



Silent Barriers: Exploring the Causes of English-Speaking Anxiety Among Freshmen

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ABSTRACT

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English-speaking anxiety presents a considerable challenge for non-native English-speaking freshmen in higher education, impacting their academic performance, classroom engagement, and self-confidence. Despite the importance of English proficiency for academic success and career readiness, many Filipino students struggle with significant anxiety in speaking English, especially in classroom settings. Building on Horwitz et al.'s (1986) Foreign Language Anxiety theory and using data collected from 206 respondents, this study found that classroom environment has the most substantial impact on language anxiety, with elements such as classroom dynamics, peer interactions, and physical settings shaping the overall learning atmosphere. Learner characteristics, including personal traits and responses, also affect anxiety levels, though their influence is less pronounced compared to environmental and instructional factors. Teacher influence, encompassing teaching methods, feedback style, and the ability to create a supportive environment, further contributes to anxiety levels. The study highlights the need for a balanced approach that considers each factor to effectively manage and reduce language anxiety.

KEYWORDS:

English-speaking anxiety, freshmen students, classroom environment, language learning, higher education

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, English has become the primary medium for international communication in fields such as business, science, technology, and academia (Cogo, 2018). In higher education institutions (HEIs), English proficiency is essential, not only for academic success but also for career advancement and global engagement (Jenkins, 2017). For freshmen, the transition into college adds a unique layer of pressure to develop English-speaking skills that are critical for classroom participation and future professional opportunities (Zhang & Mi, 2019).

However, many Filipino freshmen students experience significant anxiety when required to speak English in

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academic settings. This "English-speaking anxiety" manifests as nervousness, self-consciousness, and a fear of negative evaluation, impacting their performance, participation, and confidence (Alrabai, 2019; Liu & Jackson, 2018). Anxiety in language learning can lead to avoidance behaviors, reduced classroom engagement, and, ultimately, lower academic achievement (Haidar, 2020). The transition from high school to university intensifies these challenges, as freshmen adapt to new academic expectations and face increased demands for English proficiency (Şener, 2021).

This study aims to explore the causes of English-speaking anxiety among freshmen students in the Philippines. Despite the growing emphasis on English proficiency in higher education, many Filipino students struggle with speaking English in formal academic settings, which can undermine their self-esteem and sense of belonging (Kralova & Skorvagova, 2020). However, the factors contributing to this anxiety remain unclear, especially regarding the roles of the classroom environment, learner characteristics, and

experiences with English language learning. Thus, this study seeks to address the following questions:

1. How may the level of spoken language anxiety in English among college freshmen be described in terms of:
 - Classroom environment
 - Learner characteristics
 - English language learning?
2. What factors trigger English language anxiety in terms of:
 - Fear of tests
 - Fear of comprehension
 - Fear of negative evaluation by teachers
 - Fear of negative evaluation by peers?
3. What intervention practices may be proposed to reduce English-speaking anxiety in college freshmen?

This study circles around understanding the multifaceted nature of English-speaking anxiety among freshmen students in the Philippines. First, the research aims to identify various factors contributing to this anxiety, particularly focusing on the classroom environment, learner characteristics, and individual experiences in language learning. Understanding these elements is crucial, as they can significantly influence how students perceive and respond to language challenges (MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014).

Next, the study seeks to examine specific anxiety triggers related to fear of tests, comprehension difficulties, and concerns about negative evaluations from both teachers and peers. This investigation is vital because previous research

has indicated that such fears can exacerbate anxiety and hinder effective communication in academic contexts (Liu & Jackson, 2018).

Furthermore, the impact of the classroom environment on students' anxiety levels will be assessed, considering factors such as teacher behavior and peer interactions. The study will also explore how individual learner characteristics—such as self-esteem, previous language learning experiences, and intrinsic motivation—affect English-speaking anxiety. Moreover, an analysis will be conducted to determine the effects of English-speaking anxiety on students' academic performance, participation in class, and confidence levels. Research has established a link between anxiety and diminished academic outcomes, highlighting the importance of addressing this emotional barrier (Haidar, 2020).

Finally, the study aims to recommend effective interventions for educators and higher education institutions that can help reduce English-speaking anxiety. By achieving these objectives, this research aims to contribute to the development of effective support systems and interventions, ultimately fostering improved English-speaking skills, academic performance, and confidence among college freshmen.

FRAMEWORK OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE ANXIETY

The framework for this study categorizes language anxiety influences into three main areas: **classroom environment**, **learner characteristics**, and **English language learning process**.

