

English Language Learning Trauma, Communicative Anxiety and Willingness to Communicate: The Mediating Role of Emotional Intelligence among Pakistani University EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

English language learning is often treated as a cognitive and instructional process, although many learners enter university carrying distress associated with earlier humiliation, punishment, repeated failure and public correction. This study conceptualized English language learning trauma (ELLT) as the enduring emotional residue of such experiences and examined its relationship with communicative anxiety (CA), emotional intelligence (EI) and willingness to communicate (WTC) among Pakistani university EFL learners. A cross-sectional correlational design was used with undergraduate and MPhil students enrolled in English language teaching-related programmes at five universities. Participants completed a self-report battery measuring ELLT, CA, EI and WTC. The data were examined through descriptive analysis, group comparisons, correlation, hierarchical regression and bootstrapped parallel and serial mediation. The findings showed that greater language learning trauma was associated with stronger communicative anxiety and lower emotional intelligence and willingness to communicate. Communicative anxiety emerged as the most influential negative predictor of willingness to communicate, whereas emotional intelligence functioned as a protective resource. Both variables mediated the association between trauma and willingness to communicate and the serial pattern suggested that trauma may weaken emotional regulation, intensify speaking anxiety and reduce readiness to communicate. Learners educated through Urdu or regional-language media reported a heavier affective burden than those from English-medium backgrounds. The study extends affective second-language research by treating learners' educational histories as active influences on present communication. It recommends trauma-sensitive feedback, emotionally scaffolded speaking tasks and explicit emotional-intelligence support in Pakistani ELT classrooms.

Keywords: language learning trauma; communicative anxiety; willingness to communicate; emotional intelligence; EFL; Pakistan; mediation analysis

INTRODUCTION

English occupies an unusually powerful position in Pakistan. It is the language of higher education, of the superior judiciary, of the civil bureaucracy, of most white-collar recruitment and of a large part of the country's professional and digital economy. For the average university student, competence in spoken English is therefore not simply an academic requirement but a gatekeeping resource that regulates access to social mobility. This weight of consequence is precisely what makes the English classroom an emotionally charged space. A learner who cannot speak is not merely making a linguistic error; in the learner's own perception and often in the perception of peers and teachers, the learner is

failing at something that is treated as a proxy for intelligence, class position and future worth. Second language acquisition research has taken affect seriously for four decades. Since Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) isolated foreign language classroom anxiety as a situation specific construct rather than a spillover of general trait anxiety, a substantial evidence base has accumulated linking anxiety to lower achievement, weaker oral performance and reduced participation (Botes et al., 2020; Teimouri et al., 2019). Parallel to this, MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei and Noels (1998) reframed the goal of language instruction around willingness to communicate (WTC), the readiness to enter into discourse at a particular moment with a particular interlocutor using a second language. WTC is now widely accepted as the most proximal psychological antecedent of actual second language use and anxiety is consistently one of its strongest negative correlates (Khajavy et al., 2018; Peng & Woodrow, 2010).

What this literature has examined far less systematically is the learner's affective history. Anxiety scales ask how the learner feels in the language classroom now. They do not ask what happened to the learner in the language classrooms of the past. Yet teachers in South Asian contexts routinely encounter learners who can describe, with striking specificity and years after the event, the moment a teacher mocked their pronunciation in front of the class, the caning or slapping that followed a failed recitation, the laughter that greeted a grammatical slip, or the sustained experience of being placed in the lowest ability group and treated as beyond help. These are not neutral memories. They are appraised as threats to the self and they are consolidated as emotional learning about what happens when one opens one's mouth in English. The present study gives this residue a name and a measure. English language learning trauma (ELLT) is defined here as a learner's persistent, negatively valenced and intrusive recollection of humiliating, punitive or repeatedly failure marked experiences that occurred specifically in the course of learning or being assessed in English, together with the avoidance and hypervigilance that such recollection generates in present day English learning situations. The construct deliberately borrows its structure from the wider trauma literature, in which adverse experience is understood to affect attention, memory, motivation and school engagement long after the precipitating event (Qu et al., 2024; Tyrone et al., 2024), while remaining domain specific in the way that foreign language anxiety is domain specific.

If ELLT matters, the interesting question is not whether it depresses willingness to communicate, which is close to self-evident, but through what psychological machinery it does so and what can interrupt that machinery. Two candidate mechanisms are examined here. The first is communicative anxiety, understood as the immediate apprehension aroused by the prospect of speaking English. Past humiliation supplies the appraisal template through which present speaking situations are read as dangerous, so ELLT should raise CA and CA should in turn suppress WTC. The second is trait emotional intelligence, the self-perceived capacity to appraise, regulate and use one's own and others' emotions (Petrides & Furnham, as described in Dewaele et al., 2008; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Learners high in EI have repeatedly been shown to report lower foreign language anxiety (Shao et al., 2013) and stronger classroom engagement (MacCann et al., 2020), which makes EI a plausible protective resource that both buffers the anxiety consequences of a difficult learning history and supports the approach behaviour that WTC describes. Three gaps motivate the study. First, language learning trauma has been discussed largely in the context of refugee and forced migration education, where the trauma originates outside the classroom, rather than as a phenomenon generated by ordinary schooling in high-stakes English environments. Second, EI has been examined mainly as a correlate of anxiety or achievement and only rarely as a mediator located between a learner's history and their present communicative behaviour. Third, the Pakistani university sector, where an entire generation is being examined and employed in a language that many were taught through rote memorization, corporal punishment and public shaming, is severely under-represented in the international affective SLA literature relative to its size. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions. (1) What are the levels of English language learning trauma, communicative anxiety, emotional intelligence and willingness to communicate among Pakistani university EFL learners? (2) How are these four constructs related to one another? (3) Do the constructs differ by gender, academic level or medium of prior schooling? (4) To what extent do trauma, anxiety and emotional intelligence jointly predict willingness to

communicate? (5) Do communicative anxiety and emotional intelligence mediate the relationship between English language learning trauma and willingness to communicate, individually and in series?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Trauma, adversity and the language learning self

