



**FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY IN PAKISTANI HIGHER EDUCATION
CLASSROOMS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES,
AND COPING STRATEGIES**

Rabia Nazir,

Student, Department of English, University of Sialkot, Pakistan.

Email: rbia.shakeel01@gmail.com

Dr. Muhammad Saboor Hussain Professor

Department of English, University of Sialkot, Pakistan.

Email: dr.muhammadsaboorhussain@uskt.edu.pk

Abstract

The focus of this qualitative exploratory studies is on the genesis, impact, and alleviation of foreign language anxiety among Pakistani college students. Collection of data using focus group and individual semi-structured interviews as well as the corresponding thematic analyses of the results is an example of this. The findings point towards the existence of primary anxiety stemming from communication, a centerpiece of test, and the feared negative evaluation which then gets compounded through the lens of the sociolinguistic hierarchy of English in Pakistan. The Anxiety impacts the students' ability to speak and results in students' poor performance, low self-esteem, a confining sense of professional aspirations, and a weak level of confidence. The variety of tactical avoidance coupled with rote learning to engage in social peer behavior, interaction, preparation, self-associational/anxiety provoking and cultural strategies to positive prayer, and self-constructive language. It is a point of focus, of this study, which seeks to address the issue of minimizing anxiety, it is claimed, such equally important and an issue of equally important pedagogical change at the institutional level.

Key Words: foreign language anxiety, higher education, Pakistan, communication anxiety, coping strategy, communication apprehension

Introduction

Learning of language has been invariably believed as a process not merely affected by cognitive ability but by the psychological and affective factors as well. Out of these, foreign One critical factor determining language learning achievements is language anxiety (FLA). Initially defined by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 128). Differing from general typically observed at the level of communication activities, assessment settings, and circumstances wherein students feel apprehensive of negative opinion, academic stress is situation specific. The factor is commonly deemed Communication anxiety, test anxiety, and fear of negative assessment. Three interrelated factors and they prevent students from becoming eager communicators, impede their academic achievements, and diminish their speaking confidence level of the target language.

FLA assumes a special part in multilingual civilizations such Pakistan, where English is not the first language but serves as a marker of prestige, education, and possibility. In most universities and schools, English is not just a required topic but also the main means of instruction. For academic achievement, career advancement, and access to international knowledge networks, Pakistani students are hence expected to show fluency in English (Rahman, 2020). Many students, however, rely heavily on rote learning methods learned in prior education, with little exposure to actual English speaking environments, entering higher education (Ashraf & Zareef, 2022). The discrepancy between institutional expectations and student preparedness frequently causes increased fear of communication, especially during



oral presentations, class discussions, and group activities (Liaqat et al., 2023). Simultaneously, the test oriented culture of Pakistani education aggravates test anxiety, while deeply ingrained hierarchical teacher student interactions intensify fear of bad assessment (Rahman & Imran, 2022).

The results of FLA influence both students' psychological well-being and their academic paths beyond linguistic performance. According to empirical research, as language learners, students with great levels of anxiety avoid class participation, underperform in tests, and develop bad self-concepts (Peng, 2022; Tercan & Dikilitaş, 2022). Continuous anxiety can also stop students from seeking foreign opportunities, participating in group academic projects, or pursuing higher degrees. These results are especially serious in the Pakistani environment, where English fluency is still a gatekeeper for higher social economic mobility and could reinforce inequalities in Achievement in education and career advancement (Khattak, 2021).

Learners are not inactive victims of anxiety despite these difficulties. Based on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory of stress and coping, study implies that pupils use both problem centered methods (e.g., studying language skills, rehearsal before managing anxiety using emotional focused strategies (e.g., avoidance, relaxation techniques, self-encouragement, or reliance on religious faith) as well as speaking tasks and seeking teacher feedback Although research from Pakistan is sparse, broken, and mostly quantitative, world studies show coping techniques can somewhat attenuate the effects of FLA. Few studies have examined how students in higher education view the efficacy of these techniques inside their particular cultural and institutional settings (Ashraf & Zareef, 2022; Liaqat et al., 2023).

