

Factors Contributing to English Speaking Anxiety Among Final-Year Undergraduate Students in the English Department: Insights from a Qualitative Study at a Public University in Karachi

Syeda Neha Asim

syedanehaasim@gmail.com

Lecturer English, University of Karachi

Corresponding Author: * Syeda Neha Asim syedanehaasim@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Public speaking anxiety is pervasive, and thus, many students fail to put across their ideas and thoughts effectively. The students should overcome their English-speaking anxiety as it could bring numerous unfavourable outcomes later in their professional lives. The final-year undergraduate students often experience severe and intense English-speaking anxiety. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the factors that cause English-speaking anxiety among the final-year undergraduate students. Also, this research aimed to investigate the extent to which the final-year undergraduate students of the English Department have been able to overcome their English-speaking anxiety over the last six semesters. The qualitative research method was used in the current study, and the data were collected through a virtual focus group discussion. The study was conducted with five final-year students of a public sector university in Karachi using convenience sampling. The findings show that peer pressure, pronunciation, low opinion of oneself, undue expectations, fear of negative evaluation, lack of syntactic knowledge, limited vocabulary, fewer collaborative activities, and lack of motivation are the main factors that cause English-speaking anxiety. Also, the recommendations by students reveal how they could overcome their English-speaking anxiety if they develop certain productive habits and if their educational institutes could organize the suggested interactive sessions.

Keywords: Fear, English-speaking skills, anxiety, stress, oral presentation

INTRODUCTION

Nearly everyone has the remarkable ability to generate creative, original, and constructive ideas. However, when it comes to verbalizing these ideas, only a few individuals can effectively communicate them. Speaking anxiety is a pervasive issue among students learning English as a foreign language (EFL), with studies consistently showing high levels of anxiety in various educational contexts (Erdiana & Sari, 2020; Öztürk & Öztürk, 2021). As Raja (2017) points out, many individuals go to great lengths to avoid situations where they must express their ideas publicly. If avoidance is impossible, they often experience heightened apprehension, leading to difficulty articulating their thoughts. This fear of public speaking can paralyze students' ability to communicate proficiently. Torky (2006) underscores that speaking is a critical skill through which learners express their ideas, opinions, and emotions. However, public speaking anxiety continues to hinder students' academic and social progress, often contributing to low self-esteem and diminished confidence. Moreover, learning a second language, particularly English, can be overwhelming, and students frequently aspire to speak like native speakers. This aspiration brings considerable stress, often resulting in anxiety disorders. EFL learners are especially prone to anxiety, particularly when required to communicate in English. This is most evident when students are asked to volunteer answers or present their ideas in class, triggering feelings of panic and fear. Therefore, addressing the factors contributing to English-speaking anxiety among final-year undergraduate students

in the English Department is crucial. Understanding these factors can help students overcome their fear of public speaking and improve their communication skills.

Several factors contribute to speaking anxiety among final-year undergraduate students in the Department of English. Many students tend to avoid participating in class discussions, becoming visibly nervous, restless, and uncomfortable when called upon to speak. This avoidance behaviour often manifests in actions such as avoiding eye contact, which indicates the presence of EFL speaking anxiety (Rachmawati, 2020). Furthermore, weak communication skills can prevent students from gaining respect within their academic and social circles. In contrast, students with strong communication skills are often viewed with higher regard by peers, seniors, and instructors. As Raja (2017) asserts, "Oral communication competence contributes to individuals' social adjustment and participation in satisfying interpersonal relationships" (p. 154). Students also experience significant anxiety when asked to speak in front of peers, often due to shyness or fear (Raja, 2017). However, practicing speaking in front of unfamiliar audiences can help reduce this anxiety. When required to share their thoughts on a topic, students often feel paralyzed by fear. Hussain et al., (2020) emphasize that students who struggle to express their ideas effectively in English may be perceived as less capable. In today's globalized world, the ability to communicate confidently in English is a critical skill. Companies expect candidates to articulate their thoughts clearly in a language that is universally accepted, which can be daunting for students (Hussain et al., 2020). Additionally, the fear of making grammatical errors prevents many students from participating in class discussions. Pathan and Khan (2017) highlight that in Pakistan, students often experience heightened speaking anxiety due to the teachers' overemphasis on grammar, leading to a fear of making mistakes during oral communication. Other factors, including students' diverse educational backgrounds and fear of criticism from teachers, can further exacerbate English-speaking anxiety and prevent effective communication.