The clinical literature defines trauma by the response rather than the event: an experience becomes traumatic when it overwhelms the individual's capacity to process it and leaves a residue of intrusion, avoidance, negative cognition and heightened arousal. Educational research has adopted a graded version of this idea. Adverse childhood experiences show a dose response relationship with school outcomes: larger meta-analyses report consistent negative associations between adversity and academic performance, engagement and motivation (Petrucelli et al., 2019; Qu et al., 2024; Tyrone et al., 2024) and early adversity predicts weaker kindergarten and later school readiness (Jimenez et al., 2016). Interventions that raise teachers' trauma awareness change classroom conflict patterns measurably (Whitaker et al., 2019), which indicates that the effect is not fixed in the learner but is at least partly maintained by the classroom environment. Applied linguistics has approached this territory from a narrower angle. The available work concentrates on learners whose trauma is exogenous to the classroom, principally refugees and asylum seekers, for whom post-traumatic stress interferes with verbal learning, working memory and concentration in the target language. What has not been theorized with the same care is endogenous trauma: distress produced by the language classroom itself. Yet the ingredients are well documented in the anxiety literature. Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) showed how perfectionist learners store error episodes as evidence of personal inadequacy. Sparks and Ganschow (2007) argued that persistent difficulty and repeated public failure create a self-perpetuating cycle in which the learner's history of poor performance becomes the strongest predictor of present affective response. What ELLT adds is the proposal that these episodes are not merely correlates of current anxiety but a distinguishable, retrospectively anchored construct with its own explanatory value.

Communicative anxiety in the foreign language classroom

Horwitz et al. (1986) conceptualized foreign language classroom anxiety as a complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours specific to language learning, built around communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale that accompanied the paper remains the field's dominant instrument; its psychometric behaviour has been examined in a reliability generalization tradition and in a validated short form (Botes et al., 2022). Meta-analytic syntheses put the correlation between foreign language anxiety and achievement in the moderate negative range, around $-.39$ for general academic achievement and stronger for speaking outcomes (Botes et al., 2020; Teimouri et al., 2019). The present study uses the term communicative anxiety rather than the broader classroom anxiety label because the outcome of interest is oral participation. Communicative anxiety here denotes the anticipatory and situational apprehension attached to speaking English with teachers, peers and unfamiliar interlocutors. This is the facet most directly implicated in the decision to speak or remain silent and it is the fact that mediates between stable learner characteristics and momentary communicative behaviour in most tested models (Jiang & Dewaele, 2019; Zhang et al., 2025).

Willingness to communicate

MacIntyre et al. (1998) modelled WTC as a pyramid in which enduring influences such as personality and intergroup climate feed situated antecedents such as the desire to communicate with a specific person and state self-confidence, which in turn produce the behavioural intention to speak. Empirical work has confirmed the model's central claim that WTC, not proficiency alone, determines whether learners actually use the language. Yashima (2002) demonstrated the role of international posture in the Japanese EFL setting; Peng and Woodrow (2010) modelled classroom environment, motivation, confidence and beliefs as predictors in the Chinese context; Khajavy et al. (2018) showed with

multilevel data that emotions and classroom environment operate at both the individual and the class level; and Kang (2005) documented the moment to moment volatility of situational WTC. Two consistent findings frame the present hypotheses. First, anxiety is a reliable negative predictor of WTC across contexts and modalities, including digital ones (Lee & Hsieh, 2019; Lee et al., 2024a). Second, positive affective resources such as enjoyment, grit and emotion regulation predict WTC over and above the reduction of anxiety (Lee, 2020; Lee et al., 2024b; Zarrinabadi et al., 2021; Zheng & Guo, 2024). This asymmetry matters for intervention design: removing threat and building resource are not the same operation.

Emotional intelligence as a protective resource

Emotional intelligence was originally framed as an ability to perceive, use, understand and manage emotion (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Mayer et al., 2008). The trait or self-efficacy branch of the construct, operationalised through self-report instruments such as the scale of Schutte et al. (1998), locates the same competencies within the personality domain and has proved the more practical option in large classroom samples (Austin et al., 2004; Schutte et al., 2007). In educational psychology, EI predicts academic performance robustly, with meta-analytic evidence indicating incremental validity beyond cognitive ability and personality (MacCann et al., 2020). In second language research, the pattern is consistent. Dewaele et al. (2008) found that adult multilinguals with higher trait EI reported lower communicative anxiety and lower foreign language anxiety across all their languages. Shao et al. (2013) reported the same inverse association in a large Chinese university sample and, importantly, found that anxiety partially mediated the relationship between EI and language achievement. Cong and Li (2022) reviewed the interlocking relationships among EI, communication apprehension and self-efficacy and a recent meta-analysis of the EI to foreign language anxiety link confirms a moderate negative population estimate (Babanoglu, 2025). What follows logically and what this study tests, is that EI should also stand between a learner's aversive learning history and their present readiness to speak, both by dampening the anxiety that history produces and by supplying the regulatory capacity that approach behaviour requires.

Theoretical framework

Three complementary frameworks anchor the hypothesized model. Krashen's affective filter hypothesis supplies the oldest and simplest formulation: affective states do not alter the learner's competence directly but regulate how much input is admitted and how much output is attempted. The control value theory of achievement emotions (Pekrun, 2006) supplies the appraisal mechanism: emotions in academic settings arise from subjective control over an activity and the value attached to its outcome, which explains why English-speaking situations in Pakistan, high in value and low in perceived control for many learners, generate such intense anxiety. The broaden and build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001) supplies the resource logic: positive affective capacities widen the momentary thought action repertoire and accumulate into durable personal resources, which is the theoretical warrant for treating emotional intelligence as a buffer rather than as a mere correlate. Read together with the WTC pyramid, these frameworks generate a testable ordering. A history of humiliation in English learning (ELLT) lowers perceived control and erodes the emotional resources available for self-regulation (EI); depleted regulation and hostile appraisals raise the immediate apprehension of speaking (CA); and elevated apprehension suppresses the situational readiness to initiate talk (WTC). Because the pathway is not expected to be exclusive, a direct residual effect of trauma on WTC is also anticipated, reflecting avoidance that has become habitual rather than anxiety mediated.