Two main concerns are revealed by a little survey of the literature. First off, even though FLA has been extensively investigated all around the world, most of the research done in Pakistan is on assessing anxiety levels utilizing recognized scales like the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) put less of an emphasis on looking into its underlying causes and effects qualitatively (Rahman & Imran, 2022). Second, despite its practical effects for language teaching and student well-being, the coping dimension of FLA is still underdeveloped. To explore the reasons, effects, and coping mechanisms of foreign language anxiety in Pakistani college courses, the current study takes a qualitative, exploratory approach and solves these issues. This study aims to produce ideas that might influence English language teaching methods by placing students' experiences inside their wider cultural and institutional context and so lessen learning challenges and encourage more inclusive academic results.

Statement of the Problem

Although studies on foreign language anxiety (FLA) have been conducted extensively in international settings, in Pakistan it is still under investigated, especially in higher education where English is spoken. Academic achievement and socioeconomic mobility depend on proficiency. Quantitative survey techniques have been mostly used in Pakistan to gauge the frequency of worry as opposed to investigate scholars' actual experiences. As a result, not much is known about how university students personally view the causes, effects, and coping mechanisms pertaining to FLA inside their social and institutional contexts. Our knowledge of how anxiety affects kids' future prospects, academic performance, and classroom participation is constrained by this absence of qualitative insight. Seeking to close this divide, the current research offers a thorough, exploratory narrative of foreign language anxiety in Pakistani college settings.



Aims of the Study

This research seeks to investigate and explain how Pakistani higher education students experience foreign language anxiety in the classrooms. The research aims particularly to thoroughly explore the seen reasons of anxiety and how it influences scholars' psychological and academic experiences, and the coping mechanisms students use to negotiate such difficulties in their institutional and socio-cultural environment.

Research Objectives

- To investigate, in a qualitative way, how Pakistani college students view the reasons of foreign language phobia.
- To grasp and relate the social, psychological, and scholastic results of suffering from foreign language anxiety.
- To pinpoint and characterize the coping mechanisms students use to control anxiety in testing and classroom settings.

Research Questions

1. How do Pakistani college students attribute their foreign language anxiety to?
2. How do students view foreign language fear as influencing their grades, classroom participation, and mental health?
3. Students say they use what coping mechanisms to handle foreign language anxiety in higher education situations?

Scope and Significance

Concentrating on undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in English language and literature courses, this study is limited to higher education institutions in Pakistan. Using a qualitative exploratory approach, the study gathers students' personal experiences and views instead of depending just on objective measures. Included in the scope is a study of the causes of anxiety such as communication apprehension, test stress, and fear of negative evaluation the effects for academic participation and performance as well as the coping mechanisms pupils use in their institutional and socio-cultural surroundings.

The study is important because it could help fill a major gap in the research on foreign language anxiety in Pakistan by giving qualitatively grounded, contextual insights. These results have practical ramifications for language teachers, curriculum developers, and government officials in addition to improving theoretical arguments about FLA. The study helps to create teaching methods more supportive, sensitive to culture, and communication friendly by emphasizing students' voices, hence lowering in higher education, anxiety can improve language learning outcomes.

Literature Review

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is a unique psychological state that stops people from learning second and foreign languages. It differs from regular school stress since it stems especially from the challenges of learning and utilizing a fresh language. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) said it was a special collection of self-perceptions, ideas, and emotional responses linked to language learning, especially in contexts where communication and evaluation were important. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) expanded on this by pointing out how anxiety limits students' capacity for cognitive processing, therefore impairing understanding and production in the goal language. More recently, academics have stressed that the larger sociocultural and institutional milieu in which learning takes place affects FLA in addition to internal psychological states (Peng, 2022).



