



# Language Anxiety as a Perceived Central Factor in ESL Speaking Difficulties: A Mixed-Methods Study of Low-Proficiency Undergraduates

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**Abstract:** This study, grounded in a mixed-methods framework, examines the hindrances affecting the speaking skills of low-proficiency ESL undergraduates at a public university, with a specific focus on the perceived role of language anxiety. The study collected quantitative data by using a well-structured questionnaire, whereas qualitative insights were captured through semi-structured interviews to examine learners' reported classroom experiences. Speaking proficiency has long been a persistent challenge, given its importance for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, who need extended exposure yet have limited opportunities within formal language instruction, particularly in non-Anglophone higher education contexts. Descriptive statistical analysis indicated that psychological factors, especially presentation anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low speaking self-confidence, were reported as key barriers alongside classroom-related and linguistic challenges. The thematic analysis of the interview data further suggested that English-only instructional approaches, teacher-dominated pedagogical practices, linguistic insecurity, and crowded classrooms were perceived to heighten learners' anxiety and reduce their readiness or willingness to communicate. From a pedagogical perspective, the current study highlights the significance of affectively sensitive teaching strategies, including carefully scaffolded collaborative interaction, helpful feedback, and flexible language use, for developing communicative self-confidence.

**Keywords:** Language Anxiety, ESL Speaking Skills, Willingness to Communicate, Affective Factors in Second Language Learning, Classroom Ecology, Mixed-Methods Research, Low-Proficiency ESL Learners

## 1. Introduction

The competence to communicate effectively through spoken English has become a dominant indicator of professional advancement, academic achievement, and social participation in a rapidly globalised world (Crystal, 2012; Graddol, 2019). Speaking skills are not limited to enhancing linguistic proficiency, but also contribute to students' social and academic identities, enabling them not only to communicate within specific educational settings but also across various disciplinary discourses (Duff, 2010; Norton, 2013). Despite extensive instructional experience, undergraduate students, particularly those with non-Anglophone backgrounds learning English as a compulsory subject, often have weak oral skills, while the education system tends to focus on writing from the start (MacIntyre et al., 2017; Pawlak, 2020).

In the Pakistani education system, English is taught as a Second language from kindergarten through the undergraduate level, as it is considered an official language. Moreover, it is used across various domains, particularly in written form, including the social, economic, and educational domains, yet occupies an inconsistent position due to two distinct media of instruction: English and Urdu (Shamim, 2008; Rahman, 2009). Although Pakistani undergraduates study English in a typical way for more than a decade, experimental evidence from previous research consistently shows that many of them are unable to engage with self-confidence in spoken communication within academic and professional environments (Fareed et al., 2021; Pervaiz et al., 2022). Therefore, this persistent gap between decades of instruction and communicative proficiency raises critical questions about the efficacy of dominant academic practices and learning environments.

Prior research in EFL and ESL contexts has recognised hindrances to speaking development, generally categorised into social, psychological, and linguistic components (Horwitz et al., 1986; Zhang, 2009; MacIntyre, 2007). In linguistic problems, there are limited vocabulary, pronunciation inaccuracies, and grammatical complications; thus, learners' ability to formulate and articulate ideas smoothly is affected (Nation, 2013; Derwing & Munro, 2015). Similarly, psychological issues, such as anxiety about the foreign language, fear of negative assessment, and low confidence, have been reported to exert a strong, obstacles-based influence on learners' oral-oriented participation (Horwitz, 2010; Teimouri et al., 2019). Social and context-related effects, including inadequate contact with English outside the classroom, teacher-focused instructional activities, and uncooperative classroom environments, further restrict opportunities for expressive spoken interaction or communication (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Sato & Loewen, 2019).

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Nevertheless, a growing body of scholarship identifies language anxiety not only as one of several psychological hindrances, but also as an important factor in the social and linguistic obstacles that affect learners' speaking behaviour. Language anxiety has been reported to be associated with cognitive-based processing, reduced communicative self-confidence, and encouraged escaping behaviours, specifically in classroom atmospheres in which learners show fear of negative assessment or judgement of error exposed publicly. Several studies indicate that language learners with sufficient linguistic proficiency may still hesitate to speak when experiencing high levels of anxiety, suggesting that emotional willingness largely determines whether linguistic knowledge translates into communicative performance (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Horwitz, 2010; Teimouri et al., 2019).

Much of the current literature, particularly within Pakistani ESL environments, remains largely descriptive, focusing on identifying obstacles rather than elaborating on and examining how these factors are perceived to interact to shape learners' speaking behaviour. In the Pakistani higher education system, empirical studies that incorporate quantitative self-reports from learners alongside qualitative interpretations of observed classroom experiences reveal their limitations. More specifically, there is a lack of multi-method research design that critically investigates how psychological, linguistic, and social challenges transform to build the speaking activities and practices experienced together by lower-capability ESL undergraduates, a group that is mostly understated, though being the most susceptible to communicative peripheralization (Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015; Bielak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2020). It is essential to address this gap to shift beyond surface-level identification toward educationally purposeful understandings.

The current study, in response to this gap, examines the challenges influencing the speaking skills of ESL undergraduates with low proficiency at a public university in Pakistan, using a mixed-methods case study. This study employs a questionnaire and comprehensive semi-structured interviews to identify the main obstacles. The key purpose of this integrated approach is to support ongoing pedagogical and theoretical discussion by providing a context-dependent perception of speaking challenges, based on learners' reported experiences, through descriptive interpretation.

This study offers a context-specific contribution by investigating ESL-speaking difficulties among low-proficiency undergraduates in Pakistani higher education through a mixed-methods approach. Although previous research has widely examined language anxiety, this study offers a comprehensive perspective by integrating quantitative data with qualitative insights, showing how learners perceived anxiety as a key factor in their participation in speaking activities in the classroom. The study considers language anxiety as a perceived explanatory lens alongside social and linguistic hindrances, which are examined, thereby supporting interdisciplinary debates at the intersection of educational psychology, second language acquisition, and communication research. Considering the research gap, this study investigates the speaking challenges faced by low-proficiency ESL undergraduates using a mixed-methods approach. It specifically focuses on the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What psychological, social, and linguistic barriers do low-proficiency ESL learners perceive regarding their speaking skills?

