

**Gender Differences in Language Anxiety among ESL Students in Academic Communication:  
Exploring Classroom Participation, Linguistic Confidence, and Social Expectations****Sadia Hassan<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Muhammad Siddique<sup>2</sup>**<sup>1</sup> PhD English Scholar, Imperial College of Business Studies (ICBS), Lahore, Pakistan.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v4i1.1879>**Abstract**

Language anxiety is considered to be one of the significant factors affecting second language learning and academic communication among ESL learners. When English is the first language of instruction taught at the university level, students are expected to engage in discussions, presentations, and academic interactions, which can become a source of anxiety and reduce the tendency of communication with others. This paper examines gender differences in language anxiety among ESL postgraduate learners in academic communication with special focus in classroom participation, linguistic confidence and social expectations. The theoretical insights that inform the research are the Foreign Language Anxiety and willingness to communicate, which intensifies the role of psychology and social factors in determining the application of language in an academic context. The data was collected using open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews through purposive sampling. There were 200 English postgraduate students who are collected as a sample. The participants belonged to the first and fourth semester of the University of the Punjab, Government College University Lahore, and University of Education Lahore. The obtained data were processed through thematic analysis in order to define the patterns in the context of language anxiety and communication behavior. The results have shown that language anxiety is experienced by both male and female students though the magnitude and the reasons differ. Female students tended to complain of greater emotional anxiety associated with fear of error, whereas their male counterparts complained about language ability and social comparison. The findings further suggest that the linguistic confidence and academic experience are two primary factors that affect Students' involvement in classroom communication.

**Keywords:** Anxiety among ESL learners, Gender differences in Academic communication, Linguistic Confidence, Social Expectation.

**Introduction**

Language anxiety has emerged as one of the most popular psychological and sociolinguistic issues among second language learners of English (ESL) especially in learning institutions where English is the main language of communication. ESL students, especially in multilingual universities and colleges often have to perform in real English by using the language in classroom discussions, presentations and academic dialogue. Although the practices aim at promoting communicative competence, they tend to produce nervousness, fear, and self-doubt in the learners. The language anxiety thus may affect the desire to communicate in students, their linguistic confidence, as well as the degree to which they participate in the classroom (Dewaele &

MacIntyre, 2014). These emotional and psychological impediments may have profound impacts on the academic performance of students and their performance in terms of effective interaction in the academic set-ups.

The concepts of language anxiety are usually related in academic communication to the fear of being negatively evaluated, low confidence in language proficiency, and pressure to be good in the presence of their peers and instructors. The students also can refuse to talk in the classroom or may be afraid to ask questions or to engage in the discussion due to the fear of errors in grammar or pronunciation. Language development, as well as active participation in the learning processes, can be minimized by such anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). With the growing popularity of interactive learning conditions in universities, it is important to comprehend what influences language anxiety in order to build inclusive and supportive learning places.

Gender is one of the determinants of academic communication in terms of language anxiety. Sociolinguistic and applied linguistics research indicates that male and female students might have different language learning experiences because of different social expectations and cultural practices and styles of communication. In most educational settings, female learners tend to complain of a greater degree of language anxiety given that they tend to be more afraid of negative evaluation or social pressure when it comes to the performance and behavior in social communication (MacIntyre, 2017). Simultaneously, certain investigations suggest that male pupils can show a decreased interest in linguistic-based activities due to the fear of linguistic incompetence or being judged by colleagues (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020). These gendered experiences underscore the complicated connection between the language anxiety and social identity in academic communication.

Another essential dimension that is associated with the language anxiety is the classroom participation. The involvement in a discussion, presentation, and group project is viewed as the crucial aspect of academic communication in universities. Students feeling language anxiety can however opt out or participate in the classroom interactions to the least. This avoidance behavior may minimise the practice opportunity and have negative influence on developing language among students. According to previous research, students with more anxiety do not talk as often or take an active part in classroom activities (Zheng & Cheng, 2018). Therefore, the determination of language anxiety effects on classroom participation can inform us on the behaviors of students as they communicate in the academic environment.