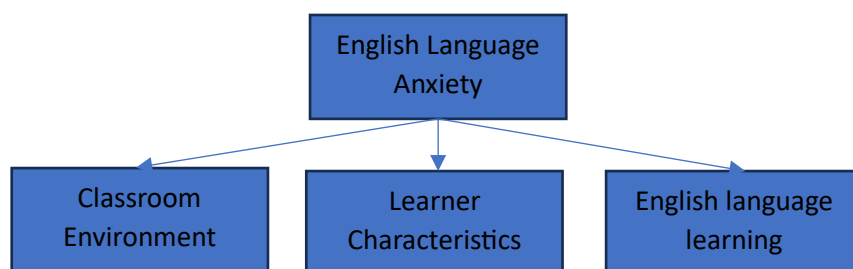


Figure 1 The Modified Framework of Language Learning Anxiety

Classroom Environment

Studies show that supportive classroom dynamics can play a significant role in alleviating language anxiety. Educators' behavior and classroom practices can either exacerbate or mitigate anxiety levels. Recent findings suggest that classrooms emphasizing positive reinforcement, personalized feedback, and a low-pressure atmosphere foster lower anxiety levels among language learners, encouraging active participation and reducing communication apprehension (Toyama & Yamazaki, 2021).

Learner Characteristics

Anxiety in language learning also strongly correlates with individual differences among learners, such as self-efficacy, motivation, and personality traits. High anxiety often inhibits

students' willingness to take risks in language use, affecting performance and confidence. For instance, recent studies indicate that learners who exhibit higher intrinsic motivation and a growth mindset tend to experience reduced language anxiety, improving their overall engagement and resilience in language tasks (Papi & Khajavy, 2021).

English Language Learning Process

The process of learning English, especially in diverse cultural contexts, involves a complex interplay of cognitive and emotional factors. Research shows that language learners often experience increased anxiety when faced with high-stakes tasks, such as speaking in front of peers or tackling complex grammatical rules. Techniques like gradual exposure to communicative activities, combined with task-

based instruction, have shown to be effective in reducing anxiety and enhancing learning outcomes (Li, Hiver, & Papi, 2022).

These components reflect a holistic understanding of language anxiety, highlighting the importance of supportive environments, awareness of individual learner differences, and mindful structuring of the learning process to optimize English language learning in anxious learners.

METHODOLOGY

This study described the level of language spoken anxiety and language anxiety factors that trigger language anxiety in the classroom using a mixed method research design. The participants of the study include college learners from two HEIs in Manila and in Bulacan, Philippines. The modified Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz, E. Horwitz, M.B, & Cope, J. (1986) was used to measure the level of language spoken anxiety and the factors that cause language anxiety among the respondents were measured using the modified questionnaire of Sabri, et.al (2021). The questionnaires underwent rigorous validation from the

experts before the collection of data. Data for this study were gathered through the administration of Google Form online survey questionnaires. The data generated by the research instrument were recorded, tabulated and processed manually with the aid of a computer to determine the exact interpretation of the results. Matrix tables were made to organize, summarize and analyze the data gathered for easy determination of its differences from each other. The data were analyzed using the following statistical tools in the analysis of the data:

1. **Percentage.** To describe the response of the respondents the percentage will be computed. The measure of the dominant quantity was utilized to determine the most probable scenario.

Formula:

$$P = F/N \times 100$$

where:

P=Percentage

F=Frequency

N= Total Number of Population

2. The responses to questions in the given variables were scaled using the “five point-scale” or and given weight as follows:

Mean Range	Descriptive Equivalent
3.51 – 4.00	Strongly Agree (High Agreement)
2.51 – 3.50	Agree (Moderate Agreement)
1.51 – 2.50	Disagree (Moderate Disagreement)
1.00 – 1.50	Strongly Disagree (High Disagreement)

3. The process of finding the “Weighted Mean” which is referred to as the central tendency was used. The formula is given below:

$$\bar{x} = \frac{\sum w_i x_i}{\sum w_i}$$

Where;

X= weighted mean

w = weighted factor

Σ = summation

x = score

N= total number of Population

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section discusses a comprehensive analysis, interpretation, and discussion of the data collected from the research investigation.

Table 1. Factors of language anxiety

Factors	Strongly Agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Weighted Mean	Rank	DE
Classroom Environment	506	983	433	86	2.95	1	MA
Learner Characteristics	358	772	668	209	2.64	3	MA
Teacher Factor	414	1034	477	80	2.89	2	MA
Overall weighted mean rating					2.83		MA

Table one (1) shows data regarding the factors that affect language anxiety in terms of classroom environment, learner characteristics, and teacher factor. The findings reveal that classroom environment is the most significant source among the respondents' anxiety as attested by the highest mean score of 2.95, interpreted as 'moderate agreement' while the learner characteristics is the least contributory factor to language anxiety as proven by the lowest mean score of 2.64 interpreted as 'moderate agreement'. The overall mean score of 2.83 reflects a moderate level of agreement that these factors contribute to language anxiety. Although none of the factors suggest extreme anxiety, each is significant enough to

deserve attention, as they fall within the "Moderate Agreement" range. The classroom environment has the greatest impact to the learners, likely due to factors like classroom dynamics, peer interactions, and physical setup. The teacher plays a key role in creating a positive space for language learners. Students felt less anxious when lecturers fostered a supportive, mentally healthy classroom environment (Sabri, Khiruddin, Johan, Daud, & Bahrm, 2021; Toyama & Yamazaki, 2021). This implies that lecturers' teaching styles and strategies can impact students' anxiety levels, contributing to a healthier language learning environment.

