

Exploring Foreign Language Anxiety Across Language Skills: Evidence from Pakistani ESL Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

Foreign language anxiety is one of the most persistent challenges in second language learning, often reducing learners' confidence and participation. This study investigated the levels of anxiety across five domains: speaking, classroom, writing, listening, and reading among ESL undergraduates in Pakistan. A total of 381 students from three universities completed a 27-item questionnaire designed to capture domain-specific anxieties. The results showed that learners experienced moderate anxiety overall ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.88$). Among the domains, speaking ($M = 3.34$) and classroom anxiety ($M = 3.26$) were the most pronounced, highlighting oral and evaluative settings as the strongest sources of stress. In contrast, reading ($M = 2.83$) was the least anxiety-inducing, while writing and listening reflected moderate levels. These findings indicate that learners are most vulnerable when required to perform spontaneously or respond in classroom contexts, whereas individual and receptive tasks generate relatively less anxiety. The study underscores the importance of supportive, student-centered classrooms that reduce evaluation pressure and build confidence in oral performance. Collaborative activities, low-stakes speaking tasks, and constructive feedback can help alleviate anxiety, while scaffolding supports receptive and written tasks. Limitations include reliance on self-reports and a sample from three universities. Future research should adopt mixed-methods and longitudinal designs to capture how anxiety evolves and evaluate interventions over time.

Keywords: foreign language anxiety; ESL; Pakistani undergraduates; speaking anxiety; classroom anxiety

INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is one of the most influential affective factors in second language acquisition, often undermining learners' confidence, motivation, and achievement. Foreign language anxiety (FLA) has been defined as a situation-specific form of anxiety characterized by fear, nervousness, and apprehension that occurs in language learning and use. It is distinct from general anxiety because it arises specifically in response to language-related tasks and contexts. Earlier research described FLA as relatively stable (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994), but recent studies demonstrate that anxiety is malleable and dynamic, capable of changing over time under different pedagogical conditions (Sun, Alhowail, & Beckmann, 2025).

In English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts, oral communication is consistently identified as the most anxiety-inducing skill. Learners often report discomfort when speaking in front of peers, answering teacher questions, or giving oral presentations, largely due to fear of mistakes and negative evaluation (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Woodrow, 2006). Classroom anxiety also persists, arising from teacher-led questioning, peer comparison, and the evaluative atmosphere of formal learning (Awan, Azher, Anwar, & Naz, 2010; Fatima, Fatima, & Bashir, 2024).

Receptive and written skills tend to evoke moderate levels of anxiety. Reading anxiety is linked to limited exposure, ambiguity, and the perception that one must understand every word (Saito, Garza, & Horwitz, 1999; Hajiyeveva, 2024). Writing anxiety reflects learners' concerns with grammar, vocabulary, and structure, often exacerbated by teacher evaluation (Cheng, 2004; Rasool, Qian, & Aslam, 2023). Listening anxiety is triggered by fast-paced or unfamiliar input and lack of clarity (Elkhafaifi, 2005; Ji, Zhang, & Martínez Agudo, 2022). In Pakistan, English is a compulsory subject and an important determinant of academic and professional success. Despite its prominence, many undergraduates report high levels of FLA, particularly in oral and classroom

performance (Ahmad, Rao, & Rao, 2023; Niazi, Ahmed, & Khan, 2024; Javaid, Chen, & Ramzan, 2024). While receptive skills provoke lower anxiety, they are not free of stress, particularly among first-year students with limited linguistic exposure. Addressing this issue requires closer examination of anxiety across individual language skills rather than treating it as a single construct.

This study therefore investigates the levels of FLA across five domains: speaking, classroom, writing, listening, and reading among Pakistani undergraduates. By identifying domain-specific patterns, the study aims to highlight the most anxiety-inducing areas of learning and provide insights into how teachers can reduce anxiety and promote confidence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is widely recognized as a multidimensional construct that negatively affects language learning and performance. It has been defined as a situation-specific form of anxiety involving communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Subsequent studies confirmed its disruptive influence on learners' input, processing, and output in second language acquisition (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Although earlier research tended to treat FLA as relatively stable, more recent work suggests that it is dynamic and malleable, capable of changing over time with exposure and pedagogical support (Sun, Alhowail, & Beckmann, 2025). A meta-analysis by Botes, Dewaele, and Greiff (2020) also reinforced the consistent negative correlation between anxiety and achievement across learning contexts.

Among the various language skills, speaking has consistently been identified as the most anxiety-inducing. Learners often express concern about pronunciation, fluency, and accuracy, particularly in public situations where errors are visible to peers and teachers (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Woodrow, 2006). Research has demonstrated that low self-confidence and limited self-efficacy significantly predict speaking anxiety (Tridinanti, 2018; Mede & Kararmak, 2017). Recent evidence from Pakistan highlights oral communication and classroom presentations as especially stressful for undergraduates, who perceive these contexts as highly evaluative (Ahmad, Rao, & Rao, 2023; Fatima, Fatima, & Bashir, 2024; Niazi, Ahmed, & Khan, 2024). Similarly, classroom anxiety has been found to undermine achievement, particularly when learners face frequent questioning or peer comparison (Awan, Azher, Anwar, & Naz, 2010).