The individual and contextual factors that lead to the FLA have a lack of self-confidence, perfectionism, and a lack of previous genuine interpersonal communication. Contextual factors include rigid teaching methods, exam centric instruction, and hierarchical communication patterns. In the context of Pakistan, the phenomenon of English as a prestigious language, especially in higher education, aggravates these factors and puts the students under additional stress. Many students perceive English as a 'mark of class and a sign of intelligence', and as a result, the fear of making mistakes is amplified. Lack of opportunities to practice English in informal settings, on the other hand, aggravates communication apprehension (Liaqat et. al, 2023). The relics of examination policies in education, culture, and societies like South Asia which emphasize memorization and 'rote learning', intensifies exam anxiety. The cultural tendency of a strong respect for authority in South Asia makes it more difficult to explain the anxiety of evaluation in education settings (Khattak, 2021, Rahman, and Imran, 2022). What these findings demonstrate is that, while the primary factors that contribute to FLA have qualitative similarities across different contexts, the case of Pakistan demonstrates a distinct link to sociolinguistic and assessment oriented concerns.

Research Gap

Despite these difficulties, students use several coping mechanisms to control their anxiety. Drawing on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress and coping model, coping responses can be divided into problem focused tactics, such as preparing for seeking feedback or oral activities and emotional focused techniques including avoidance, self-encouragement, relaxation, or reliance on prayer. Research ascertained the effective promotion of peer support and favorable classroom settings diminish anxiety and encourage participation (Peng, 2022). In Pakistan, nevertheless, the students widely practice avoidance that is, not speaking during class or depending largely on rote learning) pointing out cultural values of face saving (Ashraf & Zareef, 2022). Some students, on the other hand, use religious and cultural resources like prayer or peer support group support for alleviating anxiety, displaying coping Local socioeconomic contexts impact it (Liaqat et al., 2023). Though these results identify significant methods, little structured research exists informing the extent students find them effective.

While studies of FLA in Pakistan provide insightful comments, they also exhibit evident limitations. Most studies use quantitative surveys chiefly the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to assess level of anxiety among undergraduate students. For example, Khattak (2021) registered for strong test anxiety; Ashraf and Zareef (2022) established communication apprehension as a significant cause of class stress. Fear of negative evaluation stood out as the principal barrier to class participation as revealed by Liaqat et al. (2023). While these studies affirm the existence of FLA, they fail to reflect the lived realities of students as well as the manner they manage their concerns during routine classroom interactions. Exceptions such as Rahman and Imran (2022), which explored gendered subjective worries, demonstrate the potential of qualitative research although limited as they currently are.

The results indicate that although the concept of FLA is clearly understood if the existence of FLA in Pakistan is adequately documented, the qualitative side requires improvement. Nothing much is understood regarding how Pakistani higher education students depict the causes, consequences, as well as the coping mechanisms of their anxiety, and how these occurrences are precipitated by societal and institution based influences. Addressing the gap thus presented, the current research proposes an exploratory qualitative study aimed at enriching pupils' voices as well as providing contextually embedded insight.



Research Gap

Although FLA is a well-known construct, studies in Pakistan are usually limited to quantitative evaluations of anxiety levels, as shown in the examined literature. Less is understood regarding the subtle, context specific reasons for students in higher education courses as well as their coping mechanisms. Moreover, few research includes the voices of the pupils themselves so as to grasp the personal, cultural, and institutional dynamics of FLA.

The current study investigates the causes, effects, and coping mechanisms of foreign language anxiety among Pakistani higher education students in an exploratory qualitative research to help close this gap. The study hopes to provide fresh ideas to both the theoretical knowledge of FLA and its practical consequences for pedagogy in English medium classrooms by focusing on learners' points of view.

Methodology

To examine the causes, effects, and coping mechanisms connected with foreign language anxiety (FLA) among students in Pakistani higher education, this study used a qualitative exploratory research strategy. Since it lets academics record the complexity, depth, and subjectivity of pupils' lived experiences something impossible to capture with a qualitative approach it was seen as most suitable completely known via only quantitative questionnaires (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The exploratory character of the investigation provided latitude in data gathering and interpretation, therefore helping to create ideas that might not have been foreseen ahead.

