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Mapping Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety among Undergraduate ESL Learners in India: A Descriptive Survey

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Abstract

Background—Foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) is an important affective dimension of second-language learning, but its intensity and distribution may vary across learners and instructional contexts. Methods—This study employed a quantitative descriptive cross-sectional survey of 60 undergraduate English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. A 20-item, five-point Likert-scale questionnaire examined speaking, communication apprehension, test anxiety, classroom participation, and confidence-related experiences. Items 16, 19, and 20 were reverse-scored according to the questionnaire's stated scoring procedure. Results—Total scores ranged from 34 to 87 (M = 61.12, SD = 13.17). Based on the specified cut-offs, 10 learners (16.7%) were classified as having low anxiety, 37 (61.7%) as having moderate anxiety, and 13 (21.7%) as having high anxiety. Thus, 83.3% fell within the moderate-to-high range. The five researcher-defined thematic domain means ranged from 2.96 to 3.08, indicating relatively similar levels of reported anxiety across the classroom experiences represented. The 20-item response set produced Cronbach's alpha = .898 under the stated scoring procedure. Conclusion—The findings suggest that anxiety in this sample was relatively diffuse rather than concentrated in a single classroom activity. Pedagogical implications include supportive interaction, low-stakes opportunities for language use, predictable formative feedback, and anxiety-sensitive assessment. The scoring inconsistency identified during data auditing limits interpretation of the aggregate score and means that the questionnaire should not be regarded as a validated scale on the basis of this study alone.

Index Terms- foreign language anxiety; ESL learners; communication apprehension; test anxiety; classroom participation; India

I. INTRODUCTION

Learning an additional language involves cognitive, social, and affective processes. Among the affective variables studied in second-language acquisition, foreign language anxiety (FLA) has received sustained attention because it concerns learners' reactions to the particular demands of using and learning another language. Foreign language classroom anxiety is distinct from general anxiety because it emerges in relation to language-specific communication, evaluation, and performance demands [1], [2].

In classroom settings, learners may experience nervousness when speaking before others, apprehension about being evaluated, difficulty retrieving language under pressure, or concern about tests and oral performance. [3] linked language anxiety to interference in input, processing, and output, while [4] identified learner-, teacher-, and classroom-related sources of anxiety. Such findings have made FLA an important consideration in language pedagogy, particularly where classroom participation and oral performance are central to learning.

The present study focuses on undergraduate ESL learners in an Indian higher-education context. Rather than assuming that speaking or testing is necessarily the dominant source of anxiety, the study examines the distribution of anxiety across several classroom domains. This approach is consistent with recent work viewing language anxiety as a context-dependent and multidimensional phenomenon rather than a fixed learner characteristic [5]–[7].

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Although teachers commonly recognise anxiety as a possible barrier to language participation and performance, classroom judgements about its extent may remain anecdotal. A systematic description of learners' anxiety levels and the classroom experiences associated with that anxiety can provide a more evidence-based basis for pedagogical decisions. The present study therefore examines the level and distribution of FLA among a defined group of undergraduate ESL learners.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study aims to quantify the level of foreign language classroom anxiety among undergraduate ESL learners, classify participants according to the specified anxiety cut-offs, and identify whether anxiety appears to be concentrated in particular classroom domains.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What is the overall level of foreign language classroom anxiety among the ESL learners in the study?

How are the learners distributed across low-, moderate-, and high-anxiety categories?

Which classroom-experience items and thematic domains show relatively higher or lower anxiety ratings?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study provides context-specific descriptive evidence that can help ESL teachers identify whether anxiety is concentrated in particular classroom activities or distributed more broadly. The findings may inform classroom practices involving oral participation, feedback, assessment, and opportunities for low-threat language use. The study is not intended to establish causal effects of instructional practices on anxiety.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY AS A CONTEXT-SPECIFIC CONSTRUCT

[1] conceptualised foreign language classroom anxiety as a situation-specific form of anxiety associated with foreign-language learning. Their Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) brought together dimensions including communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. [2] subsequently reviewed the development of the construct and emphasised the distinction between language-specific anxiety and broader forms of anxiety.

ANXIETY AND COGNITIVE PROCESSING

[3] demonstrated that language anxiety may interfere with cognitive processing during second-language learning and use. Anxiety can affect learners' ability to process and retrieve language efficiently, making classroom performance more difficult even when learners possess relevant knowledge. This perspective helps explain why anxiety may appear during both communicative and evaluative activities.