Table 2. Contributory factors that trigger English language anxiety

Contributory Factors	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Weighted Mean	DE
Fear of Test	228	258	94	11	2.94	MA
Fear of Comprehension	144	324	92	11	2.84	MA
Fear of Negative Evaluation by Lecturer	192	264	98	16	2.84	MA
Fear of Negative Evaluation by Peer	244	279	74	11	3.01	MA
Overall weighted mean rating					2.91	MA

Table 2 describes the contributory factors that trigger English language anxiety and summarizes the level of agreement among respondents regarding each factor. All contributory factors such as fear of test, fear of comprehension, fear of negative evaluation by lecturer, and fear of negative evaluation by peer belonged to the "moderate agreement" range as attested by their overall mean of 2.91. This suggests that respondents moderately agree that each of these factors contributes to their language anxiety, but they are not overwhelmingly so. Since all factors received a moderate level of agreement, it means that each factor moderately impacts language anxiety. None of the factors are rated as extremely high contributors, but collectively, they create a notable amount of anxiety. In summary, the table reflects a consistent moderate agreement across all factors, indicating that while these factors are not seen as highly intense sources of anxiety, they are collectively significant enough to warrant attention and potential intervention. Language anxiety must be reduced among the college learners in the classroom as these hinder their ability to learn a language. Teachers play a crucial role in reducing language anxiety in the classroom and that they must be equipped with strategies for reducing such tensions in the language classroom (Liu & Wang, 2023). Mahmoud (2024) confirmed that language anxiety negatively

impacts academic achievement, social interaction, cognitive processing, self-confidence, and communication skills. Students may avoid language practice due to embarrassment or discomfort. Addressing language anxiety in the classroom is essential for fostering a supportive environment where students feel confident and motivated to engage in language learning.

CONCLUSION

The study finds a moderate consensus that various factors—classroom environment, learner characteristics, and teacher influence—contribute to language anxiety among learners. Among these, the classroom environment emerges as the most impactful, likely due to elements such as classroom dynamics, peer interactions, and physical settings that shape the overall learning atmosphere. Learner characteristics, such as individual traits and personal responses, also affect language anxiety, their impact is comparatively less evident than that of environmental and instructional elements. Teacher influence also plays a critical role, with teaching methods, feedback style, and the teacher's ability to foster a supportive environment being significant contributors. These insights emphasized the need for a balanced approach that considers all three factors to effectively manage and reduce

language anxiety. While these factors do not evoke extreme anxiety, their moderate impact underscores the importance of addressing each to create a conducive learning experience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study finds that the classroom environment, including classroom dynamics, peer interactions, and physical space, has the most significant impact on students' anxiety. Learner characteristics, though important, have a lesser effect, while teacher influence plays a key role in shaping the learning atmosphere. To address these, the following intervention practices may be implemented to create supportive and non-threatening classroom environments:

1. **Create a Positive Classroom Environment:** Design classroom spaces that encourage openness and minimize stress by fostering supportive student interactions and establishing a warm and relaxed physical setting. Seating arrangements that allow for easy visibility and small group discussions can help reduce anxiety.
2. **Encourage Positive Peer Dynamics:** Implement activities that build peer support and cooperation, such as group projects or peer-review sessions, to reduce the fear of judgment and encourage collaborative learning.
3. **Focus on Learner-Centered Approaches:** Customize teaching methods to cater to diverse learner characteristics, acknowledging that students' unique traits and emotional responses can influence their anxiety levels. Activities that allow individual reflection or gradual participation can help.
4. **Adopt Supportive Teaching Strategies:** Emphasize constructive feedback and encouragement over criticism to build students' confidence in using the language. Teachers should create an environment where students feel safe to make mistakes without fear of negative evaluation.
5. **Incorporate Anxiety-Reducing Practices:** Introduce mindfulness exercises, breathing techniques, or short breaks to help students manage anxiety during language classes. These strategies can help alleviate the immediate stress that may arise from language use in class.
6. **Provide Professional Development for Teachers:** Train teachers on the impact of classroom climate and anxiety, equipping them with strategies to address and reduce student anxiety through empathetic teaching, supportive feedback, and adaptable lesson planning.
7. **Balance Instructional and Environmental Factors:** Recognize the interconnected roles of classroom environment, learner characteristics, and teacher influence in language anxiety. Teachers and administrators should work together to ensure that physical, social, and instructional aspects of the

learning environment support each other in creating an optimal learning atmosphere.

The data collected for this study emphasized the critical role of the classroom setting in causing anxiety to Filipino college freshmen, with elements like student interactions, classroom design, and overall class atmosphere being particularly influential. While individual learner traits and teaching approaches are also important, the need for holistic strategies that address all these factors is clear. By implementing intervention practices that focus on creating supportive classroom environments and equipping teachers with pragmatic strategies to reduce anxiety, teachers can make more comfortable and stress-free classroom environments. Finally, addressing and attempting to remove these "silent barriers" in language learning through a multifaceted approach will significantly improve the learning experience and promote student success in building English language proficiency and confidence.

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