Participants were undergraduate and graduate students registered in English language and literature classes at three public universities in Pakistan; purposive sampling was employed to hire people who had direct exposure to English medium education and therefore were more likely to feel anxious in language classrooms. A total of to guarantee a variety of viewpoints, 24 students took part representing a balance of male and female pupils from diverse disciplinary backgrounds. Participation was voluntary, and students were guaranteed their participation in the study would not impact their academic achievement.

Semi-structured interviews and focus group conversations provided the data collection method. While focus groups inspired students to reflect as a whole on shared experiences of classroom anxiety, semi-structured interviews gave chances to investigate personal viewpoints in depth. Although inquiries were open ended, past research on FLA (Horwitz et al., 1986; Woodrow, 2017; Ashraf & Zareef, 2022) informed the interview guide to let participants expand on their own experiences. Focus groups ran 60 to 90 minutes, while each interview took around 45 to 60 minutes. Depending on the comfort level of attendees, all sessions were either audio recorded with permission in English, Urdu, or a combination of both.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step paradigm, the data were copied verbatim and thematically analyzed. Manual first coding sought to find repeating themes connected to causes, effects, and coping mechanisms. Later, these codes were sharpened into general classifications and eventually arranged into overarching themes. To guarantee reliability and consistency, the approach was iterative and involved ongoing cross transcript comparison. Ethical concerns were meticulously followed. Prior to involvement, participants were given an information sheet outlining the goal of the research and signed informed consent forms. Substituting pseudonyms for participants' names guaranteed anonymity; restricting access to data kept secrecy. The study followed the ethical rules of the host institution and respected global norms for research including human subjects (British Association for Applied Linguistics, 2021).

The study aimed to produce rich, contextually founded insights into the phenomena of foreign language anxiety in Pakistani higher education with this methodical framework. Contributing both to practice and to theory in language education is the aim.

Data Collection Tools

Semi-structured interviews and focus group conversations gathered data, therefore letting participants clearly express their foreign language anxiety experiences and assisting the researcher to investigate developing concerns. Based on the ideas of Horwitz et al.'s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Theory (communication apprehension, test anxiety, fear of negative assessment), guaranteeing consistency while room is left for unanticipated ideas. All interviews and focus groups were conducted in English and Urdu (depending on participants' comfort), audio recorded with permission, and accurately transcribed.

Data Analysis Tools

Qualitative data were categorized and thematically analyzed (Braun & Clark, 2006), a recursive process in coding, classification, and theme identification. In order to assist with systematic coding and management of large qualitative databases, the manual interpretive reading also made the analytical approach transparent and systematic.

Theoretical Framework

This research was grounded in Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Theory (FLCAT), they categorize foreign language anxiety as a special case with certain characteristics that emerge from learning a language. FLCAT posits that foreign language anxiety emerges from the interaction of three components: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension is defined as difficulties in oral expression and comprehension due to anxiety about speaking in public or failing to comprehend a message. Test anxiety is reflected in students' stress in performance assessment of skills that were continually assessed. Fear of negative evaluation is apprehension related to language in the context of peer, teacher, or other evaluation. These three components reflect and capture the complexity of anxiety in the language classroom.

The relevance of such theoretical framework particularly applies to the Pakistan context because within Pakistan, English serves as a prestigious and high status language of communication adding to the pressure of class participation, assessment, and evaluation. FLCAT framework allows for the investigation of ways all three of components exists in the environment of higher education and ways in which learners are coping.

Conceptual Framework

Through the lens of FLCAT, this research considers foreign language anxiety as a construct of three predisposed but interdependent dimensions of communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation, while recognizing contextual factors, such as social demands situated on learners, the teacher to learner dynamics, and institutional factors. Theoretical Model Presentations:

- Sources of anxiety in relation to communication challenges, assessment pressures, and fear of social judgement.
- Outcomes of low participation, low grading, emotional distress, and limitations of future academic or vocational opportunities are some of the potential outcomes.
- Coping strategies may range from avoiding speaking to memorizing texts and in to strategies of practice, peer support, and religious or cultural strategies in which learners may respond to manage anxiety.