SOURCES OF CLASSROOM ANXIETY

[4] identified several sources of language anxiety, including learner characteristics, teacher behaviours, and classroom procedures. Public performance, error correction, competitive classroom environments, and high-stakes assessment can increase perceived threat. [9] similarly demonstrated the importance of distinguishing anxiety according to the particular language-learning activity under investigation.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE AND THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL NATURE OF FLA

Evidence indicates that FLA is associated with language achievement and is not restricted to one language or national context. [8] supported the applicability of the construct beyond English-language contexts, while [5] synthesised evidence linking FLCAS scores with academic achievement. More recent work has examined the relationships among foreign-language anxiety, enjoyment, and boredom, reinforcing the importance of examining language emotions in context [6].

Recent research also suggests that FLA is not static. [7], in a systematic review of technology-related FLA research, found that technology can both alleviate and exacerbate anxiety depending on the learning environment and the mechanisms involved. A recent systematic review of longitudinal observation studies

likewise highlights the importance of treating FLA as potentially dynamic rather than as a fixed trait (Luo, 2026). These developments support the value of context-specific descriptive studies while also indicating the need for longitudinal and intervention research.

RESEARCH GAP

Much of the established FLA literature has examined relationships with achievement, specific anxiety dimensions, or interventions. Indian research has also documented language anxiety in higher-education contexts. For example, [11], [15] examined language anxiety among Indian college students, while [12] reported moderate English-language anxiety among undergraduate learners in Haryana. More recently, [13] developed and evaluated a modified FLCAS for Tamil-speaking English learners in higher education in Chennai. These studies demonstrate the continuing relevance of FLA in Indian contexts, including Tamil-speaking settings. The present study differs in its descriptive focus on the distribution of reported anxiety across selected classroom experiences within a specific undergraduate ESL context.

III. METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study employed a quantitative, descriptive, cross-sectional survey design. The design was selected because the purpose was to describe the reported level and distribution of foreign language classroom anxiety within a defined group of learners. Because the study was cross-sectional and descriptive, it does not permit causal conclusions about the sources or effects of anxiety.

PARTICIPANTS

The participants were 60 undergraduate ESL learners (N = 60). All 60 responses were complete and were included in the analysis. The dataset supplied for the present analysis did not contain demographic or academic variables such as age, gender, proficiency level, or prior language-learning experience; consequently, these variables were not analysed.

INSTRUMENT

The questionnaire comprised 20 five-point Likert-scale items. The response scale ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The questionnaire was organised into five researcher-defined thematic groupings: Speaking Anxiety (Q1–Q5), Communication Apprehension (Q6–Q10), Test Anxiety (Q11–Q14), Classroom Participation Anxiety (Q15–Q18), and Confidence in English Use (Q19–Q20). Items 16, 19, and 20 were explicitly identified in the questionnaire as reverse items. The questionnaire specified a total-score range of 20–100 and the following interpretive bands: low anxiety = 20–46, moderate anxiety = 47–73, and high anxiety = 74–100. The thematic groupings were used only for descriptive interpretation and were not treated as validated subscales.

Following the questionnaire's stated scoring instructions, items 16, 19, and 20 were reverse-coded using 6 − the original response before calculating the primary total score. During the data audit, the reverse-coded versions of these items showed negative corrected item–total correlations in the present dataset. The aggregate score is therefore reported as the result of the questionnaire's stated scoring procedure, rather than as evidence of an established or validated scale structure. This scoring issue is addressed explicitly in the limitations section.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

The questionnaire was completed individually by the participants and the responses were compiled into a single dataset. The provided questionnaire states that responses would be kept confidential and used only for academic research purposes. No information was available in the supplied materials concerning formal institutional ethics approval or a separate consent form; therefore, no such approval or procedure is claimed in this manuscript.

DATA ANALYSIS

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the total anxiety score and the 20 individual items. These included the mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum. Items 16, 19, and 20 were reverse-coded in accordance with the questionnaire's written scoring instructions. Internal consistency was assessed using

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Cronbach's alpha. Corrected item–total correlations were also examined as a diagnostic check. The five thematic groupings were summarised using mean item scores but were not subjected to factor analysis and were therefore not interpreted as validated subscales.

Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Because the five thematic groupings were created for interpretation rather than established through factor analysis, the subscale results are treated as descriptive thematic groupings rather than validated subscales. Corrected item–total correlations are reported as supplementary reliability information.

