

Mitigating language anxiety: The role of language environment and teaching strategies

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Abstract

This study examined language anxiety among senior high school ESL students at Azpetia National High School and explored how language environment and teaching strategies influenced their English-speaking proficiency. Drawing on Gardner's socio-educational model, the study utilized an exploratory sequential design involving surveys and interviews with Grade 11 and 12 students, as well as their teachers. Quantitative findings indicated high anxiety levels related to fear of public speaking, criticism, and low confidence, though correlation between classroom environment and anxiety was statistically insignificant. Qualitative findings highlighted effective strategies including peer collaboration, supportive feedback, and multisensory teaching. The study recommends interventions such as role-playing, storytelling, and SEL-based classroom practices to build student confidence and reduce anxiety. These findings provide a framework for creating inclusive language classrooms that support both academic and emotional growth.

Keywords: Language Anxiety; English as a second language; Teaching Strategies; Classroom Environment; Student Engagement; Confidence Building

1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, English-speaking proficiency has become vital for academic and professional success. At Azpetia National High School, ESL students face considerable anxiety that hinders their ability to communicate effectively in English. This study aims to explore how classroom environments and teaching strategies affect language anxiety and speaking proficiency. Rooted in Gardner's socio-educational model, this research investigates both psychological and environmental factors contributing to anxiety. Prior studies highlight how fear of public speaking, peer judgment, and lack of linguistic exposure significantly impact ESL learners (Bernardo et al., 2020; Hamzah et al., 2022). The present study seeks to address these concerns by assessing specific classroom conditions and pedagogical techniques that can reduce anxiety and foster student confidence.

2. Materials and method

A researcher-constructed survey questionnaire was utilized in this study to assess the level of language anxiety among senior high school students. The instrument consisted of multiple indicators representing school-based, home-based, societal, and trait-related sources of anxiety. To ensure content validity and clarity, the questionnaire was subjected to expert review and refinement prior to its administration. Students answered the questionnaire independently based on their lived experiences and perceptions regarding English language use in academic settings.

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Following the quantitative phase, the researcher conducted a qualitative validation process through semi-structured interviews with selected students and English teachers. The interviews aimed to further explore the emotional, environmental, and instructional factors contributing to language anxiety. This step provided a deeper understanding of the survey findings and allowed for the emergence of richer insights into classroom dynamics and student coping mechanisms.

The study employed an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design. Quantitative data obtained from the survey were analyzed to identify the prevailing levels and sources of anxiety, while qualitative data from the interviews complemented the findings by uncovering underlying themes. This approach allowed for both measurable trends and narrative depth, ensuring a holistic view of the research problem.

To determine the reliability of the results, the quantitative data were processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics—including frequency, percentage, and mean—were used to present the demographic profile and anxiety levels of respondents. Additionally, Pearson product-moment correlation was utilized to examine the relationship between the perceived classroom environment and language anxiety.

In the qualitative phase, responses from the interviews were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework. Emerging patterns and themes were coded, categorized, and interpreted to reveal how instructional strategies and classroom climate impact students' emotional experiences with the English language.

Finally, to ensure the rigor of the data and procedures, the instruments and methods used in this study were validated by experts in the field of language education. Their recommendations were incorporated to improve the clarity and applicability of both the survey and interview guides prior to implementation.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1 The Summary of the Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age (17-18 years old)	64	64%
Sex (female)	60	60%
Grade level (11 & 12)	50	50%
Social status (lower class)	65	65%
English experience (some prior experience)	93	93%

The study involved 100 senior high school students, with a majority aged 17 to 18 years (64%) and predominantly female (60%). Most students were in Grade 11 or 12 and came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, with 93% reporting only some prior experience with English. These demographics highlight a vulnerable group facing both linguistic and psychological barriers in acquiring English proficiency.

Table 2 Sources of Student Anxiety

Item Statement	Weighted Mean	Interpretation
Fear of Public Speaking	3.18	Agree
Fear of Negative Evaluation	3.06	Agree
Lack of Confidence in Language Skills	3.01	Agree
Pressure from Other Students	2.72	Agree
Cultural and Linguistic Barriers	2.69	Agree
Average	2.93	Agree

Table 2 presents the primary school-based sources of anxiety. 'Fear of Public Speaking' received the highest weighted mean of 3.18, followed by 'Fear of Negative Evaluation' at 3.06. These findings align with Bowman (2020), who found that peer practice interventions can significantly reduce public speaking anxiety and boost confidence. Similarly, students cited 'Fear of Criticism' at home ($M = 3.06$) and societal 'Fear of Judgement' ($M = 2.96$) as key anxiety triggers. These results suggest that anxiety is not isolated to the classroom but deeply intertwined with familial and social pressures.

Table 3 Psychological Dimensions of Classroom Anxiety

Factor	Highest Rated Item	Mean
Trait Anxiety	Physical symptoms during public speaking	3.21
Parity Function	Nervousness in front of crowds	3.19
External Trust	Confidence from teacher’s feedback	3.26
State Anxiety	Anxiety when being the center of attention	2.97

Table 3 shows that language anxiety was further dissected using four psychological constructs: Trait Anxiety, Parity Function, External Trust, and State Anxiety. The highest individual item under Trait Anxiety was: 'I experience physical symptoms such as a racing heart and sweaty palms when it’s my turn to speak,' with a mean of 3.21.