**RQ2:** How do learners perceive the role of language anxiety in their experiences with speaking in the classroom?

**RQ3:** Which classroom and teaching factors are associated with students' self-reported speaking challenges?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Theoretical Framework

#### 2.1.1. Speaking in Second Language Acquisition

In a second language, speaking ability is no longer considered a genuinely linguistic accomplishment, but rather a psychologically influenced, socially rooted, and situation-dependent process. The current research on second language acquisition (SLA) considers speaking as a vigorous practice formed by learners' conditions based on emotional decisions, perceived communicative competency, social level associations, and the affordances of the learning environment (Duff, 2010; MacIntyre et al., 2017; Zhang, 2009; Pawlak, 2020). In this viewpoint, challenges in speaking practices are not merely the outcome of inadequate vocabulary or grammatical inaccuracies, but appear to arise from the relations between emotional variables, linguistic means, and contextual situations (Nation, 2013; Derwing & Munro, 2015; Chand, 2021a; Chand, 2021b; Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Zargoun, 2024). Importantly, this kind of interaction is experienced through learners' emotional responses during speaking, specifically language anxiety, which may influence whether linguistic understanding is transformed into real speech behaviour.

#### 2.1.2. Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

Willingness to Communicate (WTC), as suggested by MacIntyre et al. (1998), is one of the more effective models to understand learners' speaking behaviour. This model suggests that a learner's choice to speak at any given moment is influenced by both stable individual characteristics, such as anxiety and self-confidence, and situational dynamics, such as the classroom environment, the nature of the task, and interlocutor relationships (MacIntyre, 2007). Significantly, WTC asserts that it is not possible to predict communicative behaviour solely from linguistic proficiency; learners may have sufficient language knowledge but remain silent due to psychological factors or unfavourable social circumstances. This theoretical attitude is particularly pertinent to ESL contexts in which learners face high assessment stress and inadequate opportunities for low-risk oral interaction (Kang, 2005; Pawlak, 2020). Anxiety, when discussed in WTC terms, can be understood as a perceived factor associated with changes in learners' situational willingness to communicate: as anxiety increases, learners may perceive higher communicative risk, and situation-based confidence may decrease, minimising the possibility of speaking despite the availability of linguistic resources.

#### 2.1.3. Foreign Language Anxiety

In framing speaking involvement, psychological variables, particularly foreign language anxiety or stress, play a key role. According to Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) theory of Foreign Language Anxiety, undesirable evaluation fear, communication uneasiness, and test anxiety are major affective barriers that may limit the oral participation of learners. In subsequent research, it has consistently been reported that anxiety has a stronger association with speaking proficiency than

with other language skills, as oral communication demands instant response, public performance, and the use of spontaneous language (Horwitz, 2010; Teimouri et al., 2019). Repetitive experiences of hesitation, correction, or peer observation for learners with low proficiency may contribute to negative self-realisation, which is associated with avoidance of speaking tasks despite available opportunities (Piniel & Zólyomi, 2022). Significantly, anxiety cannot only be regarded as a “feeling” that coincides with poor performance; it has also been conceptualised as being associated with reduced cognitive processing efficiency by distracting attention-related resources and escalating performance commotion under pressure. It aligns with broader psychological evidence that anxiety is associated with cognitive proficiency and attentional control during performance demonstrations (Eysenck et al., 2007; Rasool, Qian & Aslam, 2023). In recent studies, it is suggested that anxiety may vary across different communication contexts and is often discussed as an explanatory factor in learners’ speaking participation, warranting observation and assessment to strengthen its role (Boudreau et al., 2018; Ding, 2024).

#### **2.1.4. Classroom Ecology and Social Interaction**

Irrespective of individual factors, the classroom’s social environment plays an important role in the improvement and development of speaking. In sociocultural perspectives, researchers claim that language learning occurs through participation in purposeful social communication, in which learners progressively internalise communicative norms and linguistic forms (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Similarly, in teacher-focused classrooms where interactional space is inadequate, opportunities for learners to convey meaning, explore the language, and build communicative self-confidence are limited. The researchers have revealed that unhelpful classroom atmospheres, too much error rectification through corrections, and patterns of unequal participation may minimise perceived communicative safety of the learners, thus potentially reducing their readiness to communicate, as argued by (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Sato & Loewen, 2019; Pekrun, 2006; Sokip, 2020; Holandiyah et al., 2022). From the perspective of anxiety as a perceived factor, the classroom environment has its importance since it is associated with whether speaking is perceived as psychologically safe or socially uncertain. When the classroom environment is assessment-based and there is no tolerance for error, it may be associated with learners’ anxiety, which, in turn, may be linked to reduced participation. However, anxiety may be reduced when the same classroom atmosphere becomes interaction-rich and supportive, thereby making risk-taking the norm.

#### **2.1.5. Dynamic and Process-Oriented Perspectives**

These theoretical viewpoints, when considered together, suggest that speaking challenges should be understood as the result of interacting linguistic, psychological, and social effects rather than as the learner’s deficiencies in isolation. Linguistic deficiencies, like pronunciation problems or inadequate vocabulary, may be associated with increased anxiety, and in turn, anxiety may be associated with less participation of learners. Therefore, low-level participation limits practice opportunities, which may be associated with declining ability. Such a cyclical procedure is consistent with process-centred explanations of language learning; it affirms irregular progression and interactive causation (Cameron & Larsen-Freeman, 2007; MacIntyre et al., 2017). In recent years, the research conducted on emotions related to second-language learning also assists in comprehending the notion that anxiety varies over time whenever communication occurs, having a chance to be changed at once in response according to tasks and perceived assessment, highlighting its potentially influential role in speaking activities (Boudreau et al., 2018; Papi & Khajavy, 2023). Accordingly, disrupting this sequence for ESL undergraduates with low proficiency requires not just linguistic support but also supportive teaching and learning environments. According to Xiong et al. (2024), these pedagogical environments may help reduce anxiety by consolidating learners’ sense of control over speaking situations.

#### **2.1.6. Theoretical Positioning of the Study**

Managing the direction of this theoretical framework, the following study presents speaking challenges and issues existing among ESL undergraduates with low proficiency as a multi-faceted occurrence happening through social interactions of the learners, their emotional observations, interpretations, and perceived communication-based affordances within the university classrooms. Similarly, using a mixed-methods approach, the following study aims to describe how such elements co-occur in learners’ self-reported perceptions and personal experiences. As a result, it contributes to a more context-centred understanding of speaking difficulties within Pakistan’s higher education sector. More specifically, this study positions language anxiety as a perceived central explanatory theme associated with learners’ experiences of linguistic and classroom-ecological hurdles and learners’ speaking engagement.