The Pakistani ELT context

Pakistan's education system is stratified by medium of instruction. Elite private schools operate in English from the earliest grades; the public sector and low fee private sector operate largely in Urdu or a regional language, with English taught as a subject, frequently through grammar translation, memorization of set answers and high stakes written examination. Learners from the second and third

streams typically arrive at university with substantial receptive knowledge, weak oral fluency and a long personal record of being marked wrong. Studies in the Pakistani setting consistently report moderate to high English language anxiety among undergraduates, with fear of negative evaluation emerging as the dominant component and speaking as the most anxiety provoking skill (Niazi et al., 2024; Rasool et al., 2023). Existing Pakistani work, however, is overwhelmingly descriptive: it establishes that anxiety is high without modelling the mechanisms that produce it or the resources that might attenuate it. The present study responds to that limitation.

Hypotheses

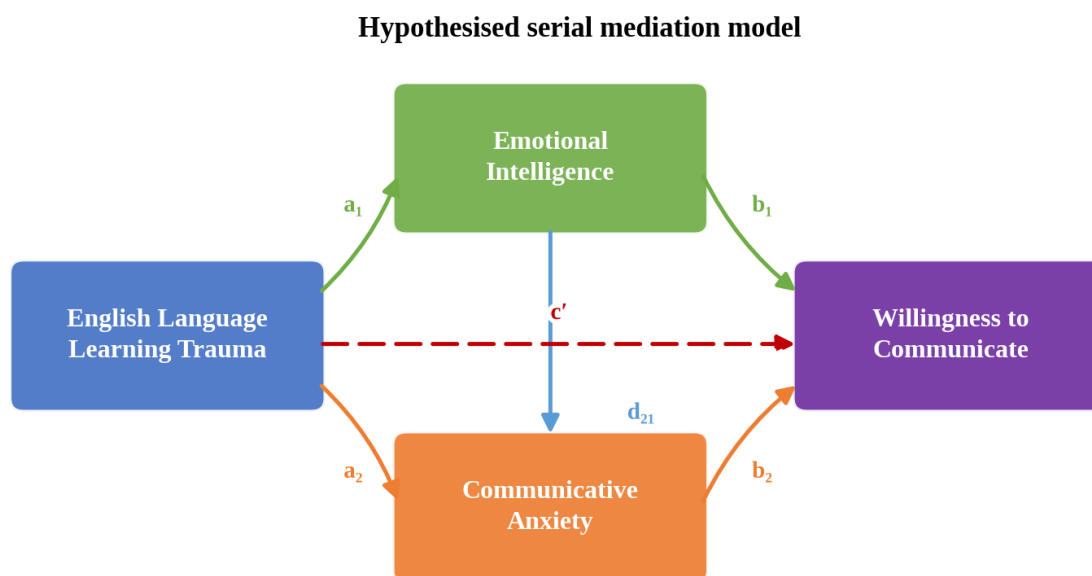
On the basis of the literature reviewed above, the following hypotheses were tested:

- **H1:** English language learning trauma is positively associated with communicative anxiety.
- **H2:** English language learning trauma is negatively associated with emotional intelligence.
- **H3:** English language learning trauma is negatively associated with willingness to communicate.
- **H4:** Communicative anxiety is negatively associated with willingness to communicate.
- **H5:** Emotional intelligence is positively associated with willingness to communicate and negatively associated with communicative anxiety.
- **H6:** Trauma, communicative anxiety and emotional intelligence jointly predict a significant proportion of the variance in willingness to communicate beyond demographic controls.
- **H7:** Communicative anxiety mediates the relationship between English language learning trauma and willingness to communicate.
- **H8:** Emotional intelligence mediates the relationship between English language learning trauma and willingness to communicate.
- **H9:** Emotional intelligence and communicative anxiety operate serially, such that trauma reduces emotional intelligence, which raises communicative anxiety, which in turn lowers willingness to communicate.

Figure 1 presents the hypothesized model. Trauma is treated as the antecedent, emotional intelligence and communicative anxiety as mediators operating both in parallel and in series and willingness to communicate as the outcome, with a direct path retained to allow for partial mediation.

Figure 1

Hypothesized serial mediation model linking English language learning trauma, emotional intelligence, communicative anxiety and willingness to communicate



Note. Solid arrows represent the mediated pathways; the dashed arrow represents the direct effect (c') of trauma on willingness to communicate.

METHOD

The study used a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational survey design with a mediation component. This design was appropriate because the aim was to estimate the strength and structure of the associations among four continuously measured psychological constructs in an intact population rather than to manipulate any of them. Predictive language is used throughout in the statistical sense only; no causal claim is made from cross-sectional data. Participants were 185 students enrolled in English Language Teaching related programmes (BS English, BS ELT and MPhil ELT) at five Pakistani universities. Convenience sampling with a quota for institution was used: the researcher approached intact classes in each participating department and invited all students present to take part. A minimum sample of 138 was required to detect a medium effect ($f^2 = .15$) in a six-predictor multiple regression with $\alpha = .05$ and power = .95 (Faul et al., 2007); the achieved sample of 185 exceeds that requirement and also satisfies the common rule of at least twenty cases per predictor for stable regression estimates and the recommendation of a minimum of 100 cases for bootstrapped mediation. Of the 185 respondents, 98 (53.0 per cent) were women and 87 (47.0 per cent) were men. Ages ranged from 18 to 27 years ($M = 21.42$, $SD = 1.84$). Participants reported a mean of 12.69 years ($SD = 2.48$) of formal English instruction. Full demographic detail appears in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic profile of the sample (N = 185)

Characteristic	n	%
Gender		
Female	98	53.0
Male	87	47.0
Medium of prior schooling		
English medium	62	33.5
Urdu medium	79	42.7
Regional-language medium	44	23.8
Age (years)	18-27	M = 21.42, SD = 1.84

Note. Institution names are anonymized. Percentages are rounded and may not total 100.