This research is significant not only for EFL students but also for instructors, as it will provide insights into the factors that contribute to English-speaking anxiety among students. Understanding these factors is crucial for helping students overcome their anxiety and achieve their academic goals. Furthermore, students in the English Department often have opportunities to teach in various educational settings, making it essential for them to develop effective communication skills. This study will propose practical solutions to help students overcome speaking anxiety and gain confidence in their ability to communicate their ideas in class. It will also offer strategies for teachers to assist students in overcoming English-speaking anxiety and enhancing their overall communication abilities.

While existing research has explored English-speaking anxiety among EFL students, there remains a lack of studies that focus specifically on final-year undergraduate students in English Departments. Much of the existing literature addresses younger learners or provides general insights into anxiety, without investigating the unique challenges faced by senior students preparing for professional environments. This study seeks to fill this gap by explicitly examining the factors that contribute to English-speaking anxiety among final-year students, with an emphasis on how this anxiety impacts their academic and professional outcomes. By addressing this gap, the research will offer valuable recommendations for both students and educators to help mitigate speaking anxiety and improve communication competencies.

Research Questions

- 1- What factors are responsible for causing English-speaking anxiety among the final-year undergraduate students studying in the Department of English?
- 2- To what extent have the final-year undergraduate students of the English Department been able to overcome their English-speaking anxiety over the last six semesters?

LITERATURE REVIEW

People often stutter when they speak English; they become very anxious and nervous. They think that people will judge them; they suffer from intense fear and experience severe anxiety. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) stated that anxiety has more to do with people's subjective feelings; feeling nervous, tensed, and worried indicates the presence of anxiety. Language learning anxiety has been a significant area of research, with a particular focus on the four essential language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Studies have shown moderate to high levels of anxiety in English language reading and writing among university students (Khan et al., 2023; Liu, 2025). A strong positive correlation exists between reading and writing anxiety, suggesting that students experiencing high levels in one domain are likely to face similar challenges in the other (Khan et al., 2023). In addition to reading and writing, research on listening anxiety in Pakistan and related contexts reveals its significant impact on language learning. Studies show that listening anxiety negatively correlates with listening test scores among Pakistani college students (Soomro et al., 2024). Factors contributing to anxiety include poor listening habits, lack of background knowledge, and high speech rates (Soomro et al., 2024; Pratama & Nurkhamidah, 2023). According to Raja (2007), it's essential for one to possess effective communication skills in the present times.

But according to Bednar (1991), right from the outset of modern civilization, people have developed fear of public speaking; they become very anxious when they have to communicate with others especially in front of a large audience. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) stated that students and teachers believe that anxiety acts as a barrier in learning to speak another language. They further stated that this tormenting speaking anxiety makes it relatively difficult for the students to respond spontaneously, even during the oral communication exercise, as they often forget the learnt grammar points. The question that generally arises is how anxiety can bring about unfavourable outcomes; Schovel (1978) believes that anxiety is an extremely complicated and complex experience, which is merely a fusion of multiple feelings, emotional state of mind, and personality trait. The previous studies divide anxiety into two different types of variations: trait anxiety and state anxiety. Rajitha and Alamelu (2009) in their research state that when people undergo anxiety in a variety of situations, it indicates the presence of trait anxiety, whereas in state anxiety, the person becomes anxious and nervous only in a specific or particular situation which he finds threatening. When we talk about state anxiety in terms of public speaking, according to Porhola (1995), state anxiety is induced by a situation when the person has to speak in front of a large audience; it's also triggered when they fear the audience's response.