The model serves as a reference lens for the research to think about the learner's narratives while still allowing for the exploration of new, unique ideas unique to the Pakistan higher education context.

Data Analysis

Data from the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were examined using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step thematic analysis approach. Initial codes were generated inductively from participants' responses while being informed by Horwitz et al.'s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Theory, including three sensitizing categories for coding communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. All coding was an iterative process that included repeated reading of the transcripts and manual highlighting of words or expressions that appeared multiple times. Using a constant comparative approach, codes that overlapped were integrated and categorized into broader themes.

As a result, three themes emerged the focus on foreign language anxiety:

- a) the sources of the anxiety
- b) the effects of anxiety for students' academic, psychological, and social life
- c) how students managed coping.

For example, each of the categories also had subcategories that were either universal to what was being described, or type specific in relation to the two contextually determined forms of Pakistani higher education.

Findings

The first theme was about foreign language acquisition causes for LA. The most commonly cited cause of unease was communication apprehension, with students indicating that they were worried about mispronouncing words, lack of grammatical accuracy or peers reacting negatively to them. As one participant put it: "When I jump up to give an answer, my entire body becomes tense because deep down inside, I keep questioning whether they will notice that my English is not perfect." Besides communication apprehension, test anxiety was heavily present. From the students' perspective, examination was stressful and emphasis was placed on procedural knowledge including memorization in addition to accuracy. "Even when I know the material, I lose focus because of mistakes." one student wrote in a reflection. Inferred fear of negative evaluation also emerged as a key theme, with some of the sample revealing that they shied away from classroom participation in order to avoid being judged.

The next topic dealt with what happens as a result of anxiety that a learner will use a different language. Corresponding to reduced participation, the students explained that silence seemed safer to them than the risk of embarrassment, and that is why they opted for it. One of the members of the group commented, that "though I know the answer, I never raise my hand, because the fear of being wrong is stronger than the desire to contribute." School performance was also on the list of negative effects, along with anxiety that hindered recalling and expressing ideas during both speech and writing tests. Additionally, learners mentioned the psychological influence of FLA that was the source of stress, lack of confidence, and the unwillingness to accept professional opportunities that might require English communication. These narrations are a reminder of how FLA not only affects participation in the classroom but keeps students from progressing in their long-term goals. results indicate that foreign language anxiety in Pakistani higher education is influenced by a complicated interplay of communicative, evaluative, and cultural factors. The impact of the anxiety extends outside the classroom performance, while the ways of dealing with the problem, albeit being different,



most of them concentrate only on the temporary alleviation of the symptoms rather than on the solving of the problem in the long run.

Discussion

The findings from this research validate the significance of the multidimensional nature of foreign language anxiety (FLA) in Pakistani college contexts and provide valuable insight into this phenomenon. This links to Horwitz et al.'s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Theory, while also identifying culturally specific dimensions. The results suggest that FLA is a socio-psychological phenomenon shaped by regional pedagogical practices, cultural hierarchies, and educational systems, rather than being solely a linguistic or cognitive phenomenon.

Causes of Anxiety

The current study found that communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation were the main causes of anxiety, which is in line with earlier global research (Horwitz, 2016; MacIntyre, 2017; Zhang, 2019). But participants stressed that the prestige of English in Pakistan, where fluency is sometimes assumed to correspond with academic aptitude, increased these issues. social standing (Mahboob, 2020; Rahman, 2021). Unlike studies in Western settings where linguistic proficiency is usually linked mostly to anxiety, the results here show how sociolinguistic disparities aggravate pupils' fear of public performance. This implies that Pakistani institutions' FLA reflects not only a psychological reaction but also structural linguistic levels.