Instruments

A four-part self-report questionnaire was used, preceded by a demographic sheet. All items were answered on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) and all scale scores were computed as item means so that they remain on the original 1 to 5 metric and are directly comparable across constructs. Negatively worded items were reverse scored before aggregation.

English Language Learning Trauma Scale (ELLTS)

Because no established instrument measures classroom generated language learning trauma, an 18-item scale was constructed for this study following standard scale development practice: item generation from the trauma and language anxiety literatures, expert review by three ELT specialists and one clinical psychologist for content validity, cognitive interviews with six students for clarity and pilot administration. The scale covers four content domains: humiliation and ridicule in English lessons, punitive teacher behaviour tied to English performance, repeated experiences of failure and being labelled weak in English and present-day intrusive recollection or avoidance connected with those experiences. Sample items are listed in Appendix A.

Communicative Anxiety Scale

Communicative anxiety was measured with a 20-item adaptation of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz et al., 1986), restricted to the communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation facets and reworded to refer specifically to speaking English in and beyond the classroom. Adaptation of the FLCAS to context and modality is standard practice and its short forms retain the psychometric properties of the original (Botes et al., 2022).

Emotional intelligence

Trait emotional intelligence was measured with the 33 item self-report Emotional Intelligence Scale (Schutte et al., 1998), which indexes appraisal of one's own and others' emotions, regulation of emotion and use of emotion in problem solving. The instrument has been used extensively in second language research and its reliability and factor structure have been examined repeatedly (Austin et al., 2004; Schutte et al., 2007).

Willingness to communicate

Willingness to communicate in English was measured with a 20-item scale adapted from the WTC tradition in second language research (MacIntyre et al., 1998; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996), crossing four communicative contexts (dyads, small groups, formal meetings or classroom discussion and public speaking) with receiver types (friends, acquaintances, strangers, teachers). Items were reframed on the same five-point agreement metric as the other scales for consistency of response format.

Table 2

Summary of instruments and internal consistency

Construct	Source	Items	α	ω
English language learning trauma	Developed for this study	18	.89	.90
Communicative anxiety	Adapted from Horwitz et al. (1986)	20	.88	.90
Emotional intelligence	Schutte et al. (1998)	33	.90	.91
Willingness to communicate	Adapted from MacIntyre et al. (1998)	20	.88	.90

Note. α = Cronbach's alpha; ω = McDonald's omega estimated from a single-factor congeneric solution. All scales use a five-point Likert response format.

Procedure and ethical considerations

Departmental permission was obtained at each site before data collection. Questionnaires were administered in person during regular class time in the presence of the researcher, who explained the purpose of the study, emphasized that participation was voluntary and unrelated to course assessment and remained available for clarification. Written informed consent was obtained from every participant. Respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, told that no identifying information would be recorded and that they could withdraw at any point without consequence. Because the trauma items ask respondents to recall distressing school experiences, the consent form carried an explicit warning to this effect and the debriefing sheet supplied contact details for the university counselling service. Completion took approximately fifteen to twenty minutes. Ethical approval was granted by the institutional review committee.

Data analysis

Data were screened for missing values, univariate outliers and distributional assumptions before analysis. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, ranges, skewness and kurtosis) were

computed for all variables and internal consistency was estimated with Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega. Bivariate relationships were examined with Pearson product moment correlations. Group differences were tested with independent samples t tests (with Levene's test for equality of variances and Cohen's d as the effect size) and one-way analysis of variance with eta squared and Tukey HSD post hoc comparisons. Hierarchical multiple regression was used to test the incremental contribution of the affective predictors over demographic controls, with multicollinearity assessed through variance inflation factors and independence of residuals through the Durbin-Watson statistic. Mediation was tested with ordinary least squares path analysis in the tradition of Preacher and Hayes (2008) and Hayes (2022), corresponding to PROCESS models 4 and 6. Indirect effects were evaluated with 5,000 bootstrap resamples and bias corrected 95 per cent confidence intervals; an indirect effect is considered significant when the interval excludes zero. Common method variance was assessed with Harman's single factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Analyses were conducted in [AUTHOR TO INSERT: SPSS 27 with the PROCESS macro v4.2, or the equivalent software actually used]; the coefficients reported here were generated with an independently written OLS and bootstrap routine that reproduces the same estimators.

RESULTS

Preliminary analyses and assumption checks

All cases contained complete data and no extreme univariate outliers were identified; therefore, the full sample was retained. Skewness and kurtosis fell within accepted limits, supporting the use of parametric procedures. Regression diagnostics indicated independent residuals and no problematic multicollinearity. Harman's single-factor test also remained below the conventional criterion, suggesting that a single common-method factor was unlikely to explain the observed relationships.

Descriptive statistics

Table 3 summarizes the distributions of the four constructs. Communicative anxiety was comparatively elevated, whereas willingness to communicate fell slightly below the response-scale midpoint. English language learning trauma occupied an intermediate position, indicating that distressing prior experiences were not confined to a very small subgroup. Emotional intelligence emerged as the clearest positive affective resource. Taken together, the profile depicts learners who possess emotional resources but remain hesitant to initiate communication in English.

Table 3

Descriptive statistics for the study variables (N = 185)

Variable	M	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
English language learning trauma	2.93	0.80	1.14	5.00	0.04	-0.63
Communicative anxiety	3.19	0.80	1.18	4.93	-0.01	-0.47
Emotional intelligence	3.51	0.62	1.82	4.79	-0.39	-0.28
Willingness to communicate	2.95	0.81	1.05	4.90	0.06	-0.53

Note. All scores are item means on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Standard error of skewness = .18; standard error of kurtosis = .35.

Figure 2 displays the four means with their standard deviations against the scale midpoint, making the affective profile of the sample immediately visible: anxiety above the midpoint, willingness to communicate below it and emotional intelligence the only clearly positive resource.