Having linguistic confidence is also the key to the way students experience language anxiety. Linguistic confidence is the perception of the learners that they can make an effective use of language in communication. Students with the high degree of confidence will be more active in the discussions and will share their ideas. On the other hand, low-confidence individuals might be afraid or shy to speak English. The linguistic confidence can usually be determined by the prior experience in learning, language proficiency, and interaction with peers at the classroom level (Papi, 2016). Consequently, the articles discussing the connection between language anxiety and linguistic confidence are vital in the analysis of the communication pattern of students in an academic setting.

The gender and the language anxiety are another problem compounded by social expectations. In most societies, cultural values influence expectations towards the proper mode of communication between males and females. Such expectations can have an impact on the perceptions of students regarding their language skills and their comfort when speaking in academic classrooms. As an illustration, students might be under pressure to excel in English since it is linked to academic achievement and career promotion. Other people are hesitant to talk because they are afraid to be judged or criticized by their peers. Such social forces may help to create differences in the anxiety and confidence of students (Young, 2018). The way social expectations relate to language anxiety can thus give a more powerful understanding of the gendered experience of ESL learners when communicating in an academic context.

The problem of language anxiety is even greater in the multilingual educational situation, especially in the country where English is a second language. Universities in most cases place English as a core element of academic achievement thus placing additional strain on students to exhibit effective communication abilities.

This can cause the students to become very anxious during academic discussions or even presentation. The study of gender variations in language anxiety can assist teachers in learning more about the issues that ESL students encounter and finding ways of assisting them in maintaining more fruitful communication patterns (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014).

Considering the extent of classroom engagement, linguistic confidence and social expectations in determining the experience of language anxiety among students, it is increasingly becoming necessary to investigate how these variables affect the experience of male and female ESL students in the context of academic communication in different ways. Awareness of these differences may offer relevant information to educators, curriculum developers and policymakers in their quest to develop supportive learning environments that promote active learning and elimination of communication barriers.

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the experience of male and female ESL students with language anxiety in academic communication situations?
2. What is the effect of language anxiety in classroom participation of ESL students?
3. How does linguistic confidence and social expectations contribute to the development of gender differences in language anxiety?

### **Objectives**

1. To investigate gender variation in the concept of language anxiety in academic communication among ESL students.
2. To test the research question on the impact of language anxiety on classroom participation among ESL students.
3. To examine the role of linguistic confidence and social expectations on determining students in language anxiety.

### **Literature Review**

It is well acknowledged that language anxiety is a major impact on the second language learning and communication, especially in the academic environment where students must actively engage in discussions, presentations, and other class activities. The idea of language anxiety had a scholarly following with the initial research done by the school of thought that perceived it as a specific psychological phenomenon associated with language learning conditions. As Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) defined, foreign language anxiety can be took to refer to a cluster of self-concepts, beliefs, emotions, and actions related to language learning in formal environments. Their effort presented the notion of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA), which has evolved into a major model of comprehending the emotional dimensions of the impact of anxiety on student communication in the language classes.

The research that followed has elaborated the concept of language anxiety referring to the cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of it. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) recommended that language anxiety has the potential of harming language processing, listening comprehension, the performance of speaking, and vocabulary finding. Learners with anxiety tend to have problems with organizing their thoughts and putting across their ideas in an effective manner. This mental disruption may result in decreased participation of classrooms and decrease linguistic confidence in ESL students. In the same vein Gregersen and MacIntyre (2014) underscored that anxious learners would shun communicative activities and this could restrict language practice and development.

The relationship between the language anxiety and classroom participation is one of the most vital areas of research. It is believed that active participation is necessary in the language acquisition process since it enables learners to practice communication skills and get feedback about them by instructors and colleagues.

Nevertheless, a number of studies have revealed that students who develop high anxiety about language have lower chances of involvement into the classroom discussions or other interactive learning procedures (Young, 1991). Fear leads to anxiety, which consequently leads to avoidance of communication where learners fear not to make a mistake and not to be judged negatively by other people (Aida, 1994). This avoidance habit may lead to a vicious circle where a lack of participation results in lack of language practice which further makes him or her more anxious.