The fear of public speaking is quite threatening, since the researcher Irvine (2020) states that even if a few students look confident, they still experience nausea when they have to give a class presentation. Also, according to McCroskey et al. (1990), students who don't generally participate in classroom discussion believe that they have comparatively less oral communicative competence than others; the researchers further assert that students who seldom show interest in class discussions are often shy and apprehensive. Also, the researchers stress the fact that such students aren't much appreciated by the teachers who demand active class participation and involvement. McCroskey et al. (2001) draw a conclusion that the teachers who fail to positively deal with the students who experience speaking anxiety make the situation worse; they increase the problem that their students face. According to Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986), in the ESL classes, students are often required to communicate only in the target language and the language skills are continuously monitored; and thus, it becomes the source of anxiety for many students. Siddique (2019) states that students try their hardest to avoid responding in class unless the teacher individually points them out to speak; the researcher asserts that these students avoid responding to the teacher either because they don't find proper words to articulate their ideas or because they are not very confident when it comes to speaking English.

According to Siddique (2019), oftentimes the responses of the students are judged very critically by the teachers, and thus it makes them nervous and anxious when they are asked to volunteer answers in class. Also, according to Raja (2017), when people find themselves in a situation where they have to present their ideas in front of a large audience, they suffer from anxiety; their fear of public speaking also leads them to experience nausea and increased sweating. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) state that this communicative apprehension develops when one finds it difficult to put across their thoughts or make themselves understood; and thus, even the most talkative people tend to sit quietly in class and show the least active engagement. The researchers further enunciate that students also become test-anxious when they have to give an oral test; they develop both test and speaking anxiety.

The researchers of the previous studies have drawn various conclusions and recommended many ways that could help students overcome speaking anxiety. Hussain et al. (2020) suggested that teachers can help learners enhance their oral communication competence if they work hard to reduce the intensity of the situation that causes speaking anxiety. Also, the aforementioned researchers suggested that the students can overcome speaking anxiety if the learning process is not tough enough to cause stress; the learning process should offer more fun to the learners. Moreover, Raja (2007) in his research suggested that the people who suffer from speaking anxiety should become acquainted with the fact that many speakers undergo the same emotions of fear and nervousness; thus, they are not different. Raja (2007) also suggests that people can overcome their fear of public speaking if they prefer to practice in relatively small groups of people; once their anxiety reduces, they can move to speak in front of a comparatively large crowd.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research was used as the research design, which helped the researcher investigate the dominant factors affecting and causing English-speaking anxiety among the final-year undergraduate students of the English department. According to Ahmed, Pathan, & Khan (2017), qualitative research allows one to develop comprehensive understanding of people's behavior and intentions; it requires close observation and demands interpreting skills. The views and experiences of participants are given more importance in the qualitative research approach.

A virtual focus group interview was conducted to explore the reasons behind the fear of public speaking in students. Also, it aimed to obtain students' viewpoints about practical and effective strategies on how to overcome English-speaking anxiety. According to Marques et al. (2020), the technology has made it relatively easy to connect with people via social media platforms; it has also created an opportunity for one to conduct qualitative research together with virtual focus groups.

Virtual focus groups bear numerous advantages; they save time as participants don't have to visit any specific place, and thus, they are able to join comfortably from their homes. Also, the meeting can be scheduled anytime when the participants are free and have no other commitments, engagements, or involvements. Moreover, the coronavirus pandemic has challenged many daily activities; social distancing or physical distancing is being encouraged to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus. As a result of this, it was unsafe and incredibly risky to take an in-person focus group interview. Thus, a virtual focus group interview was conducted to avoid the adverse consequences of COVID-19.

Sample

The research was conducted with five final-year undergraduate English major students of a public sector university in Karachi.

In the present study, the convenience sampling technique was used, since, accessible.