Consequences of Anxiety

The results of this study correspond to those of prior research showing the detrimental effect of FLA on participation, performance, and confidence (Liu & Jackson, 2008; Dewaele, 2017). But by showing how these effects also restrict long term goals, this research expands upon what we already know. Students said they were discouraged from applying for anxiety. Scholarships, foreign study programs, or professions needing English fluency. These results point to a cumulative impact of FLA that limits students' social and career mobility in addition to the obvious restrictions within the classroom. In the Pakistani setting, where English competency is strongly correlated with employability and world competitiveness (Khan, 2022), this result is especially important.

Coping Strategies

The coping mechanisms discovered in this study are in line with Oxford's (2017) and Shao et al. (2019) research highlighting the interaction between avoidance and problem focused techniques. Nevertheless, the present study offers depth by drawing attention to culturally grounded methods including reliance on prayer, self-talk grounded in religious faith, and collective peer support. Although coping mechanisms have some universal characteristics, their expression is mediated by local cultural and educational background, as these results show. Importantly, the dependence on avoidance techniques points to a need for educational changes that foster confidence building and resilience rather than support silence as a kind of self-protection.

Theoretical Implications

Using Horwitz et al.'s (1986) methodology, this study confirms the continuing relevance of FLA theory in several settings. Still, the results show that when used to multilingual, postcolonial societies where language anxiety interacts with issues of power, identity, and access, the theory demands contextual enrichment. The evidence that FLA in Pakistan goes beyond classroom communication to more life chances indicates that the framework should



include sociocultural aspects of anxiety, thereby supplementing its initial psychological emphasis.

Research Gap and Contribution

Giving an exploratory perspective from the under investigated Pakistani higher education environment helps to expand the already substantial corpus of qualitative study on FLA. Although a lot of the current literature depends on quantitative surveys, thematic analysis in this study grabbed rich, first hand tales that provide insight into the lived experiences of pupils. By connecting known theoretical ideas with their local manifestations, the results broaden the scope of FLA research to include individual as well as environmental influences.

Implications and Conclusion

Among Pakistani university students, this study looked at the factors, effects, and coping mechanisms associated with foreign language anxiety (FLA). Guided by Horwitz et al.'s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Theory, the results showed that FLA is influenced by test anxiety, fear, and communication apprehension. of negative appraisal, but that the sociolinguistic hierarchies that surround English in Pakistan magnify these dimensions. The findings also showed that the effects of worry are all encompassing, affecting not just students' performance and participation but also their confidence, professional decisions, and long-term aspirations. Although students showed resilience by means of both avoiding and problem oriented approaches, coping techniques were mostly personal, hence indicating a lack of organized or institutional assistance.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings highlight the need for more immediate student centered practices to reduce the fear of negative evaluation and help create a more supportive learning environment. Teachers need to utilize cooperative and communicative classroom practices where mistakes are considered part of the learning process rather than a loss. Peer support programs, scaffolding, and practices to build confidence can also help mitigate the fear of communication. Assessment practices must also be changed; moving toward formative, process based assessments instead of highly test based practices could alleviate text related fears and promote authentic, spontaneous language use.

Policy Implications

Universities should offer a mentoring program and language assistance center at an institutional and policy level to foster a safe environment for students to practice and build confidence. Policymakers must also recognize the broader socio-economic role of English in Pakistan and develop initiatives to address support the disparities between English proficiency and equitable access to opportunities. Teacher professional development could focus on managing student anxiety, developing curriculums to educate learning content while incorporating language support, and increasing the budgets of student psychological services.

Future Study Implications

Many lines of investigation are opened by this study. First, longitudinal qualitative studies could be used in future research to investigate the development of anxiety over students' academic paths. Second, comparative studies across various sections of Pakistan or between public and private schools could reveal contextual differences. Thirdly, a mixed-methods technique fusing qualitative depth with quantitative scope might yield more complete understanding. At last, studies combining instructors' viewpoints with students' experiences will produce a more complete picture of how classroom dynamics help to either reduce or lessen FLA.



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