The issue of gender differences in language anxiety has also been thoroughly covered in the area of applied linguistics. According to the sociolinguistic views, gender roles and social expectations may affect the experiences and reactions of learners to language learning problems. It was also found that in some studies female students are likely to report more language anxiety than male students especially when it comes to speaking (Park & French, 2013). This is usually due to the increased sensitivity to social judgment and the increased anxiety over academic performance amongst female learners. Conversely, other studies have suggested that male pupils might show reduced involvement in language related tasks because of the fear of linguistic proficiency or the opinion of their peers (Dewaele, Petrides, & Furnham, 2008). These are mixed results, which indicate that the gender difference in language anxiety is subject to complex social and cultural factors.

Linguistic confidence is another concept that is important as far as language anxiety is concerned. Linguistic confidence is what is meant by belief of the learners that they can effectively communicate in a second language. The linguistic confidence of students is usually higher, which allows them to be more open to engaging in classroom discussions and sharing their ideas in academic communication. On the other hand, the low confidence learners are usually afraid and hesitant to speak in English (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998). The concept of willingness to communicate has been strongly associated with linguistic confidence as it explains how much the learners are ready to engage in communication in the second language. At such a high level of anxiety, the desire to communicate is usually lowered, which leads to lower participation and little experience with developing the language.

The social expectations and cultural norms also have a great influence on the experiences of language anxiety of students. English is also related to academic achievement, career growth and social status in most multilingual societies. This could pressure the students to perform reasonably well in English communication in academic environments (Crystal, 2003). Such expectations may also contribute to the development of anxiety, especially in cases where the students feel that their language skills are not good enough. The cultural beliefs about the proper communication behavior can also have an impact on the reaction of male and female students to the language learning difficulties (Oxford, 2015). As an example, certain students will be reluctant to make a speech because of the cultural requirements that place emphasis on modesty or respect in the learning process.

Sociocultural view of language anxiety has been researched lately, which points to the importance of identity and social interaction in language learning. Dewaele & MacIntyre (2014) claimed that language anxiety does not just constitute a psychological phenomenon; it is also a socially constructed phenomenon, which can be influenced by the classroom situation, peer relations, and institutional demands. The attitudes held by students towards their language identity may affect their confidence in speaking English. Students who have the feeling that they are proficient language users will become more engaged in academic communication, and those who regard themselves as poor language learners can get more anxious (Papi, 2016).

Besides the classroom interactions, the very academic environment may be a source of language anxiety. As interactive modalities in learning, presentations, debates, as well as group discussions are the focus of university classrooms. Although these activities are expected to enhance the level of communication skills, they may also cause stressful experiences to those students who feel unprepared or insecure about their language skills (Zheng & Cheng, 2018). One of the most widely cited causes of language anxiety expressed by ESL learners is the fear of being negatively graded by the instructors and the peers (Kitano, 2001). Such

fear can make students feel unwilling to engage actively in the academic communication process especially when they feel that their language skills are lower compared to those of their peers.

In general, current literature points to the fact that language anxiety is a condition affected by various factors that are, however, interconnected, such as gender, classroom engagement, linguistic confidence, and social expectations. Despite a number of studies that have been conducted on language anxiety in language classrooms, more research is still required on the gendered experiences in language anxiety in the conditions of academic communication. The interpretation of male and female ESL language anxiety may help derive useful information concerning the patterns of communication in the classroom setting of universities as well as help create a supportive learning environment that will facilitate active involvement in classroom communication and foster confidence in academic discussions.

## **Methodology**

This paper explores the gender variations of language anxiety in ESL students in the academic communication with respect to classroom participation, linguistic confidence, and social expectations. The research methodology will go to investigate what the students experience and perceive about language anxiety in the classroom at the university. The methodological framework will be used to shed light on offering a systematic way of comprehending how male and female ESL learners feel during communication in English in academical settings.

The study is informed by an interpretivist research paradigm, which focuses on explaining social phenomena by the perceptions and experiences of the participants. This study is suited to the interpretivist paradigm since language anxiety is not only a psychological phenomenon but also a social interaction experience that was defined by classroom interaction, cultural expectations, and gender roles. Through this paradigm, the research will be able to understand how students sense their own experiences of communication and how the sense affects their involvement and confidence in academic communication.