Data Collection Instruments

In the current study, the data were collected through a virtual focus group discussion. Zoom audio conferencing was used to record the responses of the participants. The researcher hosted the Zoom meeting, and all the participants were asked to join the meeting using their laptops or phones. The interview lasted for 50:16 minutes, during which nine questions were answered by the participants. All the questions were open-ended, which immensely helped the researcher get a deeper and better insight into participants' opinions, views, and thoughts about the topic. After each question, the participants were asked to unmute their microphone and share their response one by one.

Data analysis

The discussion related to the present study was analyzed and recorded in a summary form, comprising the most evident themes, quotations, and unexpected findings that led to the research. The data of the study were recorded in the pattern of thematic form, since according to Oteir & Al-Otaibi (2012), thematic analysis gives considerable room to detect the factors that influence the issue which is under discussion in the study. Also, it increases the research's accuracy as it requires data collection on diverse aspects of the topic. Marks and Yardley (2004) believe that thematic analysis gives one an opportunity to develop an extensive understanding of the prevailing issue of a study. The study encompasses all the details enunciated and imparted by the participants in the format of a focus group discussion.

Limitations

The data of the study were collected from the students of the English department of only one public sector university in Karachi; therefore, the findings and conclusions of the current study can't be generalized to the other universities in Pakistan offering English literature and linguistics degrees. Also, the COVID-19 situation didn't allow for gathering data using a focus group interview, and thus, the data of the present study were collected through a virtual focus group discussion that served. As another constraint, since three participants had internet connectivity issues, they had to rejoin the meeting several times, failing to maintain the created momentum. Moreover, the researcher had to meet a given deadline, and thus, the time constraint also acted as another constraint.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

In the virtual focus group discussion, five undergraduate students of English department participated to state the factors that cause speaking anxiety. All 5 students belong to final-year English Major. The researcher helped the participants become acquainted with the fundamental notion of the research topic with the objective of beginning a discussion. The participants highlighted various factors that give rise to speaking anxiety.

Peer Pressure

When the students were asked if they still get afraid of being judged by the other students while speaking English in their final year, the four participants mentioned that they still think about how critically they are judged by their classmates if they make mistakes when speaking English. This question was followed by another question; the participants were asked to tell the reasons that had hindered them from dealing with peer pressure. One of the participants reported, "*Even if I want to speak,*

I unintentionally look around to see people's expressions. And if someone gives me weird looks, it makes me nervous and I begin to doubt my skills."

A few participants shared how they gain no appreciation from their classmates; they are surrounded by the fear of being mocked, which makes them exceedingly nervous and quite anxious when they try to volunteer answers, even in their final year class. The two participants believed that their peers judge them because this is what they've learnt from our society; people think that being fluent in English is important for one to prove their intelligence, and thus they use it as a tool to judge one's intellectual level. On the other hand, one of the participants believed that she had managed to deal with peer pressure to some extent; she stated, *"Lately, I've started to care less about my fellow students. And, I think as long as your teacher isn't there to judge you, I personally feel confident in speaking English. But this realization has hit me in the final-year."*

Another participant added, "We've come here to learn, but are judged on our skills". The same participant further added that peer pressure makes you self-conscious and shatters your confidence since it gives no room for improvement; and thus,

"When one doesn't get appreciation and is always criticized, they fail to overcome English speaking anxiety."

Fear Of Negative Evaluation

When it comes to speaking English, it's true that people often develop a fear of negative evaluation; they become anxious when they think of their skills being negatively evaluated. The researcher collected various responses when she asked a question about whether the participants became self-conscious when the teacher corrected their oral English; and when the three students stated "yes", the researcher asked them the reasons that made them self-conscious. One of the students responded, *"The way that the teacher corrects you is all that matters. If the teacher has a mocking tone, and you think he's intentionally trying to make you a laughingstock for making a mistake, then it's definitely going to shatter your confidence."* The same participant further added, *"It's teacher's tone that actually tells you if he's genuinely trying to correct you or making fun of you."* The participants believed that if the teachers correct their oral English in a mocking way, then it will lead to developing a fear of negative evaluation; they'll always feel anxious about other people's negative opinions about them. Moreover, another student uttered, *"I become self-conscious when my teacher corrects my oral English as I commence to think that other students can perhaps speak better than me."* The other participant supported the previously given responses and stated, *"always receiving negative feedback and criticism destroys one's confidence and gives rise to speaking anxiety."* On the other hand, the two participants stated that their teachers have never intended to make fun of them when they corrected their oral English, and thus, the fear of negative evaluation never overpowered them.