Correlations among the study variables

Table 4 shows that all correlations were statistically significant and followed the hypothesized directions. English language learning trauma was positively associated with communicative anxiety and negatively associated with emotional intelligence and willingness to communicate. Communicative anxiety had the strongest negative association with willingness to communicate, while emotional intelligence was negatively related to anxiety and positively related to willingness. The coefficients indicated meaningful overlap without suggesting that the constructs were redundant; thus, H1 through H5 were supported.

Table 4

Pearson correlations among study variables

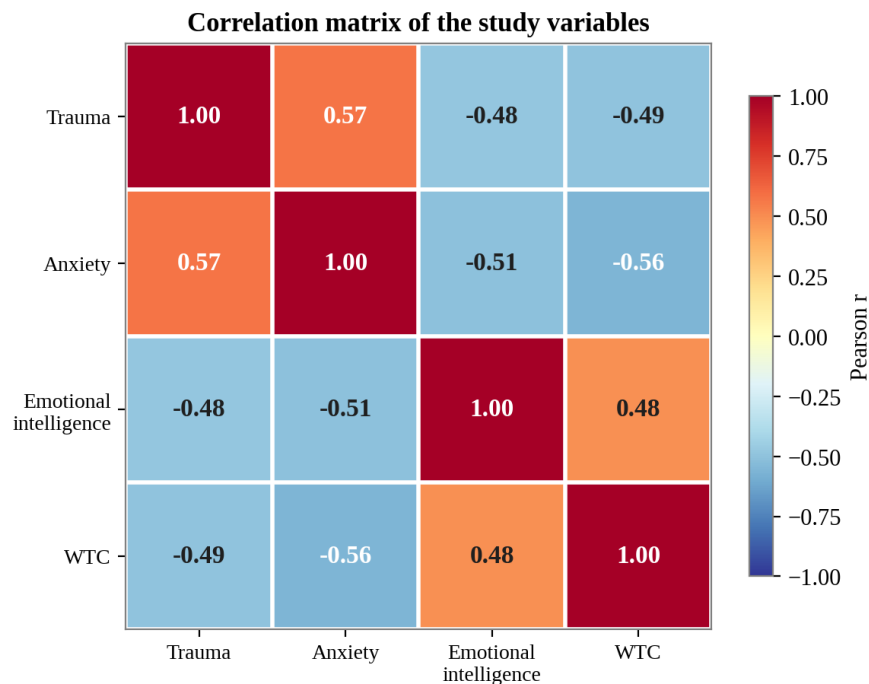
Variable	1	2	3	4	α
1. English language learning trauma	-				.89
2. Communicative anxiety	.57***	-			.88
3. Emotional intelligence	-.48***	-.51***	-		.90
4. Willingness to communicate	-.49***	-.56***	.48***	-	.88

Note. Cronbach's alpha coefficients appear in the final column. *** $p < .001$.

The correlation structure is displayed in Figure 3, where the two positive associations (trauma with anxiety, emotional intelligence with willingness to communicate) and the four negative associations are separated by colour. Figure 4 plots the two relationships of primary theoretical interest together with their fitted regression lines.

Figure 3

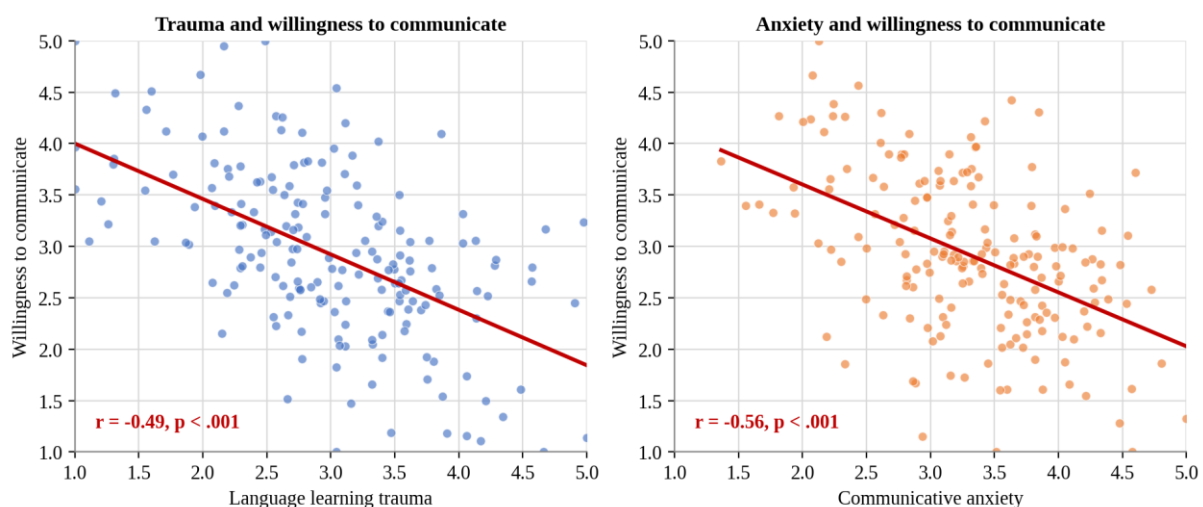
Correlation matrix of the study variables



Note. Warm colours indicate positive and cool colours negative correlations. All off-diagonal coefficients are significant at $p < .001$.

Figure 1

Scatterplots of trauma and of communicative anxiety against willingness to communicate



Note. Each point represents one participant; the solid line is the least squares fit.

Group differences

Gender

The gender comparisons in Table 5 identified a significant difference only for communicative anxiety: women reported greater anxiety than men, with a small-to-moderate effect. Gender differences in trauma, emotional intelligence and willingness to communicate were not statistically significant. Variance assumptions were met for each comparison.

Table 5

Independent samples t tests comparing women and men on the study variables

Variable	Women (n = 98)	Men (n = 87)	t	df	p	d
Trauma	2.97 (0.82)	2.90 (0.78)	0.59	183	.559	0.09
Communicative anxiety	3.35 (0.79)	3.00 (0.77)	3.10	183	.002	0.46
Emotional intelligence	3.45 (0.68)	3.58 (0.54)	-1.45	183	.149	-0.21
Willingness to communicate	2.95 (0.79)	2.96 (0.83)	-0.03	183	.978	0.00

Note. Cell entries for the two groups are means with standard deviations in parentheses. d = Cohen's d.