The researcher uses the qualitative research approach in the study to examine the subjective experiences of ESL students towards language anxiety. Qualitative approach enables the researcher to investigate complicated social and psychological aspects underlying language apprehension in learning institutions. By conducting a qualitative inquiry, the research will seek to understand the perceptions, feelings and experiences of the students in regard to their participation and communication within the classroom in English. It is a method that is especially well suited to the investigation of gender variation in the language anxiety experience since it offers intuitive and detailed information on the academic communication experience of the students. The research data will be gathered at three universities in Lahore, namely University of the Punjab, Government College University Lahore and University of Education Lahore. The choice of these universities was due to the fact that postgraduate programs in English are offered and these universities provide a wide range of academic environments where students frequently communicate using English. The respondents will include English post-graduate students in the first semester and fourth semester so that the research can be able to capture the differences in language anxiety among students who are relatively new into the post-graduate study and those who are more experienced with academic communication.

Semi-structured interviews and open ended questionnaires are the main data collection methods that will be used in the study. Semi-structured interviews will allow the participants to explain their experiences related to language anxiety, classroom involvement, and linguistic confidence themselves, whereas open-ended questionnaires will allow collecting the answers of more participants. Such tools can be used to investigate the effects of gender on communication experiences and the impact of social expectation on the attitudes of students regarding their languages skills in their studies.

Participants will be identified through a purposive sampling approach that will help to gather pertinent information and content to the research subject. The sample population will be 200 English postgraduate students, comprising of both male and female students in the first and fourth semester of the chosen

universities. Purposive sampling will suit the study since the researcher can choose respondents who have first-hand experience with English academic communication and can comment on the experiences of their language anxiety in classrooms.

The data will be collected and analyzed with the help of the thematic analysis that presupposes identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns in the qualitative data. Using the thematic analysis, the researcher will observe the common themes associated with language anxiety, classroom involvement, linguistic confidence, and social demand. This method of analysis enables a systematic meaning of the results of the participants as well as emphasizes similarities and differences in the experiences of male and female ESL students. These themes will help the study obtain a better insight into gender disparities in language anxiety and their influence on language communication in academic contexts in ESL postgraduate students.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data obtained regarding the English postgraduate students, to establish patterns in language anxiety with regard to academic communication. The discussion was based on three key themes in line with the research objectives; classroom participation, linguistic confidence, and social expectations. The first and fourth semester responses of students were analyzed and compared to determine how academic experience reflects on the language anxiety as well as the way in which the experience differs in relation to male and female students. The discussion also involved the way the students wrote about their emotions when communicating using English in an academic setting (discussions and presentations in the classroom, group work, etc).

Among the most apparent patterns based on the data was the linguistic anxiety in the classroom when participating. Several students gave reports that they were nervous whenever requested to speak in the English language during classroom discussions or presentation of work. Some said that they felt reluctant to engage actively in academic communication due to the fear of failure or being criticized by the other students. One of the female students in a first semester said that she felt uncomfortable speaking in class, and told me that when the teacher posed a question in English, she was sure of her answer, yet she felt intimidated to speak out because she felt that she might say something wrong and everyone in the classroom would realize it. This reaction shows the fear of being judged negatively which is normally regarded with language anxiety in an academic setting.

On the same note, even some male students stated that they were anxious when using English to communicate but the causes were at times different. One of the participants, a male and in his first semester, said, *I am afraid to attend because I think that other students are more or less fluent as compared to me and I would rather remain silent than utter, something wrong*. This assertion shows that this anxiety with language is not restricted to the female students but male students also experience this anxiety as they are uncertain about their language skills. Some responses however indicated that the female students were more likely to have emotional reactions to communication issues.

The other theme of considerable importance was the influence of linguistic confidence on the classroom. Students who said that they had less confidence in their English skills tended more to evade the classroom talk. To a great number of participants, confidence was directly related to the past experiences of the language learning and the exposure to English communication. A student (4th) who was interviewed and described that her confidence changed with time, to which she said, that she was so scared to speak up in my classes during the first semester but now *I feel more confident, I have been practicing presentations and discussions and what I have learned during my classes*. This assertion implies that language anxiety may be minimized through exposure to academic experience and the recurring exposure to the English communication.

Conversely, other students note that even after a number of semesters, they did not feel confident. One fourth semester male student said, *I still spend time worrying that I could not talk properly before the classroom even after years of studying English, as I am afraid that my grammar may be wrong*. This reaction portrays

that language anxiety can also be felt even in high level learners especially when the students are under high expectations of accuracy in the academic communication.