Limited vocabulary and lack of syntactic knowledge

Syntactic knowledge helps one skillfully combine words in meaningful sentences, and when one doesn't possess it, they often lose fluency when they speak English. Also, many people struggle to find words to express their thoughts in a better way. When the participants were asked if they still struggle to find proper words to express their ideas in their final year, all of them responded "yes". The researcher then asked them to state the reasons; one of the participants enunciated, *"We don't possess the bank of good vocabulary to articulate our thoughts, and it's because we seldom read; we don't even have a reading environment at our homes"*.

The students stated that the more you read, the more words you learn; you come across numerous words that could help you articulate Your thoughts are well. They stated that reading not only helps you learn new words, but also gives you an in-depth understanding of how you can construct sentences in a number of different ways to put across your ideas.

Pronunciation

ESL students often face difficulties when it comes to the right pronunciation of English words since it's not their first language. Thus, it often causes speaking anxiety among the English Department students. One of the participants stated, *"Sometimes I do have words in mind but couldn't use them since I don't know their correct pronunciation; I avoid using them with the fear of embarrassment."* The other participant backed the statement and reported, *"Yes, we hesitate because we often know the word but don't know its correct pronunciation."*

Low opinion of oneself

It's true that there are countless external reasons that give birth to speaking anxiety, but the situation gets worse when one holds a low opinion of himself; he begins to overthink his weaknesses and commences to doubt his skills. When the participants of the final year were asked if they had a low opinion of themselves, all of them responded "yes". Also, various responses were collected when the researcher asked the participants to state the reasons that caused them to form a low opinion of themselves. A participant responded, *"I underplay my skills as oftentimes I don't find adequate or appropriate words to express myself"*. The same participant further enunciated, *"Although I've a good vocabulary, when I'm supposed to give a spontaneous answer, the words don't come to mind."* Participants shared how they want to be fluent in the English language, but the fear of using incorrect grammatical structure and committing pronunciation errors makes them really anxious. One of the participants stated, *"Accent also plays a huge role in making you form a low opinion of yourself."* The interest of our society has drastically shifted to copying British and American English accents, and thus, those who even possess relatively adequate knowledge of the English language also fear speaking because they're judged on their accent. This takes away their confidence and makes them anxious. Moreover, students pointed out how they don't necessarily share the same educational background. The students with an intermediate background usually feel like they can't possess language skills better than those students with an O/A level background. One of the students stated, *"Unfortunately, our educational system is a barrier to learning"*. They believe that the tools for measuring knowledge and skills shouldn't be the same. For all students, as they don't share the same educational background, they think this could make them form a low opinion of themselves.

Fewer Collaborative Activities

Interactive speaking sessions enormously help students get rid of speaking anxiety. When the students were asked if their teachers ever created speaking activities that could help them improve English speaking skills, the four participants responded "no", whereas one participant stated that a few teachers have tried to engage students by *"building an interactive speaking environment"*. The participants who said "no" were further asked to state whether they think it's the most evident factor that still makes them embarrassed when they try to volunteer answers in their final year; one of the participants uttered, *"If teachers had normalised the speaking environment, the students would've taken it as routine work. But now, since our teachers never organised the speaking activities, speaking English spontaneously sounds like a big deal to us"*. The other student added, *"Yes, I still get embarrassed when I try to volunteer answers even in my final year. The problem goes back to school; the teacher never organized Interactive speaking sessions that could give considerable room for students' engagement."*