Although speaking and classroom performance appear to be the most anxiety-provoking domains, writing, listening, and reading anxieties also play significant roles. Writing anxiety often stems from concerns about grammar, vocabulary, and organization, with learners reporting stress when they are unsure about accuracy or fear negative evaluation from teachers (Cheng, 2004; Rasool, Qian, & Aslam, 2023). Listening anxiety is triggered by fast-paced speech, unfamiliar accents, and dense input, factors that make comprehension difficult (Elkhafaifi, 2005; Ji, Zhang, & Martínez Agudo, 2022). Learners who lack effective listening strategies often report heightened anxiety, which in turn reduces comprehension (Liu & Thondhlana, 2015). Reading anxiety, while generally lower, remains relevant when learners encounter complex texts or feel the need to understand every word. Studies show that limited exposure to English texts and low tolerance for ambiguity contribute to this anxiety (Saito, Garza, & Horwitz, 1999; Chen, Du, Wang, & Yang, 2022; Hajiyeva, 2024). In regional contexts, anxiety has also been shown to impair word recognition and comprehension in reading (Chan, Yeung, & Chung, 2024).

Taken together, the literature demonstrates that FLA is not a uniform phenomenon but varies by skill and context. Speaking and classroom situations consistently emerge as the most stressful, while reading, writing, and listening generate moderate but persistent levels of anxiety. In Pakistan, these patterns are particularly relevant given the central role of English in education and professional advancement, yet persistent challenges in oral and classroom performance remain. By examining anxiety across all five domains, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive picture of how FLA manifests among Pakistani undergraduates and to identify areas where pedagogical support is most urgently needed.

METHODOLOGY

This research utilized a quantitative survey approach to examine anxiety levels among undergraduate ESL learners in Pakistan. The study design focused on measuring domain-specific anxieties in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and classroom contexts through a structured questionnaire.

Participants

The study employed purposive sampling to target undergraduate students actively engaged in ESL courses. This non-random method ensured the inclusion of participants directly relevant to the study's objectives (Alvi, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The final sample comprised 381 learners from various academic fields, including 308 students from Science faculties and 73 from Arts and Humanities. Of these, 244 were male and 137 female, reflecting the gender distribution typical of the sampled institutions.

Instrumentation

The instrument was a 27-item anxiety questionnaire designed to capture domain-specific ESL anxieties. Items were adapted from established scales such as the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz et al., 1986), the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) (Saito et al., 1999), and subsequent studies (Cheng, 2002; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Zhao & Dynia, 2013). Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Examples of items are shown in Table I.

Table I Example of Items from the Anxiety Questionnaire

Domain	Source	Example of Item	No. of Items
Classroom Anxiety	Horwitz et al. (1986)	I feel upset when I don't know the answer to my teacher's question.	5
Listening Anxiety	Al-Khafaifi (2005), Zhao & Dynia (2013)	I feel uneasy when listening to new information in English.	5
Speaking Anxiety	Horwitz et al. (1986), Zhang (2019)	I feel nervous when I am speaking in English.	6
Reading Anxiety	Zhao & Dynia (2013)	I feel anxious when I encounter unfamiliar words while reading.	5
Writing Anxiety	Cheng (2002), Liu & Ni (2015)	I feel nervous when organizing my ideas in English writing.	6

Validity and Reliability of the Questionnaire

Content validity was established through expert review by specialists in applied linguistics and ESL pedagogy, ensuring the items were contextually appropriate for Pakistani undergraduates. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which indicated high internal consistency across domains: values ranged from 0.82 to 0.89, exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70. These results confirmed that the instrument was both valid and reliable for measuring ESL anxiety in this context.

Data Collection

Data were collected from three Pakistani universities, yielding an initial 396 responses. After screening for duplicates, incomplete entries, and outliers, 381 valid responses were retained for analysis. Ethical safeguards were observed throughout, including informed consent, voluntary participation, and anonymization of all responses.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, mean and standard deviation were computed for overall anxiety and each domain. To interpret the levels of anxiety, thresholds adopted from Abu-Snoubar (2017) were applied:

- Low: 1.00–2.49
- Moderate: 2.50–3.49
- High: 3.50–5.00

This framework allowed for meaningful comparison of domain-specific anxiety levels within the Pakistani ESL undergraduate population.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics show that learners reported moderate anxiety overall. Using the classification of low (1.00–2.49), moderate (2.50–3.49), and high (3.50–5.00) (Abu-Snoubar, 2017), the results reveal that learners experience different levels of anxiety across the five domains.