The data also indicated the difference in the patterns of participation among the male and female students. Some of the female participants reported that they would be more worried about committing some mistakes in the presence of classmates, which occasionally caused them to be less active in the classroom discussions. One of interviewees stated the reason was that *I tend to think a lot before I say anything, just in case I say something wrong. At other times I remain quiet although I may have something to say*. This shyness depicts the way anxiety may restrain the desire of students to communicate in the academic environment.

Male students, however, at other times reported an alternative form of certification that was connected to the peer perceptions. One male respondent mentioned that there are cases when *I undergo the pressure due to the fact that other students talk very confidently. In case I talk slowly or go wrong, I feel humiliated*. Even though both females and males students said that they felt anxiety, the answers indicate that the causes of anxiety might be different depending on the expectations and personal perceptions of the language competence.

The other significant theme that was located during the analysis was the contribution of social expectations to the development of language anxiety. The perceptions of the students regarding the attitudes of the society towards English were reflected in the responses given by many students about their attitude to academic communication. In most educational systems, English is a condition that is linked to intellectuality, their education, and career. Consequently, students can be under great pressure to excel in communicating in English. One female interviewee had the following pressure; *she said that people believe that you have to study English, and then speak perfectly*. It is the expectation that causes me more anxiety in speaking.

In the same manner, another student observed that anxiety was also brought about by social expectations in the classroom set up. One of the male respondents commented that there are times that other students are talking so fluently and it puts one under pressure as one thinks that he needs to talk at that height. These reactions show that students tend to compare their language skills with those of other students, which can be a strong cause of anxiety and decrease their participation desire.

Some differences were also found between first-semester and fourth-semester students in the analysis. Students in their first semester are more likely to have expressed higher anxiety levels due to the fact that they were still getting used to the academic setting and expectations of the English communication in postgraduate learning. As one of the first-semester respondents said, at the start *I was extremely nervous to speak since I did not practice speaking about academic matters in English*. This quote brings out the role of not being conversant with academic language in developing language anxiety among new postgraduate students.

However, conversely, most fourth-semester students claimed that they had improved over the years in their anxiety because of their exposure to more English communication in the academic environment. One student (4th semester) observed that she is much more relaxed since she has already given quite a number of presentations in class and she knows that she will always make small mistakes which is normal. This reaction indicates that repetition and in-class experience can assist students to attain higher linguistic confidence and less anxiety.

Nevertheless, it was also found that not every student had an equally high level of improvement. There are students in the fourth semester who still indicated anxiety even though they also had more academic experience. According to one participant, *I would still feel nervous during presentations, even in the following semesters, due to the fear of forgetting the words when speaking*. This reaction shows that even with extensive acquisition of academic communication, language anxiety can still be maintained in some learners.

The other theme that appeared out of the data was the correlation between language anxiety and classroom silence. Many of the students confessed that they were very silent in discussions due to fear of committing errors or being criticized by other students. One female respondent said that at times she comprehends all in the lecture and she does not bother asking questions since she is shy to speak in English. This quote shows how fear may not allow students to seek clarifications or even engage in learning exercises.

On the same note, one of the male participants said, *I will rather listen to others than talk to them because I feel more at ease doing so*. Although listening can be used as part of learning, too much silence in listening can limit opportunities that students may have to practice academic communication and acquire confidence in the use of English.

Altogether, the results of the initial stage of the analysis suggest that the language anxiety plays a huge role in determining student involvement in academic communication. The experiences of the participants indicate that anxiety is influenced by various variables among them being linguistic confidence, peer comparison, social expectations, and academic experience. Male and female students have indicated that they had language anxiety, but their perception and reaction varied in some cases due to individual and social aspects.

The second stage of the data analysis was aimed at gender-based patterns of the language anxiety and interpretation of the way these events affected academic communication in ESL postgraduate students. Thematic analysis of the responses gathered during the work with the students of the first and the fourth semesters helped identify a number of trends in the way male and female students believed about their capacities to communicate in English during academic activities. It also examined the role played by linguistic confidence, peer comparison, and classroom dynamics in creating language anxiety in students.