## **2.2. Empirical Background**

### **2.2.1. ESL Speaking Challenges in the Pakistani Context**

These social and psychological constraints, when discussed in the context of Pakistani higher education, are largely driven by broader sociolinguistic and institutional factors. According to Rahman (2009) and Shamim (2008), English functions as a high-status language associated with social mobility and academic achievement, which can heighten fear of failure and performance pressure among learners from vernacular-medium backgrounds. Moreover, in many public universities, instruction-based practices continue to prioritise examination-centred reading and writing skills, providing inadequate, organised support for spoken interaction. Consequently, learners may cultivate passive English knowledge when there is reluctance or inability to participate in oral communication activities (Ali et al., 2020; Akhtar et al., 2020; Asghar & Butt, 2018; Fareed et al., 2021; Pervaiz et al., 2022; Panezai et al., 2023; Rasool, Aslam, Mahmood et al., 2023). Such sociolinguistic pressure may be associated with increased language anxiety, since speaking is not just a classroom activity but also a social act and an expressive performance tied to legitimacy and status, making errors feel consequential.

### **2.2.2. Institutional and Sociolinguistic Factors**

These challenges, within the Pakistani ESL conditions, are further intensified by sociolinguistic and institutional situations. English occupies a high-status position and is associated with academic achievement and socioeconomic mobility; it can intensify performance pressure and fear of error among learners in vernacular-medium contexts (Rahman, 2009; Shamim, 2008). In Pakistani higher education, empirical studies consistently report an inadequate emphasis on listening and speaking skills, teacher-involved educational practices, and unsatisfactory platforms for reliable and effective oral communication (Asghar & Butt, 2018; Fareed et al., 2021; Pervaiz et al., 2022). As a result, many undergraduates maintain passive knowledge

of English while showing reluctance to engage in spoken practice. This situation is specifically pertinent to anxiety-centred understanding since institutional expectations and sociolinguistic status may be associated with increased assessment pressure, making the classroom speaking practice a demanding performance for learners with low proficiency.

### 2.2.3. Research Gap

Though a growing body of research has revealed social, linguistic, and psychological hurdles to speaking in Pakistani contexts, much of the existing literature is descriptive and fragmented, and it mostly investigates these factors in isolation. There is a notable lack of mixed-methods and integrative studies that investigate how these dimensions interact to shape the speaking activities and practices of low-proficiency ESL undergraduates. Studies, in particular, barely investigate anxiety as a perceived explanatory factor associated with classroom-ecological and linguistic obstacles and reduced speaking participation. Addressing this gap is vital for enhancing theoretical perception and understanding and informing instructional interventions responsive to affective experiences of learners and social truths.

## 3. Methodology

The present study employed an explanatory mixed-methods case study design to examine how social, linguistic, and psychological obstacles are experienced together in relation to the speaking skills of ESL undergraduates with low proficiency at a Pakistani university. In this regard, mixed-methods research is particularly appropriate for examining complex educational phenomena in which numerical trends require contextual understanding through participants' reported experiences, as indicated by Creswell & Plano Clark (2018). Aligning with the theoretical orientation of this study, the adopted design enabled the incorporation of learners' self-reported responses and qualitative perceptions into their classroom speaking practices and experiences.

### 3.1. Research Design

To present the research design, an interpretative and sequential integrated approach was utilised, in which quantitative data collection was conducted first to identify common patterns of experienced speaking challenges, and qualitative interviews were conducted to interpret and provide further detail on these patterns. This study was designed as a bounded case study, concentrating on only a single public Pakistani university in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. The case study investigation permits a deep examination of context-specific phenomena, especially when there are no clearly defined boundaries between the phenomenon and its setting (Yin, 2014). Instead of aiming to produce statistical generalisation, this study aimed to achieve analytical generalisation by connecting empirical results to well-established theoretical frameworks, especially readiness or willingness to communicate and non-native (foreign) language anxiety.

### 3.2. Participants and Sampling

In this study, the researchers employed purposive sampling to select participants who met clearly defined criteria aligned with the study's objectives. Undergraduate students of the University of Kotli enrolled in the English Department were engaged as the target population. The participants were classified as low-proficiency ESL learners based on their performance in the *Communication and Presentation Skills* course, which included assessments of oral presentations, classroom participation, and basic communicative performance tasks as a common practice in higher education in Pakistan (see Hussain et al., 2021; Hameed et al., 2025). The students whose scores were below 50% in the course were categorised as low-proficiency learners (with limited communicative competence); they were requested to participate, since this group was considered most susceptible to speaking-related challenges. This criterion aligns with institutional assessment standards, in which scores below 50% indicate limited communicative competence in speaking-related tasks, particularly in the course's oral performance components. The university sets the passing threshold for this course at 50%. The study included 35 undergraduate students, as it was a case study. The gender distribution for the quantitative stage of the study was 24 females and 11 males, with an average age of 20 - 23 years. After the quantitative stage, to enhance the study's trustworthiness, credibility, and dependability, 12 students were purposively selected to collect qualitative data through interviews for more detailed insights, thereby supporting the quantitative results. This triangulation of data strengthened the study's credibility by capturing diverse learners' perspectives.

### 3.3. Research Instruments

As mentioned earlier, to ensure methodological triangulation, the study utilised two types of instruments: questionnaires and interviews for quantitative and qualitative data collection, respectively.

#### 3.3.1. Questionnaire

To measure the psychological, linguistic, and social experiences of the participants, they utilised a self-administered questionnaire to examine issues related to speaking skills. The questionnaire was adapted and modified from the previous literature to make it consistent with the conceptual framework specified for speaking anxiety and oral proficiency (see Touhid, 2018; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre et al., 1998; Pawlak, 2020), with items selected and contextually adjusted to reflect ESL classrooms' experience of low-proficiency learners. The questionnaire consisted of two complementary sections: Part 1, comprising 9 items distributed across linguistic (3 items), psychological (3 items), and social (3 items) dimensions, which measured learners' perceived speaking barriers (see Table 4 and Appendix A for the full questionnaire). Part 2 comprised 12 items assessing self-reported speaking performance indicators, such as fluency, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary (see Table 5 and Appendix A for the full questionnaire).