IV. RESULTS

OVERALL ANXIETY LEVEL

After applying the questionnaire's stated reverse-scoring procedure to Q16, Q19, and Q20, total anxiety scores ranged from 34 to 87. The mean total score was M = 61.12 (SD = 13.17), corresponding to a mean item score of approximately 3.06. Under the questionnaire's specified cut-offs, this falls within the moderate-anxiety range. The relatively wide observed range indicates meaningful variation in reported anxiety across participants.

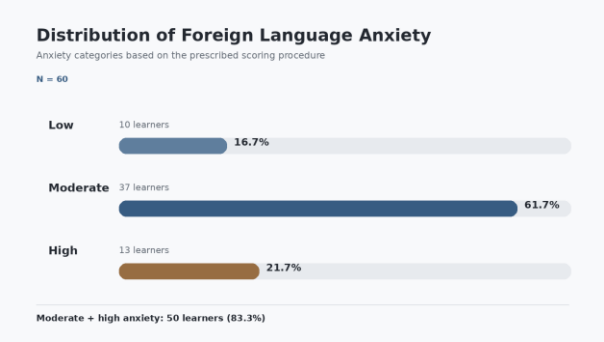

Figure 1. Distribution of foreign language anxiety levels after reverse-scoring Q16, Q19, and Q20 (N = 60).

Ten learners (16.7%) were classified as having low anxiety, 37 (61.7%) as having moderate anxiety, and 13 (21.7%) as having high anxiety. Thus, 50 learners (83.3%) fell within the moderate-to-high anxiety range. This distribution indicates that moderate anxiety was the most common category, while a substantial minority experienced high anxiety.

ITEM-LEVEL ANXIETY

Corrected item means ranged from 2.85 to 3.20. The highest rating was Q6 (M = 3.20), the first item in the communication-apprehension grouping, while the lowest was Q20 (M = 2.85) after reverse scoring. The relatively narrow spread suggests that no single item dominated the anxiety profile.

Figure 2. Item-level anxiety: observed range and overall mean after the specified reverse-scoring.

Because the item means are clustered near the midpoint, the data do not support the claim that anxiety is overwhelmingly concentrated in speaking, testing, or participation alone. Instead, anxiety appears to be distributed across several classroom experiences.

THEMATIC DOMAIN ANALYSIS

Speaking Anxiety (Q1–Q5): M = 3.06.

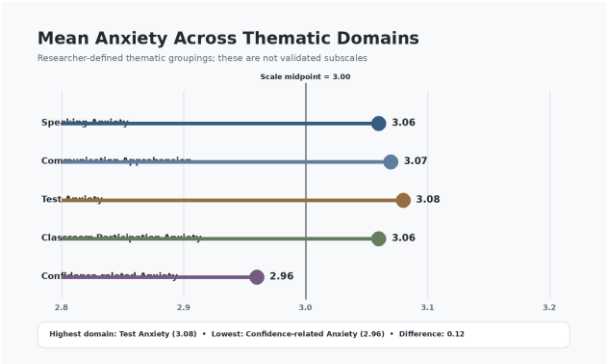

Figure 3. Mean anxiety ratings across the five researcher-defined thematic domains.

Communication Apprehension (Q6–Q10): M = 3.07.
Test Anxiety (Q11–Q14): M = 3.08.
Classroom Participation Anxiety (Q15–Q18): M = 3.06.
Confidence-related Anxiety (Q19–Q20): M = 2.96.

The five thematic means ranged from 2.96 to 3.08, a difference of only 0.12 points. Test anxiety had the highest mean (3.08), whereas the Confidence-related Anxiety domain had the lowest (2.96). However, these differences are small and should not be interpreted as evidence that one domain is substantially more problematic than another.

RELIABILITY OF THE INSTRUMENT

Using the questionnaire's prescribed reverse-scoring procedure, the 20-item dataset produced Cronbach's α = .898. This indicates substantial internal consistency under that scoring arrangement, but it should not be interpreted as evidence of construct validity or unidimensionality. In the present dataset, corrected item–total correlations were negative for the reverse-coded items, most notably Q20 (r = −.79), indicating that the scoring structure warrants caution. The reliability coefficient is therefore reported transparently as a property of this sample and scoring procedure, not as validation of the questionnaire.

V. DISCUSSION

MODERATE ANXIETY AS THE DOMINANT PATTERN

The most important finding is that moderate anxiety was the dominant category, with 61.7% of participants falling between 47 and 73 points. A further 21.7% were in the high-anxiety category, meaning that 83.3% of the sample was at or above the moderate threshold. This does not establish that anxiety is caused by particular classroom practices, but it indicates that language anxiety is sufficiently prevalent in this sample to warrant pedagogical attention.