One of the most important conclusions of the data was the fact that female students tended to have more vivid emotional responses to communication issues in the classroom settings. Most of the female interviewees said that they were nervous before talking in a classroom, especially when making a presentation or when responding to the teacher. One of the female students said, *I am very nervous before giving a presentation as I believe I may forget about the right words or make some grammatical errors*. This assertion implies that the anxiety of the students can be raised by the issues of linguistic correctness and speech in front of the crowd. Some of the female participants also highlighted that negative judgment by peers and instructors made them fearful and therefore they were not willing to participate in discussions.

Nevertheless, female learners also cited that the practice in the classroom slowly helped them to dispel some of these fears. One of the fourth-semester students confessed that she was afraid to speak in a classroom in the first semesters, but since she has made a few presentations, she has also learned not to be afraid of making a mistake of small scale. This reaction shows the significance of the ongoing exposure to academic communication in the development of confidence and the alleviation of anxiety with time. The data indicates that female students who were initially found to report high levels of anxiety, many of them have devised methods of dealing with their anxiety levels with the help of the classroom experience and peer support.

Male students, in their turn, tended to define language anxiety through the notions of linguistic competence and comparing with peers instead of emotional uneasiness. Some of the male participants also mentioned that they got anxious when they felt that there are other students that are more fluent or confident in speaking English. One of the male respondents remarked, when other students use the English language very fluently, it makes me feel that my English is not good. This quote implies that the social comparison in the classroom setting can have a serious impact on the students' perceptions about their language proficiency. These comparisons could cause shyness in engaging in discussions or posing questions.

Although such fears exist, a number of male students indicated that they tried to conquer the anxiety effect by engaging themselves more in classroom discussions. A participant of the fourth semester said that he or she attempts to speak even though his or her English is not the best since the only way to perfect it is to practice. This line is indicative of an active attitude towards dealing with the language anxiety whereby students see communication difficulties as learning opportunities instead of a barrier.

The other theme that was found to be significant based on the analysis was the influence of peer interaction in fostering language anxiety. Some of the participants indicated that they were alleviating their anxiety when they conducted group discussions and presentations with supportive classmates. According to a female respondent, *I feel more confident to speak when my classmates motivate me or react positively*. The positive feedback by the peer can consequently result in a favorable classroom atmosphere that would foster

participation. On the other hand, the feeling of anxiety and discouragement to communicate can be caused by negative feelings or how the peers are perceived.

Likewise, one of the male participants also focused on the significance of a positive classroom climate saying, that, in case the environment is welcoming and everyone is learning collectively, it was easier to talk in English. This reaction implies that classroom culture is an important factor that determines the communication experiences of students. Students who feel accepted and supported are more likely to be actively engaged in the process and attain linguistic confidence.

The discussion also brought to light how academic expectations also have an impact on the experiences of language anxiety among the students. Several members pointed out that they felt pressured to excel in English when making presentations and discussions and this raised their stress levels. One student has commented that the teachers expect us to speak very well and that expectation is what makes me nervous at times as *I am an English student*. This is because of the feeling that studying English as a postgraduate subject poses increased expectations of language proficiency. Such expectations can even lead to anxiety especially in cases where the students feel that their language proficiency is under scrutiny.

The same concern was raised by another participant who said, “Occasionally, *I feel that people evaluate our intelligence depending on the way we speak English*. The perception brings out the wider social implication of English communication within the academic circles. Academic competence and intellectual ability are also associated with an English proficiency, and this can advance the stress that students have to achieve good performance in classroom communication.

The discrepancies between first and fourth semester still occurred during the second phase of analysis. Students in the first semester often complained that they were unsure of their academic skills in expressing complex academic topics in English. According to one student in his first semester, he found it hard to communicate his thoughts in English, as he was still thinking in the language he was used to. This fact implies that the shift between the communication of daily life and the academic one may cause some additional difficulties to ESL students.

Fourth semester students, were however, also more familiar with academic communication practices. It was stated that presentations and group discussions as well as written assignments made them feel able to better their language and decrease anxiety. One participant in the 4th semester said, *I now feel more at ease discussing academic subjects in English, which is after many semesters studying English literature and linguistics*. This reaction shows that theoretical exposure and practice can slowly enable students to gain lingual confidence.