A five-point Likert scale was utilised to collect participants' responses, ranging from strong disagreement to strong agreement. After adaptation and modification, the questionnaire was sent to two applied linguistics experts to verify its initial validity and reliability. After expert validation, internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. For Part 1, the results were satisfactory, with acceptable internal consistency for the overall scale ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ); the subscales' reliability analyses were (psychological  $\alpha = 0.74$ , linguistic  $\alpha = 0.40$ , social  $\alpha = 0.39$ ), which were interpreted cautiously, supporting their usage in the present study. For the psychological dimension, there was acceptable internal consistency, whereas the other two dimensions showed comparatively low reliability values, i.e., linguistic ( $\alpha = 0.40$  and social ( $\alpha = 0.39$ ). Given the exploratory and context-specific nature of the study, these values were considered sufficient to provide preliminary insights into learners' perceived speaking challenges. The overall internal consistency of Part 2 was acceptable ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ). However, as this section includes

multiple aspects of speaking performance (fluency, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary), this value is interpreted as an overall indicator rather than representing a single unified construct.

### 3.3.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

For the second stage of the analysis, a semi-structured interview protocol was used to remove redundancy. It was conducted to elaborate on the survey data, examining learners' experiences of speaking English in classroom environments. This interview tool enabled the same purposively selected participants to elaborate on their classroom interactions, emotional responses, and perceptions of instructional practices that influenced their speaking behaviour. While designing the interview protocol, the open-ended questions theoretically aligned with the focused keywords from the theoretical framing, such as speaking anxiety, readiness to communicate, teacher support, peer dynamics, and opportunities for oral interaction practice. Each interview lasted around 25–35 minutes and was conducted in a language preferred by the participants (English/Urdu/Bilingual) to ensure comfort and in-depth expression. The interviews were recorded as audio and later transcribed into text. To ensure linguistic accuracy, the Urdu portions of the interviews were translated into English for consistency, and minor linguistic errors were corrected, preserving the original meaning of the ideas. With participants' consent, all the interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### 3.4. Data Collection Procedures

At first, quantitative data were collected using questionnaires administered during regular class sessions to ensure a high response rate. Upon completion of the survey, participants were briefed on the interview phase, and volunteers who met the selection criteria were also invited to participate in interviews. Along with the qualitative data collection, the preliminary analysis of survey outcomes followed, informing interview questions that investigated challenges arising from the quantitative results, aligned with the interpretative mixed-methods design. Both the qualitative and quantitative research methods were used to enhance the depth of the findings.

## 4. Data Analysis

### 4.1. Quantitative Analysis

Using SPSS, quantitative data were analysed to generate descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations. Given the interpretative nature of the study and the limited sample size, the analysis focused on identifying patterns and trends rather than analysing causal associations. The findings were interpreted as indicators of experienced speaking difficulties across social, linguistic, and psychological dimensions.

#### 4.1.1. Qualitative Analysis

The study employed the six-phase approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), which is designed to conduct the reflexive thematic analysis. This approach is well-suited to recognising meaning patterns within participants' descriptions while acknowledging the researcher's interpretive role. This analysis comprised familiarisation with the data, primary coding, thematic development, theme review, and refinement. To enhance trustworthiness, coding decisions were reviewed and refined through repeated comparison across transcripts. Simultaneously, interview data were coded using a hybrid approach (inductive and theory-informed), focusing on three overarching themes: social constraints, psychological barriers, and linguistic problems. The coding process followed a structured protocol adapted from prior qualitative studies (Alsharairi et al., 2026; Aslam et al., 2023, 2024), as summarised in Table 1. These themes were considered in relation to the theoretical concepts of foreign language anxiety and readiness to communicate, enabling theory-informed interpretation rather than surface-level classification.

**Table 1:** Coding Protocol for Thematic Analysis

Phase	Coding Procedure	Description	Outcome
1	Data Familiarisation	Interview transcripts were read repeatedly to understand participants' speaking experiences	Initial understanding of speaking challenges
2	Initial Coding	Segments of data were coded based on participants' descriptions of speaking difficulties	Initial codes related to anxiety, fear, vocabulary, and classroom interaction
3	Theme Development	Codes were grouped according to similarities across responses	Development of broader categories
4	Theme Review	Categories were compared and refined across all transcripts	Consistent patterns identified
5	Theme Definition	Themes were defined based on recurring patterns in the data	Social barriers, Psychological barriers, Linguistic barriers, English-only instructional practices
6	Interpretation	Themes were interpreted in relation to speaking challenges reported by participants	Explanation of how these themes relate to speaking difficulties

Source: author-developed, adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006)

#### 4.1.2. Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Integration occurred at the interpretative stage, where all qualitative results were used to interpret and contextualise the quantitative trends into findings. The survey results provided a wide-ranging overview of learners' experienced speaking problems, while interview data demonstrated how learners perceived and negotiated these complications in the classroom. This integration-based process reinforced the study's interpretative depth, enhancing the reliability of its findings (Creswell & Clark, 2018).

## 4.2. Ethical Considerations

The researchers obtained ethical approval from the relevant departmental authority; all participants signed an informed consent form before participating. Similarly, participants' confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by providing pseudonyms and confining access to the data. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

## 5. Data Analysis

The subsequent section presents the study's quantitative findings, focusing on students' reported speaking challenges. Findings are managed to describe participant attributes, followed by social, linguistic, and psychological dimensions associated with participants' speaking proficiency. Findings, consistent with the study's theoretical alignment, are interpreted to identify patterns that demonstrate how several speaking hindrances interact with specific responsiveness to the role of anxiety as a perceived influencing factor, as reflected in learners' speaking participation.

### 5.1. Participant Characteristics

Table 2 presents the gender distribution of the survey respondents. In this study, 35 undergraduate students participated, with females comprising a larger proportion of the sample.

**Table 2:** Gender Distribution of Survey Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	11	31.4	31.4	31.4
Female	24	68.6	68.6	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

Source: by the author

Table 3 presents the respondents' age profile. Participants in the sample were of similar age, representing a typical undergraduate unit.

**Table 3:** Age of the Respondents

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	35	20.46	0.70

Source: Self through SPSS

### 5.2. Linguistic, Psychological, and Social Factors Influencing Speaking

In Table 4, students' responses to the questionnaire items measuring perceived speaking challenges have been summarised. The findings demonstrate changing levels of difficulty within psychological, linguistic, and classroom-related aspects. Notably, the highest mean scores were constantly related to anxiety-associated indicators, suggesting that emotion-based responses to speaking conditions may be perceived as the immediate obstacle to oral involvement. Although linguistic restrictions evidently existed, the prominent presence of fear and anxiety suggests that students' perceived communicative risk may influence their willingness to engage in speaking activities.

