses by Students:

- Teachers' high expectations
- Lack of confidence
- Fear of judgment from others
- Anxiety about peoples' reactions to mistakes
- Limited vocabulary
- Inadequate everyday English communication
- Stuttering and mispronunciations
- Fear of ridicule and scolding from teachers
- Embarrassment over accent
- Self-doubt and stress
- Bullying from friends due to grammatical errors

These responses highlight various factors contributing to English-speaking anxiety in secondary school students of Peshawar. It ranges from external pressures like teacher expectations to internal struggles like lack of confidence and fear of judgment. To help students feel better about speaking English, Teachers should help them feel supported. The classroom should be a friendly place where everyone feels included.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study found that female students in Peshawar's secondary schools have higher levels of anxiety when speaking English compared to male students. This is supported by the average English language anxiety score, which was 2.64 for male students and 3.03 for female students. It was also noted that many students feel anxious when speaking English in front of their class. The main reasons given by students were fear of being judged by friends and making mistakes with grammar. Other factors also contributed to the anxiety including the teachers having high expectations from students, Friends bullying each other for making grammatical errors, limited words in their vocabulary, and self-doubt.

Furthermore, the study also revealed a variety of coping strategies employed by students to manage their anxiety. Some students reported to rely on internal motivation by convincing themselves that mistakes are normal and can be corrected over time. Others stated that they often rely on external support, such as reciting prayers or seeking encouragement from close friends. Many of them mentioned the use of physical techniques, like holding onto objects, taking deep breaths, or avoiding eye contact, to calm their nerves and maintain composure while speaking English. A few of them talked about engaging in cognitive strategies, such as reframing negative thoughts and redirecting attention from anxious feelings by focusing on external stimuli.

From the findings of the present study, it is suggested that students should work on reducing their fear of being judged for grammatical errors by practicing speaking English regularly and participating in group discussions. Educators must also help them by encouraging class participation, not scolding students for making mistakes, and providing emotional support to help with their anxiety.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that secondary school students in Peshawar feel moderate to high levels of anxiety when speaking English. Female students experience higher levels of anxiety compared to male students. The study also identifies several factors that contribute to this anxiety, such as the fear of being judged and making grammatical mistakes. Additionally, it uncovers different ways in which students deal with this anxiety, ranging from internal motivation to using physical and cognitive techniques. This research has important implications for teachers that includes understanding and addressing students' anxiety issues that can impact their academic and social lives. Future studies could include students from various regions and education levels in Khyber pakhtoonkhwa, Pakistan for broader relevance. Longitudinal studies could also explore how English-speaking anxiety changes over time and its long-term effects on students.

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