Irrespective of these advances, the analysis has also indicated that even in more experienced students the language anxiety does not vanish totally. A few fourth-semester students reported that they were still nervous with formal presentations and evaluations. According to one student, *I could still be anxious when making a presentation because it is always difficult to address the entire class*. This result indicates that there are still some academic circumstances which can cause anxiety irrespective of the academic experience of students especially in the case of public speaking.

The other theme that was discovered during the analysis was the association between language anxiety and classroom silence. Some students acknowledged that they would rather stick to silence than run a risk of failing in English. One of the female students described it as follows: *Sometimes I have a thought but I always remain silent because I do not know how to say it right*. Accordingly, one male interviewee stated, *when I am not totally sure about my sentence, I will not talk*. These lines demonstrate how the language anxiety may decrease the desire of the students to communicate and restrict the possibilities of practice and communication. Besides patterns of participation, how the students perceived linguistic confidence in regard to their academic developments was also looked into in relation to their participation patterns. Most respondents noted that they gained confidence over time in communication using the English language by practicing and being exposed to it. One of the students said, “*It is because you are sure that you can communicate without being the best at*

*grammar*. Such a point of view is indicative of the change in the attitude of the students towards the language learning process as they consider competent communication more significant than the prevention of errors. In general, the results of the second round of the analysis support the thesis that the psychological, social, and educational factors are the combination of which causes the language anxiety in academic communication. Gender variation was seen through the manner in which students narrated their anxiety experiences in that the female students tended to focus on emotional issues whereas the male students illuminated their anxiety on issues concerning linguistic competence and peer comparison. Nonetheless, the two groups stated that the classroom practice, positive peer interaction, and academic experience were relevant to the development of linguistic confidence and anxiety alleviation.

This analysis suggests that to deal with language anxiety, it is necessary to develop the classroom environment that would allow students to share their ideas without fear of being evaluated negatively. Participation, interaction towards learning, and focusing on communication instead of perfection are some of the few motivator strategies that can be encouraged to reduce anxiety and enhance the academic communication abilities of students. Through the gendered experiences of language anxiety among ESL learners, teachers will be able to come up with more effective measures to support their learners and promote inclusive academic communication in university classes.

### **Findings**

This study presents its findings based on the three research questions that it used to investigate. The review is done on the basis of gender differences in language anxiety among ESL postgraduate students on the academic communication, especially in classroom participation, linguistic confidence, and social expectations.

The results show that male and female ESL students are subjected to language anxiety when communicating in an academic context, especially in classroom discussions, presentations, and communication with instructors. Nevertheless, the type and the manifestation of anxiety in each gender is different. Girl students also often explained that they feel more emotional when speaking before others and teachers in English. Most of the women participants talked about feeling nervous, being hesitant and fearing making mistakes, when engaging in academic talks. They usually mentioned the issues of the correct pronunciation, grammar correctness, and chances to be judged negatively by peers.

Male students also mentioned experiencing language anxiety, although their answers were usually focused on issues of linguistic competence and peer-comparison, and not on emotional discomfort. A number of the male subjects reported that they got nervous when they thought other students were more proficient or more confident in the English language. Such comparison at times lowered their readiness to engage in classroom discussions. In general, the results are that both genders are found to be impacted by language anxiety, however, female students are more likely to talk about anxiety in emotional words, and male students are likely to relate the anxiety to the language competence perceptions and academic achievement.

This result indicates that the language anxiety has a large impact on the willingness of students to engage in academic communication. Most of the participants indicated that they shunned classroom activities in the fear of committing errors or being criticized by other participants. The students of higher anxiety tended to avoid answering questions, participating in discussions or sharing their ideas in English. Consequently, they would at times choose to keep quiet even in cases where they were aware of the subject under discussion.

Anxiety and lower participation were usually higher among first-semester students as compared to fourth-semester students. Students who were new and postgraduate students expressed that they had lower confidence when expressing the complex ideas in English which inhibited the desire to participate in classroom discussions. Conversely, fourth-semester students claimed to be more acquainted with academic communication practices such as the presentation and discussion of groups. This exposure to the English communication assisted in building confidence in some of the students and minimizing anxiety in the long run.

Although this has improved, the students also reported that even in the later semesters, there are still some students who are anxious especially when it comes to giving of formal presentations or during evaluative situations. These results indicate that the language anxiety may be maintained during educational courses and might be used to still affect the pattern of participation among ESL students.