**Table 4:** Speaking Barriers (Part 1: Psychological, Social, and Linguistic Dimensions)

No.	Item	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	I have difficulty pronouncing words (LD1)	35	2.00	5.00	4.11	0.67612
2	I have trouble with vocabulary (LD2)	35	4.00	5.00	4.29	0.45835
3	Choosing proper words in oral English learning is very difficult (LD3)	35	2.00	5.00	3.97	0.51368
4	I am afraid of committing mistakes in front of other people (PD1)	35	2.00	5.00	4.34	0.80231
5	I have a negative experience in speaking English (PD2)	35	3.00	5.00	4.31	0.52979
6	Presenting in English makes me nervous (PD3)	35	2.00	5.00	4.00	0.76696
7	I am confident in speaking English in my English class (SD1)	35	1.00	3.00	1.77	0.59832
8	I am always worried about learning oral English (SD2)	35	3.00	5.00	4.34	0.53922
9	I enjoy interacting with my classmates while speaking (SD3)	35	1.00	3.00	2.03	0.56806

Source: Self through SPSS. Note: Positively worded items (Items 7 and 9) were reverse-coded prior to analysis to ensure consistent interpretation across all barrier-related items.

The above results indicate that psychological factors, specifically fear of committing errors ( $M = 4.3429$ ), and anxiety during communicative presentations ( $M = 4.0000$ ), got the highest mean scores. Linguistic complications, such as inadequate vocabulary and pronunciation problems, also emerged as prominent challenges. In contrast, items associated with pair-work tasks reported comparatively lower mean scores at the lower level, suggesting inadequate observed efficacy of interactive speaking performances.

### 5.3. Speaking Performance Indicators

Additional items assessed aspects of fluency, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary use in speaking performance. These results further illustrate students' perceived limitations in oral communication.

Table 5 below shows that hesitation, reluctance, pronunciation issues, and inaccurate vocabulary use remain notable hindrances to students' speaking activities. Negatively worded items with higher mean scores suggest that learners consider their oral production to be restricted in accuracy and fluency, particularly in spontaneous speaking situations. These

performance-based complications are associated with learners' anxiety when real-time communication occurs, as per vocabulary, and hesitation retrieval issues frequently increase while students feel performance pressure or negative assessment fear. This pattern is consistent with the understanding that linguistic problems may be associated with psychological dynamics and may influence noticeable speaking performance or production.

**Table 5:** Speaking Performance Indicators

	Indicators	N	Mini.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
<b>Fluency</b>	F1	35	3.00	5.00	4.25	.70
	F2	35	1.00	4.00	1.85	.77
	F3	35	1.00	5.00	1.80	.83
<b>Pronunciation</b>	P1	35	1.00	5.00	2.05	.83
	P2	35	2.00	5.00	4.17	.70
	P3	35	4.00	5.00	4.45	.50
<b>Grammar</b>	G1	35	1.00	5.00	2.48	1.22
	G2	35	1.00	5.00	2.60	1.31
	G3	35	1.00	5.00	2.51	1.24
<b>Vocabulary</b>	V1	35	1.00	5.00	2.60	1.31059
	V2	35	3.00	5.00	4.25	.61083
	V3	35	1.00	5.00	2.80	1.07922

Source: *Self Through SPSS*. Note: F = Fluency, P = Pronunciation, G = Grammar, V = Vocabulary. Labels (e.g., F1, F2) match questionnaire items; descriptions are in Appendix A. Some items are positive and reversed for consistency; others reflect speaking difficulties (e.g., F2, F3, G1, G3, V1, V3).

#### 5.4. Qualitative Findings: Speaking Skills Obstacles

Grounded in semi-structured interview data, the findings highlight how social, psychological, linguistic, and instructional dynamics, experienced together, shape students' speaking experiences and reflect a deep qualitative analysis of learners' hindrances to developing speaking skills in ESL classrooms. This analysis shifts the perspective from seeing these obstacles as isolated problems to understanding their growing, interconnected influence on learners' communication readiness. It highlights how anxiety consistently appears as an emotional reaction that is associated with classroom interaction pressures, linguistic insecurity, and instructional practices. The managed analysis produced one overarching theme, identified as obstacles in speaking skills, comprising four interconnected subthemes: social barriers, psychological barriers, linguistic obstacles, and English-only instructional practices (see Table 6).

**Table 6:** Qualitative Themes of Speaking Skills Obstacles

Theme	Subtheme	Operational Meaning
Speaking Skills Obstacles	Psychological Barrier	Shyness and anxiety that create fear during classroom speaking
	Social Barrier	Interpersonal factors that restrict learners' speaking performance
	Linguistic Barrier	Limited vocabulary, inaccurate pronunciation, and syntactic difficulties
	English-only instruction	The methods used by teachers to support student learning

Source: *Author's analysis*

##### 5.4.1. Psychological Barriers

In the findings, psychological barriers appeared to be the most noticeable hindrance to students' improvement and development in speaking, initially manifesting as low self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, and anxiety during classroom interactions. Participants persistently stated that speaking English in front of teachers and peers increased feelings of anxiety, lack of self-confidence, and fear of negative assessment. Such affective responses repeatedly discouraged students when they attempted to participate in oral/speaking activities, despite their basic linguistic familiarity. The prominent prevalence of anxiety throughout participants' lived experiences suggests that emotional factors are frequently reported and may be associated with speaking behaviour, highlighting the role of anxiety as a significant barrier. Qualitative findings revealed that participants' main concerns, fear of vocabulary, grammatical errors, and pronunciation mistakes, may undermine their self-confidence. For instance, I-P3 clarified, "I most of the time feel fear of making mistakes, particularly in vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation, which diminishes my self-confidence while speaking English." Likewise, one more participant observed, claiming, "Since English is a non-native language for me, I frequently feel inhibited and less self-confident while speaking. Such given psychological obstacles make it hard for me to convey my ideas in an effective way."

Fear of judgment and shyness were often stated as central obstacles to speaking in the classroom. I-P5 highlighted that nervousness due to being assessed by teachers and peers was associated with hesitation and then silence, reporting, "students have to face challenges while speaking mostly because of low self-confidence, fear of evaluation, and anxiety concerning making mistakes." Anxiety, in some cases, emerged in cognitive and physical signs. I-P2 emphasised, "Whenever I want to communicate English orally, my fear of making mistakes stops me from speaking in front of my classmates. I observe myself in a shaking condition, and hence my mind goes blank." It suggests that participants perceived psychological factors as affecting the process of speaking English as a non-native speaker, which may be associated with foreign language anxiety and reflect emotional challenges during oral performance, potentially reducing learners' readiness to communicate. Language anxiety appears to be a perceived cognitive reaction, as reported by participants, making speaking challenges more noticeable and ultimately influencing learners' decisions to speak or remain silent.