Medium of prior schooling

The analyses in Table 6 showed that prior medium of schooling was associated with both aversive constructs. Learners from English-medium backgrounds reported less trauma than regional-language-medium learners and less anxiety than both Urdu- and regional-language-medium learners. Emotional intelligence and willingness to communicate did not differ significantly across schooling backgrounds. This pattern suggests that medium of instruction is related more closely to accumulated negative affect than to the emotional resources learners use to manage it.

Table 6

One-way ANOVA of study variables by medium of prior schooling

Variable	English (n = 62)	Urdu (n = 79)	Regional (n = 44)	F	p	η^2
Trauma	2.68 (0.76)	2.98 (0.77)	3.20 (0.82)	5.94	.003	.06
Communicative anxiety	2.82 (0.72)	3.29 (0.75)	3.52 (0.81)	12.22	< .001	.12
Emotional intelligence	3.47 (0.58)	3.53 (0.61)	3.54 (0.69)	0.18	.832	.00

Variable	English (n = 62)	Urdu (n = 79)	Regional (n = 44)	F	p	η^2
Willingness to communicate	3.00 (0.69)	2.95 (0.86)	2.89 (0.86)	0.24	.783	.00

Note. Cell entries are means with standard deviations in parentheses. $df = 2, 182$ for all tests. $\eta^2 =$ eta squared.

Predicting willingness to communicate

The hierarchical regression in Table 7 supported H6. Demographic controls contributed little to the prediction of willingness to communicate, whereas adding trauma, communicative anxiety and emotional intelligence produced a substantial improvement in explanatory power. Communicative anxiety was the strongest negative predictor. Emotional intelligence made an independent positive contribution, while trauma retained a smaller negative effect after the proposed mediators were controlled. None of the demographic controls was significant in the final model.

Table 7

Hierarchical multiple regression predicting willingness to communicate

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	VIF
Step 1: Gender (female = 1)	0.01	0.12	.00	0.05	.963	
Step 1: Age	-0.04	0.03	-.08	-1.10	.273	
Step 1: Senior level (= 1)	-0.13	0.12	-.08	-1.08	.279	
Step 2: Gender (female = 1)	0.18	0.10	.11	1.92	.056	1.07
Step 2: Age	-0.03	0.03	-.07	-1.19	.237	1.01
Step 2: Senior level (= 1)	-0.08	0.10	-.05	-0.84	.402	1.01
Step 2: Trauma (ELLT)	-0.18	0.07	-.18	-2.46	.015	1.63
Step 2: Communicative anxiety	-0.37	0.08	-.36	-4.78	< .001	1.75
Step 2: Emotional intelligence	0.29	0.09	.22	3.16	.002	1.46

Note. Step 1 $R^2 = .01$, $F(3, 181) = 0.86$, $p = .463$. Step 2 $R^2 = .41$, adjusted $R^2 = .39$, $\Delta R^2 = .39$, $F(6, 178) = 20.50$, $p < .001$. Durbin-Watson = 1.94. β = standardized coefficient; VIF = variance inflation factor.

Predicting communicative anxiety

The supplementary regression in Table 8 examined the paths leading to communicative anxiety. Trauma and emotional intelligence jointly explained a substantial portion of anxiety: trauma independently

predicted greater anxiety, whereas emotional intelligence independently predicted lower anxiety. These results supported their inclusion in the mediation models.

Table 8

Regression of communicative anxiety on trauma and emotional intelligence

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Trauma (ELLT)	0.43	0.07	.43	6.51	< .001
Emotional intelligence	-0.39	0.09	-.30	-4.58	< .001

Note. $R^2 = .40$, $F(2, 182) = 60.15$, $p < .001$.

Parallel mediation: anxiety and emotional intelligence as mediators

The parallel mediation model tested H7 and H8 (Table 9). Trauma predicted lower emotional intelligence and greater communicative anxiety; in turn, emotional intelligence predicted stronger willingness to communicate, whereas anxiety predicted weaker willingness. Both indirect pathways were supported by bias-corrected bootstrap intervals, with the anxiety pathway stronger than the emotional-intelligence pathway. The combined indirect association accounted for most of the overall relationship, although the remaining direct path was still significant. The evidence therefore supported complementary partial, rather than complete, mediation.

Table 9

Parallel mediation of the effect of trauma on willingness to communicate

Effect	<i>B</i>	Boot SE	95% BCI
Total effect (c): Trauma to WTC	-0.50		
Direct effect (c'): Trauma to WTC	-0.20		
a1: Trauma to emotional intelligence	-0.37		
a2: Trauma to communicative anxiety	0.57		
b1: Emotional intelligence to WTC	0.29		
b2: Communicative anxiety to WTC	-0.34		
Indirect via emotional intelligence (a1b1)	-0.11	0.04	[-.19, -.04]
Indirect via communicative anxiety (a2b2)	-0.19	0.05	[-.29, -.10]
Total indirect effect	-0.30		[-.42, -.19]

Note. Unstandardized coefficients. BCI = bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval based on 5,000 resamples. An indirect effect is significant when the interval does not contain zero. WTC = willingness to communicate.

Figure 8 decomposes the total effect of trauma into its direct and indirect components with the bootstrap intervals attached, showing at a glance that the larger part of the effect is carried by the mediators rather than by the direct path.

Serial mediation

The serial model tested H9 (Table 10). Emotional intelligence was inversely related to communicative anxiety after trauma was controlled. The indirect pathways through emotional intelligence alone, anxiety alone and the ordered chain from trauma through emotional intelligence and anxiety to willingness to communicate were all supported by bootstrap inference. The serial pathway was smaller than the single-mediator pathways but remained reliable. A supplementary model also supported an indirect association between trauma and anxiety through emotional intelligence. These findings support the proposed affective cascade while remaining consistent with partial mediation.