ANXIETY IS DIFFUSE RATHER THAN CONCENTRATED

The near-similarity of the five thematic means is analytically important. Rather than identifying speaking, testing, or participation as a single dominant source, the findings suggest a diffuse pattern across the classroom experience. This interpretation is compatible with the multidimensional account of FLA developed by [1] and with Young's (1991) argument that anxiety may arise from overlapping learner, teacher, and instructional factors.

COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION AND EVALUATIVE PRESSURE

Q6 produced the highest item mean (M = 3.20), placing communication apprehension at the upper end of the observed item range. Test anxiety also had the highest thematic mean, although the difference from the other domains was small. These results are consistent with research identifying communication apprehension, fear of evaluation, and test anxiety as interconnected components of language-specific anxiety [1], [3].

CONFIDENCE SHOULD BE INTERPRETED CAREFULLY

The confidence-related domain had the lowest thematic mean after reverse scoring (M = 2.96). Because Q19 and Q20 were positively worded and reverse-coded, their corrected scores represent anxiety rather than confidence itself. The result should therefore be interpreted as relatively lower anxiety on these two items, not as a direct measure of learners' confidence or self-efficacy.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE AFFECTIVE FILTER PERSPECTIVE

[16] affective filter hypothesis provides a useful theoretical lens for interpreting the findings: anxiety can be understood as an affective condition that may interfere with the processing of language input. However, the present study did not measure comprehensible input, acquisition, or learning outcomes. It therefore supports the relevance of an affective perspective but does not empirically test the affective filter hypothesis.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The diffuse distribution of anxiety suggests that anxiety-reduction practices should not be restricted to oral examinations. Teachers can reduce unnecessary threat through frequent low-stakes speaking opportunities, supportive and predictable feedback, pair and small-group interaction, opportunities for preparation before public responses, and assessment formats that allow learners to demonstrate developing competence without excessive evaluative pressure.

- Provide regular low-stakes opportunities for spoken English rather than concentrating oral

performance in a small number of high-stakes tasks.

- Use formative feedback that treats errors as part of learning and makes expectations for correction clear and predictable.
- Use pair and small-group activities to widen participation before whole-class performance.
- Give learners brief preparation time before requiring public responses when the learning objective does not specifically require spontaneous performance.
- Use short, validated anxiety measures periodically if teachers or programmes wish to monitor changes in learner anxiety.

VI. LIMITATIONS

Several limitations constrain the interpretation of the findings. First, the sample comprised only 60 learners from a single educational context, so the results should not be generalised to other institutions, proficiency levels, or learner populations without additional evidence. Second, the design was cross-sectional and descriptive and therefore cannot establish causal relationships between anxiety and classroom practices or language achievement. Third, the data were self-reported and may be influenced by individual interpretation of Likert categories or social desirability. Fourth, the five thematic groupings were researcher-defined and were not established through exploratory or confirmatory factor analysis. They should therefore be treated as descriptive domains rather than validated subscales.

A further limitation concerns the scoring structure itself. Although the questionnaire instructs the researcher to reverse-code Q16, Q19, and Q20, the reverse-coded versions of these items showed negative corrected item–total correlations in the present dataset. This discrepancy between the written scoring instruction and the observed response structure means that the aggregate score should be interpreted cautiously. The study does not claim to validate the questionnaire. Finally, the supplied dataset did not include demographic, proficiency, or prior language-learning variables, preventing analysis of potentially important learner differences.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study examined foreign language classroom anxiety among 60 undergraduate ESL learners. After the specified reverse-scoring of Q16, Q19, and Q20, the mean total anxiety score was 61.12, and 83.3% of learners fell within the moderate-to-high anxiety range. Anxiety was relatively evenly distributed across the five thematic domains, with only a small difference between the highest and lowest domain means. Communication apprehension and test anxiety appeared somewhat more prominent, but not to an extent that justifies treating either as the sole source of anxiety.

The findings support a classroom-wide approach to anxiety-sensitive pedagogy. Rather than attempting to eliminate anxiety entirely, teachers can reduce unnecessary evaluative threat while creating repeated opportunities for supported participation, practice, feedback, and gradual public performance. Future research should move beyond descriptive cross-sectional surveys by examining anxiety longitudinally, relating anxiety to objective language-performance measures, and evaluating specific interventions through pre–post or controlled designs.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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