#### 5.4.2. Social Barriers

According to the results, social barriers were markedly associated with classroom structure, instructional practices, and peer interactions. The participants often reported receiving inadequate guidance from their teachers and insufficient opportunities for speaking practice in purposeful situations. Many of the respondents reported that their speaking difficulties were linked to traditional, especially teacher-centred, instructional methods that prioritised delivering lectures over managing or facilitating interactive communication. Students from Urdu-medium educational settings reported additional difficulties adjusting to the ESL classroom environment. One of the participants claimed, *“Since they come from an Urdu-medium college, they mostly feel a lack of confidence, and their inadequate vocabulary makes it hard to comprehend the classroom context.”* Similarly, according to I-P2, English was used minimally to communicate objectives, which may result in fewer opportunities for targeted practice in persistent, sustained oral communication.

From the same perspective, I-P7 reported that students’ inability to speak with confidence appeared to be related to inadequate teacher support, noting that teachers primarily relied on direct instruction rather than communicative practices. Similarly, I-P6 found that large class sizes made it hard for teachers to observe and keep individual students engaged; as a result, many learners remained uncomfortable participating in group activities. Social hurdles, such as fear of speaking due to peer dynamics, which may also be linked to peer cooperation and overloaded classrooms, often lead to unease with speaking during classroom activities. For instance, I-P2 and I-P9 argued that large classrooms often disrupt and limit speaking practices, reduce speaking opportunities, and leave students hesitant to speak due to distraction. This may often be associated with speakers’ and learners’ confidence being weaker in the context of social restrictions. Therefore, language anxiety is often perceived as a social barrier that may be associated with increased speakers’ and learners’ communicative concerns and is associated with the fear of being judged unfairly.

#### 5.4.3. Linguistic Barriers

Linguistic barriers were mainly associated with insufficient vocabulary, incorrect pronunciation, weak control of grammatical structures, and poor fluency. Participants consistently reported difficulty following classroom debates/discussions and articulating ideas due to limited vocabulary. Students from Urdu-medium educational setups specifically reported these challenges. I-P2 emphasised, *“students have to face linguistic difficulties, including insufficient vocabulary and inaccuracy in sentence structure, which restrict the improvement of speaking skills.”* Likewise, I-P4 observed, *“students mostly encounter challenges in speaking English because of insufficient opportunities for speaking practice and a limited number of lexical items.”*

Language challenges were rarely observed in isolation; rather, they were reported to occur alongside psychological dynamics such as low self-confidence and nervousness. A number of participants reported that inadequate practice, weak sentence-making or construction, and insufficient subject-related knowledge may collectively be associated with reduced willingness to speak and reduced speaking fluency. I-P8 reported, *“Linguistic challenges, insufficient vocabulary, grammatical incorrectness, and lack of interest are largely associated with limited fluency and confidence.”* In these findings, it has been suggested that linguistic barriers may perform less as autonomous restrictions and more as factors associated with anxiety, as well as avoidance behaviours in an English-speaking environment. Participants repeatedly reported linguistic insecurity as an underlying factor in psychological unease, noting that insufficient vocabulary and limited grammatical exposure are often associated with increased fear of making errors during classroom communication.

#### 5.4.4. English-Only Instructional Practices

Only English-based instructional performance emerged as a distinctive but largely related barrier, especially for low-proficiency learners from Urdu-medium academic backgrounds. Participants emphasised that overreliance on English during instruction may limit understanding and increase anxiety, particularly when complex concepts are introduced without a linguistic framework. According to I-P5, interpretation *“Since English is a non-native language for them, they may not completely comprehend instruction conveyed entirely in English.”* Likewise, I-P9 observed, *“Students having weak foundational English expertise struggle to follow lessons and feel hesitant in asking for clarification of concepts while teachers use just English.”*

Some of the participants asserted that exclusive English usage may be associated with reduced participation rather than stimulating speaking advancement. I-P2 found that English-only instruction was not beneficial for low-proficiency learners due to their educational and linguistic contexts. In view of I-P7, *“The exclusive usage of English by the teacher mostly leads to low self-confidence and complications in comprehending things, thus confining students’ participation and their language improvement.”* These results additionally indicate that English-only instruction, when applied without an understanding of learners’ ability levels, may unintentionally be associated with increased anxiety and may contribute to reduced oral participation rather than facilitating speaking skills. Participants’ responses further suggest that instructional inflexibility may heighten perceived communicative risk; moreover, it may reinforce avoidance behaviours among learners with low confidence.

Overall, these qualitative findings suggest that speaking problems emerge from the interaction of social restrictions, psychological shyness, linguistic insecurity, and instructional performance. Likewise, psychological barriers, especially anxiety and negative evaluation fear, appeared to be the immediate hindrances to speaking practice, whereas social and instructional dynamics shaped the classroom situations where such emotions were experienced. Linguistic inadequacy appeared to further intensify these difficulties by being linked to learners’ lower confidence during oral communication practice. Collectively, the qualitative evidence suggests that anxiety appears as a perceived central explanatory factor associated with social and linguistic hindrances, leading to minimised speaking engagement. Experiences by the participants indicate a recurring pattern in which linguistically based insecurity and classroom stresses may be associated with increased anxiety, and, as a result, anxiety may limit participation. Accordingly, reduced participation may limit opportunities for speaking development. This mixed-methods pattern offers a detailed interpretive account of the quantitative results, highlighting the need to address speaking challenges as a multifaceted, contextually sensitive dynamic.

## 6. Discussion

In this study, it has been sought to investigate the issues that tend to influence ESL undergraduates with limited proficiency in speaking by integrating quantitative trends with qualitative descriptions of learners' classroom experiences. The findings indicate that speaking concerns are not solely attributable to linguistic deficiencies; they also arise from the interplay of social, psychological, and instructional factors, which may be associated with reduced willingness and learners' reluctance to participate in activities designed to improve speaking. Analysing through the lens of willingness to communicate (WTC) theory along with non-native language anxiety, the obtained findings disclose an understanding in detail indicating why numerous learners reveal reluctance while speaking, despite the fact that learners have formal experience of English instruction, highlighting perceived influences and situational communication behaviour consistent with WTC theory (MacIntyre et al., 1998). These derived findings, more specifically, suggest that language anxiety is perceived as a central factor associated with classroom ecological pressures, linguistic uncertainty and learners' reduced participation. The stated explanatory interpretation aligns the current study with WTC theory, where anxiety may be reflected in situational willingness to communicate (MacIntyre, 2007), indicating how participants perceive context-dependent barriers in relation to their speaking experiences.