Table 10

Serial mediation: trauma to emotional intelligence to communicative anxiety to willingness to communicate

Path	B	Boot SE	95% BCI
a1: Trauma to emotional intelligence	-0.37		
a2: Trauma to communicative anxiety	0.43		
d21: Emotional intelligence to communicative anxiety	-0.39		
b1: Emotional intelligence to WTC	0.29		
b2: Communicative anxiety to WTC	-0.34		
Direct effect (c')	-0.20		
Ind. 1: Trauma to EI to WTC	-0.11	0.04	[-.19, -.04]
Ind. 2: Trauma to CA to WTC	-0.14	0.04	[-.23, -.07]
Ind. 3: Trauma to EI to CA to WTC	-0.05	0.02	[-.09, -.02]
Total indirect effect	-0.30	0.05	[-.41, -.20]

Note. Unstandardized coefficients; 5,000 bootstrap resamples. EI = emotional intelligence; CA = communicative anxiety; WTC = willingness to communicate.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to determine whether the distress that Pakistani university learners carry from their earlier English learning careers helps to explain their present reluctance to speak and whether emotional intelligence and communicative anxiety are the mechanisms that carry that effect. The answer supported by the data is affirmative on both counts and the size of the associations suggests that the affective history of the learner deserves a place in models that have so far been built almost entirely from present tense variables. The descriptive picture is coherent and troubling. Communicative anxiety was the highest scoring construct ($M = 3.19$) and willingness to communicate the lowest ($M = 2.95$), a combination that describes a population that knows a great deal of English and speaks very little of it. This mirrors the consistent finding in Pakistani studies that speaking is the most anxiety provoking skill and that fear of negative evaluation is its dominant component (Niazi et al., 2024; Rasool et al., 2023). The mean trauma score of 2.93 on a five-point scale indicates that endorsement of humiliation, punishment and repeated failure in English learning is not a minority experience confined to a damaged few but a modal feature of the sample's educational biography. Emotional intelligence was the only construct to sit clearly above the midpoint ($M = 3.51$), which is encouraging for intervention: the resource on which a remedy would be built is present in reasonable measure, it is simply not being mobilized in the English classroom.

The strongest bivariate association in the study was between trauma and communicative anxiety ($r = .57$) and trauma remained a significant predictor of anxiety with emotional intelligence controlled. This is consistent with an appraisal reading of the relationship. Under control value theory (Pekrun, 2006), anxiety arises where an activity is highly valued and subjectively uncontrollable. A history of being mocked or punished for English performance does precisely two things: it raises the perceived stakes of every subsequent speaking act and it supplies concrete autobiographical evidence that the outcome cannot be controlled. The learner is not making an irrational forecast; the learner is generalizing accurately from experience. This reframes classroom anxiety in an important way. If anxiety were purely dispositional, the pedagogical response would be limited to desensitization. If a substantial part of it is the residue of specific, remembered, institutionally produced episodes, then the pedagogical response must include changing the classroom conditions that produce such episodes in the first place, a conclusion that echoes the trauma informed education literature (Whitaker et al., 2019). It should be noted that the correlation between trauma and anxiety, while strong, leaves roughly 67 per cent of the variance unshared. The two constructs are related but not interchangeable, which is what a newly proposed construct must demonstrate. Trauma is retrospective, episodic and biographical; anxiety is present tense, anticipatory and situational. The discriminant evidence here is preliminary and rests on internal consistency and pattern of correlations rather than on confirmatory factor analysis, a limitation addressed below.

Emotional intelligence behaved exactly as a protective resource should. It correlated negatively with trauma ($r = -.48$) and anxiety ($r = -.51$), positively with willingness to communicate ($r = .48$) and it carried a significant independent positive weight in the regression ($\beta = .22$) once anxiety was already in the model. That last point deserves emphasis. Emotional intelligence does not help only by lowering anxiety; it adds something further to the decision to speak. This is the pattern that broaden and build theory predicts (Fredrickson, 2001) and that the positive psychology turn in second language acquisition has repeatedly documented for enjoyment, grit and emotion regulation (Lee, 2020; Zarrinabadi et al., 2021; Zheng & Guo, 2024). Removing threat and building resource are separable operations with separable effects. The negative association between trauma and emotional intelligence is theoretically the most interesting finding, because it runs against a simple reading of trait emotional intelligence as a stable dispositional endowment. If emotional intelligence were fully independent of learning history, there would be no reason to expect this correlation at all. Two readings are compatible with the data. The first is a resource erosion account: sustained aversive experience in a domain degrades the learner's confidence in their capacity to appraise and regulate emotion, at least in that domain. The second is a selection account: learners who arrive with weaker regulatory capacities are more likely to experience ordinary classroom setbacks as humiliating and to encode them as such. Cross-sectional data cannot

separate these and the mediation model tested here assumes the first ordering because it is the one supported by the theoretical literature, not because the design establishes it.

The mediation analyses give the study its central contribution. Roughly 61 per cent of the total effect of trauma on willingness to communicate was indirect and the two mediators divided this unequally: communicative anxiety carried about 64 per cent of the indirect effect and emotional intelligence about 36 per cent. The serial model added the specific chain from trauma through emotional intelligence to anxiety to willingness to communicate, which was small but reliable (-0.05 , 95 per cent BCI $[-.09, -.02]$). Taken together the results describe a cascade: aversive history depletes the regulatory resource, depleted regulation amplifies the apprehension attached to speaking and apprehension closes down the willingness to speak. This is a more informative account than the familiar bivariate claim that anxious learners speak less and it identifies two distinct points of intervention rather than one. The persistence of a significant direct effect ($c' = -0.20$) is equally instructive. Something in the trauma to silence relationship is not captured by anxiety or emotional intelligence. Plausible candidates include habituated avoidance that no longer requires felt anxiety to operate, a damaged ideal second language self, low self-perceived communicative competence and the simple fact that learners who were rarely allowed to speak have less oral practice and therefore less fluency to draw on. Testing these additions would be a productive next step and would connect the present model to the self and identity strand of motivation research.