Table 2 Anxiety Scores across Domains

Subdomain	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Speaking Anxiety	3.34	1.24	Moderate
Classroom Anxiety	3.26	1.26	Moderate
Writing Anxiety	3.06	1.23	Moderate
Listening Anxiety	3.05	1.26	Moderate
Reading Anxiety	2.83	1.26	Moderate
Overall Anxiety	3.11	1.25	Moderate

The findings indicate that Pakistani ESL undergraduates experience moderate anxiety overall ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.88$). Among the five domains, speaking ($M = 3.34$) and classroom anxiety ($M = 3.26$) were the most prominent, showing that learners feel most anxious in oral and evaluative situations. By comparison, reading anxiety ($M = 2.83$) was the lowest, suggesting that text-based, individual tasks are less threatening. The difference of 0.51 between the highest (speaking) and lowest (reading) domains shows a meaningful gap between performance-based and receptive tasks. Writing and listening fell in the middle range, reflecting concerns about grammar, spelling, comprehension, and key word recognition. These results suggest that productive and performance-oriented tasks provoke more anxiety than receptive skills. Learners appear most vulnerable in situations requiring spontaneous oral performance and public evaluation by teachers or peers, while they feel relatively more comfortable in private, text-based activities.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed that Pakistani undergraduates experience moderate levels of foreign language anxiety, with speaking and classroom contexts emerging as the most anxiety-provoking. This pattern reflects learners' vulnerability in performance-based and evaluative situations, where the fear of mistakes and negative peer or teacher judgment is particularly strong. Such results are consistent with previous research that has consistently identified oral communication as the most stressful domain of second language learning (Gegersen & Horwitz, 2002; Woodrow, 2006). They also resonate with recent studies in Pakistan that highlight oral presentations and classroom questioning as major triggers of apprehension, reinforcing the

importance of context and teaching style in shaping students' experiences (Ahmad, Rao, & Rao, 2023; Fatima, Fatima, & Bashir, 2024; Niazi, Ahmed, & Khan, 2024).

By contrast, anxiety related to reading, writing, and listening was lower, although still moderate. These skills are less public and allow for more processing time, which may reduce immediate pressure. Nevertheless, they remain sources of stress, particularly in writing, where concerns about grammar and organization dominate, and in reading, where perfectionist tendencies or unfamiliar vocabulary heighten apprehension (Cheng, 2004; Rasool, Qian, & Aslam, 2023; Chen et al., 2022). Listening anxiety also persisted, reflecting the challenges posed by fast-paced input and limited exposure to authentic spoken English (Elkhafaifi, 2005; Ji, Zhang, & Martínez Agudo, 2022). These findings suggest that although productive and evaluative tasks are the most anxiety-inducing, receptive skills cannot be overlooked, especially in contexts where learners have limited opportunities to practice outside the classroom.

The results contribute to the growing recognition that foreign language anxiety is not fixed but dynamic. The systematic review by Sun, Alhowail, and Beckmann (2025) demonstrates that anxiety levels can change over time with supportive teaching practices and increased exposure. This perspective positions FLA not as an unalterable barrier but as a variable that can be managed and reduced through targeted pedagogical interventions. For Pakistani learners, this means that speaking and classroom anxiety, although currently the most pronounced, could be alleviated through strategies such as small-group activities, peer collaboration, and reduced emphasis on error correction. At the same time, scaffolding and explicit strategy training could help mitigate the moderate levels of anxiety found in receptive and writing skills.

Overall, the study underscores that FLA is a multidimensional yet unevenly distributed phenomenon, with certain domains carrying more psychological weight than others. The findings echo both global and local evidence that productive and evaluative tasks are the greatest sources of anxiety, while receptive and writing tasks, though less intense, remain significant. Importantly, they highlight the central role of classroom climate and instructional design in shaping learners' emotional experiences, pointing to the need for more supportive, student-centered pedagogies in Pakistani higher education.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the levels of foreign language anxiety across five domains—speaking, classroom, writing, listening, and reading—among Pakistani undergraduates. The results revealed that learners experience moderate anxiety overall, with speaking and classroom contexts as the most anxiety-inducing. Receptive and writing skills generated lower levels of anxiety but remained moderate, showing that no domain is free from stress. These findings confirm that productive and evaluative tasks provoke greater apprehension, while receptive tasks, though less stressful, continue to affect learners' confidence and performance.

Implications of this study highlight the importance of student-centered teaching practices in higher education. Teachers can reduce oral and classroom anxiety by integrating small-group discussions, peer collaboration, and low-stakes speaking tasks. Constructive feedback, tolerance for errors, and scaffolding strategies can also help reduce stress in receptive and written tasks. At a broader level, curriculum designers and teacher training programs should embed awareness of affective variables, equipping educators with tools to recognize and address anxiety in their classrooms. Despite these contributions, the study is limited by its reliance on self-report data and its focus on undergraduates from only three universities, which restricts generalizability. Future research

should employ mixed-methods approaches, combining surveys with classroom observations and interviews to capture richer insights. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to explore how anxiety evolves over time and how targeted interventions may reduce it, in line with recent evidence that FLA is dynamic and malleable. Expanding the scope to include diverse regions, educational levels, and instructional contexts in Pakistan would provide a more comprehensive understanding of anxiety in ESL learning. Ultimately, addressing domain-specific anxieties is essential not only for improving students' immediate academic performance but also for fostering their long-term confidence and sustained engagement with English in Pakistan's higher education context.

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