### 6.1. Psychological Barriers and Willingness to Communicate

The domination of psychological barriers found in the quantitative and qualitative findings highlights the important role of emotions in determining and shaping speaking behaviour. Anxiety during presentations, heightened degrees of fear of making mistakes, and a lack of confidence were repeatedly documented, indicating that anxiety appears as a key barrier to oral communication engagement. This finding is closely consistent with Horwitz et al.'s (1986) conceptual framework on foreign language anxiety, supporting subsequent research and indicating that speaking skill is often reported as more susceptible to anxiety-related disturbance (Horwitz, 2010; Teimouri et al., 2019).

Learners' reluctance to speak, specifically from the WTC perspective, can be considered a situation-related decision framed by immediate emotional states rather than by well-established linguistic proficiency, as highlighted by MacIntyre et al. (1998). Qualitative findings showed that fear of negative assessment and repeated exposure to error before public speaking were associated with students' withdrawal from speaking activities, though not when they had basic linguistic knowledge. It provides insight into why psychological variables reported higher mean scores than linguistic factors in the survey, supporting the claim that proficiency does not necessarily result in successful communication. The present findings also support the attentional control theory, which suggests that anxiety may be associated with reduced cognitive capacity required for task performance, potentially affecting fluency, lexical recovery, and extemporaneous speech articulation (Eysenck et al., 2007). This cognitive aspect helps explain why participants experienced mind-blanking and hesitated in speaking practices, reflecting the role of affective variables in communicative performance, as highlighted in anxiety frameworks (Horwitz et al., 1986).

### 6.2. Linguistic Insecurity as an Anxiety Trigger

Though linguistic or language obstacles were not considered the most dominant obstacles quantitatively, they appeared to be associated with increased anxiety and reduced confidence in participants' accounts. Inaccuracy in pronunciation, limited lexicon, and limited command of grammar were associated with fear of making mistakes, as reported by the learners, thus potentially decreasing their willingness to speak. Similarly, according to Cameron & Larsen-Freeman, (2007) and MacIntyre et al. (2017), such a kind of interaction provides support to ecological as well as dynamic views associated with the learning of language; it also underscores the interdependency in relationships that exist between linguistic competence and emotional experiences (MacIntyre, 2007; Mercer, 2016) supporting the view that linguistic and psychological factors are interdependent within dynamic SLA systems.

Linguistic difficulties, rather than operating as independent barriers, were reported as factors associated with greater psychological constraints, especially during natural speech performances. This finding is consistent with prior research, indicating that learners tend to overestimate the communicative impact of linguistic mistakes; this overestimation may be associated with avoidance, which further limits oral practice, as argued by Pawlak (2020). Findings obtained from meta-analyses provide further substantiation that anxiety and language success are negatively associated, highlighting that affective obstacles may be related to performance results through various learning situations (Teimouri et al., 2019).

### 6.3. Social and Classroom Ecology Constraints

The role of social and instructional conditions has been significant. They emerged as factors associated with changes in speaking anxiety. Participants' observations demonstrated teacher-directed practices, inadequate communication opportunities, large-sized classrooms, and limited feedback as the main contributing agents to speaking hesitation. These circumstances may be associated with reduced learners' ability to engage in low-risk communicative activity necessary for improving fluency and confidence. Speaking, when viewed from the perspective of classroom ecology, is not just an individual performance but also a socially mediated practice shaped by classmate dynamics and pedagogical design (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Lack of cooperation, fear of peer judgment, and imbalanced participation designs may be associated with a reduced sense of communicative security among students, thus making situational WTC too low. This finding is consistent with Kang's (2005) emphasis on the role of the classroom environment and relationships with communication partners in learners' spontaneous speaking choices. The derived findings also align with achievement emotion theory, which asserts that learners' understandings of classroom support and control are associated with participation behaviour and anxiety levels (Pekrun, 2006), reinforcing the importance of classroom ecology in shaping learners' emotional and communicative engagement.

### 6.4. English-Only Instructional Practices and Low-Proficiency Learners

Findings of the study also indicate problems with English-only instructional practices when applied to low-proficiency ESL learners without sufficient learning scaffolds. Although English immersion is repeatedly considered a potential benefit, participants reported that exclusive use of English may be associated with increased anxiety, confusion, and reluctance, especially among students from an Urdu-medium environment. To facilitate speaking development, English-only instruction is often associated with reduced comprehension, discouraging learners from seeking clarification. The inferred finding supports the growing evidence that instruction-centred methods and techniques must be tailored to learners' linguistic and educational

credentials, particularly in contexts where foundational English skills are limited (Shamim, 2008; Rahman, 2009). A strategy-based incorporation of learners' native language for affective support and clarification may help reduce anxiety and foster a broadly supportive speaking environment, aligning with sociocultural perspectives that emphasise supportive interaction in language learning (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). While supporting conceptual comprehension in multilingual classroom environments, translanguaging-informed methods and techniques have been reported to be associated with reduced communication-centred anxiety (Liu et al., 2020; Panezai et al., 2023).

### 6.5. Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The combination of quantitative and qualitative data enhances the interpretive depth of the study. Survey findings identified psychological barriers as the most pressing obstacles, as the interview data demonstrated the lived experiences, observations, and classroom contexts through which these obstacles appeared. Instructional practices, deficiency in linguistic knowledge, and social restrictions were depicted to co-occur, being associated with increased anxiety, avoidance, and insufficient practice. In this study, the utilised mixed research design remains consistent with WTC theory, which emphasises situation-based variability and provides support to the argument that speaking challenges should be viewed as contextualised processes and not the permanent learner's deficiencies, thus reinforcing WTC's emphasis on situational variability and context-dependent communication behaviour (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Accordingly, by incorporating statistical trends with rich qualitative insights, the study moves beyond descriptive detail to provide a theory-informed interpretation of speaking hesitation among low-proficiency ESL undergraduates.

From this perspective, the study's findings contribute to SLA research by proposing a contextually grounded interpretive framework in which anxiety is understood as a psychological factor linked to classroom ecology, linguistic insecurity, and learners' participation in speaking. The study builds on existing research by providing a contextually grounded, integrated explanation of speaking difficulties. It shows how psychological, social, and linguistic factors are experienced together, not separately, among low-proficiency ESL learners. This aligns with interaction-based perspectives in SLA.