Lack of Motivation

Motivation is crucially important and essential in the development of speaking skills. It's important for the teacher to motivate students so that they can build their confidence to speak English fluently. The researcher asked the participants about the role of a teacher; they were asked whether they think teaching kindness could help build the students' confidence to speak English. One of the students shared, "If teachers fail to maintain a friendly environment, I fear humiliation and lose motivation. And, it also makes me self-conscious and anxious whenever I try to participate in class." Another student added, *"I lose motivation when my teacher doesn't show kindness; teachers normally associate English-speaking fluency with high-intellectual level and are less concerned about the idea that we try to put across."* On the other hand, the participants also stated that we normally don't speak English outside of class hours; the participant enunciated, "I don't speak English whenever I am with friends and family". The students also shared that they speak English mostly in formal conversation, and thus they think it is the most evident factor that doesn't encourage or motivate them to enhance their English-speaking skills.

Undue Expectation

Undue expectations often set certain standards that the students try to achieve. When the participants were asked about the highlighted factor that didn't allow them to overcome their English-speaking anxiety over the last six semesters, one of them stated, "We panic about making mistakes because people expect us to use perfect grammar." The other student added, *"I've somehow not completely overcome my speaking anxiety, and I still panic about making mistakes; people think we can't commit any errors and can be very fluent in speaking since we are studying in the department of English. And thus, their expectations usually make me anxious."* Another participant responded, *"My writing skills are better than my speaking skills. And, I don't speak English fluently because I've this fear that if I won't speak well, my writing skills will also be judged. People would doubt my written essays; they will think that these essays aren't written by me."* Participants drew a conclusion that undue expectations cause anxiety and fear; these expectations prevent them from speaking English fluently.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Improvement

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors and reasons that cause English-speaking anxiety among the final-year undergraduate English major students. The current study also aimed to investigate the extent to which the final-year undergraduate students of the English Department have been able to overcome their English-speaking anxiety over the last six semesters. The participants stated countable factors that give rise to speaking anxiety. The participants also suggested and recommended various ways that could help students overcome speaking anxiety. The students recommended that one should enhance their receptive skills, i.e., they should read various books to gather a bank of vocabulary so that they could learn different expressions to articulate their ideas more skillfully. The participant stated, *"We should listen to various podcasts as listening integrates speaking skills; it also helps you learn the correct pronunciation of the words."* The other student recommended, "I think a group of supportive friends incredibly helps you gain confidence and speak fluently. I think we should talk to our friends in English more often to get rid of speaking anxiety". It is also suggested that the teacher should motivate students to take part in class activities; they should organise interactive speaking sessions and give students the opportunity to take part in speeches, plays, and class presentations; also, it shouldn't be optional, as one of the participants added, *"The designed speaking activities shouldn't be optional."*

Teachers should keep it compulsory for the students to participate so that the shyest students would also take part in it and it will help him get rid of speaking anxiety."

Moreover, the students can manage speaking anxiety if they care less about what people would think of them; the participant affirms, “*Those who are judging you and are not contributing positively, then you should care less about such people. You shouldn’t doubt your skills; at least, unlike those people, you’re doing something positive.*” Furthermore, from the students’ responses, it can also be concluded that teachers should understand that not all students share the same educational background, and thus, students’ speaking skills may widely vary. Moreover, one can enhance their speaking skills if they try to engage in random conversation with their family, since the student enunciated, “*Random conversation in English with family can enhance your speaking skills and help you overcome speaking anxiety.*” The random conversation with family is helpful since you are generally relaxed at home and don’t fear the adverse outcomes. It can also be concluded and suggested that one shouldn’t lose hold on confidence when society expect him to use perfect grammar and speak fluently as one of the participant shared, “*Even we can make mistakes as we are learning*”. Lastly, another student suggested, “*teachers should learn that English isn’t the tool to analyze students’ intelligence as this can help students overcome speaking anxiety and participate more in class.*”

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