Table 4 Correlation Between Classroom Environment and Anxiety

Sources of Relation		r value	Degrees of Correlation		p-value	Analysis
Classroom Environment	Anxiety Level	-0.114	Weak Correlation	Negative	0.260	Not Statistically Significant

Pearson correlation results indicated a weak negative relationship between classroom environment and anxiety levels ($r = -0.114$, $p = 0.260$), suggesting no statistically significant correlation. While classroom support plays a role, it may not independently predict anxiety levels without accounting for external influences such as home and societal pressures.

3.2. Teachers’ Strategies and Supportive Practices

Qualitative data from teacher interviews revealed common strategies for mitigating anxiety: group work, role-playing, positive reinforcement, and peer collaboration. Teachers emphasized that rigid rules like 'English Only' policies heightened anxiety, while flexible, student-centered approaches fostered confidence and participation. Additionally, teachers highlighted how code-switching between English and the students’ native language helped bridge linguistic gaps and build gradual fluency. This aligns with Belghith and Fethallah (2024), who advocate for context-sensitive approaches that support incremental language acquisition.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the significant factors that contribute to language learning anxiety among students, particularly their fear of public speaking, criticism, and judgment. The demographic profile of the respondents, primarily consisting of 17- to 18-year-old female students from lower-class backgrounds with no prior English experience, further emphasizes the challenges they face in language acquisition. Additionally, physical and physiological reactions to anxiety, such as nervousness and trust in teachers' feedback, play a crucial role in shaping their confidence and willingness to participate in class discussions. These findings underscore the importance of addressing both emotional and environmental factors to create a more supportive language learning experience.

Teachers play a vital role in mitigating language anxiety through interactive and engaging classroom strategies. By incorporating games, role-playing, and collaborative activities, they make language learning more enjoyable and less intimidating. Identifying students with high anxiety levels allows educators to provide targeted support, ensuring that every student has an opportunity to develop their speaking skills in a stress-free environment. Evaluating these

strategies based on student participation and confidence growth ensures that teachers continually refine their approaches to best support their learners.

A supportive classroom environment is essential in fostering students' confidence in speaking English. Teachers emphasize the importance of consistent practice opportunities, peer support, and a judgment-free space where students feel comfortable making mistakes. Small yet meaningful reinforcements, such as teacher encouragement and positive peer interactions, help students overcome their fear of speaking and gradually build their self-assurance. These aspects collectively contribute to a learning atmosphere where students feel motivated to engage in language activities without fear of criticism.

Lastly, classroom policies and teaching approaches significantly impact students' anxiety and motivation in language learning. Rigid, punitive rules can create pressure and hinder participation, whereas flexible and student-centered strategies encourage engagement. The study highlights that fostering a growth mindset, promoting peer encouragement, and allowing students to transition at their own pace are crucial in reducing anxiety. By implementing supportive policies and teaching methods, educators can cultivate a more inclusive and effective language learning environment where students feel empowered to express themselves with confidence.

Recommendations

No	Factor	Item statement	Recommendation	Personnel involved	Time frame	Target output
1	Anxiety from School	Fear of Public Speaking	Schools should implement regular public speaking workshops and provide a supportive environment where teachers encourage students to practice through presentations and interactive activities.	School administration and english teachers	Whole academic year	Increased english competency
2	Anxiety at Home	Fear of Criticism	Schools should foster a growth mindset by encouraging constructive feedback, teaching resilience, and creating a supportive classroom culture where mistakes are seen as learning opportunities.	School administration and english teachers	Whole academic year	Increased english competency
3	Anxiety to Society	Fear of judgement	Schools should promote an inclusive and supportive environment where teachers encourage respectful peer feedback and emphasize self-confidence through positive reinforcement.	School administration and english teachers	Whole academic year	Increased english competency
4	Trait Anxiety	I experience physical symptoms, such as a racing heart and sweaty palms, when it's my turn to speak in English during lessons	English teachers should incorporate relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing exercises and positive reinforcement, while gradually increasing students' speaking opportunities in a supportive and low-pressure environment.	School administration and english teachers	Whole academic year	Increased english competency

5	Parity Function	I get shy and nervous when speaking in front of large crowds	Teachers should provide gradual exposure through small group discussions, peer practice, and confidence-building activities before engaging students in larger public speaking opportunities.	School administration and english teachers	Whole academic year	Increased english competency
6	External Trust	I trust my teacher's feedback, which helps me feel less nervous and more comfortable speaking English during class recitations	Teachers should continue providing constructive and encouraging feedback, fostering a supportive learning environment that boosts students' confidence in speaking English.	School administration and english teachers	Whole academic year	Increased english competency
7	State Anxiety	I feel anxious every time I have to speak in English, particularly when everyone is paying attention to me	Teachers should create a supportive and non-judgmental environment by encouraging peer support, using positive reinforcement, and incorporating interactive activities that make speaking in English feel more natural and less intimidating.	School administration and english teachers	Whole academic year	Increased english competency

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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