### 6.6. Implications for ESL Pedagogy

Overall, the research findings provide remarkable and important pedagogical insights and practical implications for ESL teaching practices in the Pakistani higher education system. Addressing speaking difficulties does not rely solely on refined pronunciation practices, techniques, or vocabulary enrichment; it also requires emotion-grounded teaching practices, which may help reduce fear of adverse evaluation while strengthening perceived communicative confidence. It may be that the teacher adopts mixed, well-structured, coordinated activities, even if he may provide valuable and constructive feedback, thereby presenting mistakes as a natural component of the language learning process.

Additionally, flexible instructional methods in language use may support low-proficiency language learners by enhancing their comprehension and reducing anxiety. When a well-managed, interactive, shared, and student-centred classroom environment prioritises objective-based communication over structural accuracy, it may support learners' willingness or readiness to communicate effectively by fostering sustained speaking ability. Psychologically favouring instructional adjustments of this kind demonstrates their consistency with positive language teaching practices and learning principles, which accentuate the promotion of overall emotional well-being of the learners as well as their linguistic efficiency (MacIntyre et al., 2019). Based on these findings, incorporating an experiential learning approach may help to reduce speaking anxiety in low-proficiency learners. This might involve scaffolded speaking exercises, collaborative activities, and low-pressure opportunities for interaction that gradually enhance learners' confidence and encourage more active classroom participation.

## 7. Conclusion

This study assessed the barriers influencing the oral communication skills of ESL undergraduates with low proficiency by integrating quantitative analyses with qualitative interpretations of learners' classroom experiences and observations. Similarly, the study's findings indicate that the presence of speaking issues is not solely due to inadequate linguistic knowledge but is also associated with the co-occurrence of social-level constraints, psychological or affective shyness, and teaching methodologies. Amongst the factors mentioned before, psychological barriers, especially apprehension of committing mistakes, overall anxiety, and low self-confidence, were identified as the most prominent factors associated with learners' hesitation when they try to speak fluently.

The current study, by applying the theory of willingness to communicate (WTC) as an explanatory lens, provides a more context-specific, descriptive, and interpretive understanding of issues related to speaking, considering them situation-based and context-dependent occurrences. The inferred findings also reveal that learners' choices of speaking are not related to their personally experienced linguistic efficiency, but are also influenced by emotion-oriented conditions and the perceived communicative opportunities of the classroom atmosphere. Similarly, linguistic inadequacies were portrayed in participants' accounts as factors associated with increased anxiety; however, instructional and social situations either appeared to be associated with changes in these emotional obstacles. After analysis, this study consequently offers theoretical contributions by identifying anxiety as a central perceived element associated with classroom ecology, linguistic insufficiency, and speaking involvement in learners' reported experiences in ESL settings. Moreover, the study's findings indicate that integrating quantitative and qualitative data enhances the interpretative value of the results. Results of the survey highlight the dominance of psychological barriers, while interview data illustrate how limited pedagogical support, negative assessment anxiety, large-class settings, and exclusive English instructional methodologies and practices may be associated with reduced participation in speaking. This merging technique and approach provided a more comprehensive understanding of learners' speaking issues than would have been possible with a single methodological lens or procedure.

### 7.1. Limitations and Future Research

Despite the contributions, the current study has several limitations. The research was conducted within a single institutional setting with a comparatively small sample; therefore, the limited sample size constrains the broader applicability of the results. Additionally, the quantitative analysis focused on descriptive patterns rather than inferential associations, as no statistical techniques such as correlation, regression, or mediation analysis were employed. The study primarily relied on self-reported

data, which may be influenced by participants' perceptions and responses. Additionally, no standardised or validated speaking test was employed to objectively evaluate learners' oral skills. Subsequent studies could expand on this work by incorporating longitudinal designs, larger sample sizes, or experimental approaches to investigate how focused teaching techniques and methodologies influence willingness to communicate over time. Further research may also investigate momentary fluctuations in speaking difficulties utilising dynamic systems or idiodynamic investigative frameworks, which have recently gained importance in influential second-language research, as indicated by Boudreau et al. (2018).

The subsequent research may also investigate teachers' perceptions of approaches to speaking instruction and classroom limitations, as well as the role of digital or mixed learning environments in reducing speaking anxiety among low-proficiency learners. Collectively, the present study advances understanding of ESL speaking anxieties by establishing the central explanatory role of contextual and psychological factors in shaping speaking practices. By theoretically positioning speaking problems as interactional and multidimensional, the results provide both theoretical understanding and practical guidelines to improve speaking instruction in higher education settings with ESL backgrounds, especially in Pakistan and similar contexts.

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**Appendix A:** Questionnaire Items (5-Point Likert Scale)

**Scale:** 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

No	item	SA	A	N	D	SD
<b>Speaking Barriers (Part 1: Psychological, Social, and Linguistic Dimensions)</b>						
<b>Linguistic Dimension</b>						
1	I have difficulty pronouncing words					
2	I have trouble with vocabulary					
3	Choosing proper words in oral English learning is very difficult					
<b>Psychological Dimension</b>						
4	I am afraid of committing mistakes in front of other people					
5	I have a negative experience in speaking English					
6	Presenting in English makes me nervous					
<b>Social Dimension</b>						
7	I am confident in speaking English in my English Class					
8	I am always worried about learning oral English					
9	I enjoy interacting with my classmates while speaking					
<b>Fluency</b>						
1	I experience hesitation and pauses when speaking English					
2	I am able to speak English smoothly without hesitation					
3	My speech in English feels natural and fluent					
<b>Speaking Performance Indicators (Part 2: Fluency, Pronunciation, Grammar, Vocabulary)</b>						
<b>Pronunciation</b>						
4	I have difficulty pronouncing English words clearly					
5	My pronunciation causes misunderstanding when I speak English					
6	Some of my pronunciation is unclear when speaking English					
<b>Grammar</b>						
7	I can use simple English structures correctly when speaking					
8	I find it difficult to use complex grammatical structures when speaking English					
9	I can use both simple and complex grammatical structures accurately when speaking					
<b>Vocabulary</b>						
10	I have enough vocabulary to express my ideas in English					
11	My vocabulary use is sometimes incorrect or inappropriate when speaking English					
12	I can use a wide range of vocabulary and paraphrase when needed					