The gender finding, higher communicative anxiety among women with a small to moderate effect ($d = 0.46$) and no accompanying difference in willingness to communicate, replicates a pattern reported across many contexts. It is most defensibly read not as a dispositional difference but as a reflection of differential exposure and differential socialization regarding public performance and evaluation, which in the Pakistani setting includes gendered norms about speaking up in mixed classrooms. The schooling background result is the most policy relevant. Learners educated through Urdu or a regional language reported significantly more trauma and substantially more anxiety than learners educated through English, with a medium to large effect for anxiety ($\eta^2 = .12$), while emotional intelligence and willingness to communicate did not differ. In other words, the stratification of the school system does not distribute emotional capacity unevenly; it distributes emotional injury unevenly. Learners from non-English medium backgrounds arrive at university carrying a heavier affective burden acquired in classrooms where English was taught as a subject to be feared rather than a resource to be used. This is a structural finding and it cannot be addressed by learner-level remediation alone.

Theoretical implications

Three theoretical contributions follow. First, the study proposes and provides initial evidence for English language learning trauma as a construct distinct from and antecedent to, foreign language classroom anxiety. Anxiety research has always acknowledged that learners bring histories with them; this study supplies a way to measure that history and shows that doing so adds explanatory value. Second, it places trait emotional intelligence inside the mediating machinery of the willingness to communicate pyramid rather than alongside it as a correlate and shows that it functions both as a buffer against anxiety and as an independent facilitator of approach behaviour. Third, it demonstrates that a distal biographical variable can be integrated into an affective model of second language communication without displacing the proximal variables that the field has already established; trauma did not compete with anxiety for explanatory space so much as explain where some of that anxiety comes from. The findings translate into several concrete recommendations for Pakistani ELT practice.

A trauma-sensitive communicative classroom requires more than a generally supportive teacher attitude. It requires predictable routines through which learners can anticipate when they will speak, how preparation will be provided, what form feedback will take and how mistakes will be treated. Teachers can begin with private rehearsal, move to pairs and stable small groups and only then invite voluntary whole-class performance. Choice over topic, partner and response mode can restore a sense of control that earlier punitive experiences may have weakened. Feedback should separate the

communicative success of an utterance from its linguistic limitations: teachers can first acknowledge meaning, then select one or two teachable features instead of publicly cataloguing every error. Brief reflection prompts can help learners name anxiety, identify its trigger and choose a regulation strategy such as paced breathing, cognitive reappraisal, positive self-talk, or help seeking. Peer norms also matter because ridicule by classmates can reactivate earlier humiliation even when the teacher is supportive. Explicit discussion of respectful listening, repair and accent diversity should therefore precede demanding speaking tasks. Departments should complement classroom practices with confidential referral pathways for learners whose distress is persistent or severe. These measures do not require teachers to diagnose clinical trauma. Their purpose is to reduce avoidable threat, strengthen emotional agency and create repeated experiences of safe, successful communication through which willingness to speak can gradually be rebuilt. Progress should be monitored through low-stakes self-ratings and participation records across the semester.

- Since a substantial part of present anxiety is the residue of remembered humiliation, error correction practices that expose learners publicly should be replaced with delayed, private or aggregated feedback and no learner should be required to perform orally without preparation time in front of the whole class in the early weeks of a course.
- Corporal punishment and public ridicule for language errors remain reported features of schooling for many of these learners. The finding that trauma clusters in Urdu and regional medium backgrounds means teacher education for those sectors, not only for universities, is where the largest gains are available.
- Because emotional intelligence predicted willingness to communicate over and above anxiety, brief embedded modules on emotion appraisal, reappraisal of speaking situations, self-talk and peer support are likely to add value that anxiety reduction alone does not deliver. Emotional intelligence is amenable to training, which makes it the most actionable variable in the model.
- Pair and small group tasks with unfamiliar-to-familiar sequencing let learners accumulate successful speaking experiences that compete with the stored aversive ones, addressing the direct effect that anxiety reduction does not reach.
- A short trauma and anxiety screening at programme entry would let departments identify the subgroup at greatest risk of silence and route them to speaking clubs, peer mentoring or counselling before the pattern consolidates across a degree.
- Where oral performance is graded, rubrics that reward communicative attempt and repair rather than accuracy alone reduce the perceived stakes that drive the anxiety documented here.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Formal validation, ideally including a confirmatory factor model with average variance extracted and Heterotrait-Monotrait ratios is the first priority for follow-up work. Retrospective self-report of distressing experience is also subject to recall bias and current affect may colour recollection of past events in ways that inflate the trauma to anxiety association. Future research should pursue four lines. First, a longitudinal design following learners across a semester or a degree would show whether trauma predicts change in willingness to communicate rather than its level. Second, an intervention study delivering emotional intelligence training to high trauma learners would test the practical claim implied by the mediation model. Third, qualitative work, narrative interviews in particular, would recover the texture of these episodes and the meanings learners attach to them, which a Likert scale necessarily flattens. Fourth, extending the model to include self-perceived communicative competence, the ideal second language self and classroom environment variables would test whether the residual direct effect can be accounted for.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that reluctance to speak English among Pakistani university EFL learners is partly connected to adverse experiences accumulated in earlier English classrooms. Language learning trauma was associated with greater communicative anxiety and with weaker emotional intelligence and willingness to communicate. The mediation evidence indicates that trauma may constrain communication both by heightening immediate speaking anxiety and by weakening the emotional resources required to approach difficult interactions. The persistence of a direct association also suggests additional mechanisms, including learned avoidance, limited oral practice and reduced communicative self-belief. Learner silence should therefore not be interpreted automatically as lack of knowledge or motivation. It may operate as a protective response shaped by earlier exposure, ridicule, punishment, or repeated failure. Trauma-sensitive correction, gradual and supported speaking opportunities and explicit emotional-regulation instruction can help create classrooms that avoid new harm while enabling learners to revise the emotional meaning of speaking English.

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