The results have shown that linguistic confidence is an important factor in the experience of language anxiety among students. Students who stated to be more confident in their proficiency in English were more willing to engage actively in classroom discussions and share their ideas openly. Conversely, less confident students would procrastinate when talking and would not like engaging in academic communication. The confidence in the language was usually related to the prior language learning experiences, the academic exposure, and the possibility to practice the English language in the classroom.

Another factor that was found to have such an impact on language anxiety was social expectations. Most students stated that they were under pressure to show good level of communication in English due to the linkage of academic success and professional adequacy. This strain would at times heighten anxiety to students who believed that their proficiency in language was not up to these standards. Also, comparison with others who were seen to be more fluent speakers would tend to increase anxiety and self-doubt.

On the whole, the data show that in academic communication, the language anxiety is the result of a complex interplay between the factors of gender-related perception, linguistic confidence, classroom involvement, and social expectations. All these combined influence the experience and reaction of the ESL students in respond to the communication difficulties in the university classrooms.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has discussed the gender variance in language anxiety among postgraduate ESL students in academic communication, paying special attention to classroom involvement, linguistic confidence and social expectations. According to the results of the research, it is evident that language anxiety is a major problem affecting the lives of most ESL students in institutions of higher learning. Despite the common use of English as a medium of instruction in higher education, a number of students continue to find it difficult and nervous to use English in academic institutions. Through these experiences, one can easily see how the learning of language is complex in its relationship with the psychological reasons as well as the social interactions in the classroom.

Among the key conclusions of the given study, it is possible to note that language anxiety influences both men and women, who learn English as a second language, yet the experiences they may have will be different. Experiments of the study showed that female students tended to have more emotional responses when talking in English during classroom discussions and presentations. Their fear was often related to the issues of grammatical or pronunciation mistakes and the fear of negative feedback of the colleagues and the teacher. Male students were also anxious, but they were more likely to focus on the problems connected to the linguistic competence and peer comparison. Most of the male participants meant that they would get anxious when they felt other students were more fluent or more confident in English. These results indicate that gender variations in language anxiety are not only a factor of personal psychological conditions but also those of social demands and classroom interactions.

The research also found that the state of language anxiety affected classroom participation directly. The more anxious students were more prone to evading speaking in classes, were afraid to ask questions or were silent in the discussions. This aversion can restrict language practice opportunities and decrease academic learning in students. Classroom involvement is a critical aspect of language acquisition especially in postgraduate education where discussion, debate and presentation are the key elements of academic communication. Thus, anxiety may force some obstacles that do not allow students to enjoy interactive learning environments.

The other notable conclusion is the contribution of linguistic confidence to the experience of language anxiety in students. The students that noted to have greater confidence in their English skills were more likely to

engage in active academic communication. The development of confidence was observed to be gradual based on constant exposure to English communication practice like presentation, group discussions and classroom interactions. The comparison made between first semester students and fourth semester students also showed that the experience of the study academic is a significant factor in alleviating anxiety among many students. Students with increased time experience in the postgraduate program tended to be more at ease with the expression of their ideas in English, though not in formal addressing situations.

The social expectations were another factor which became influential in the form of language anxiety among the ESL students. Most of them also said that they were pressured to perform well in English due to the assumption that academic competence and intelligence is indicated by how well one knows English. Their expectation tended to raise anxiety particularly when students compared themselves in terms of their language skills with that of others. These social pressures can aggravate the state of self-doubt and preclude students in their involvement in classroom discussions.

In general, the results of the current research point to the fact that the development of language anxiety in the academic communication is conditioned by the complex of psychological, social, and educational factors. Gender variations, language assurance, patterns of classroom participation as well as expectations of the society are all factors that determine the experiences of communication among students of English. It is necessary to know these factors to develop positive academic environments where the students will feel free to share their ideas and discuss them without the fear of being negatively evaluated.

To sum up, language anxiety has to be managed by teachers and learning institutions through teaching methods that are participatory, foster linguistic confidence and lessen the pressure of flawless language performance. The establishment of a positive and inclusive classroom environment can assist the learners in breaking the barrier of communication and becoming more effective in academic communications. Universities can help ESL students feel more confident and effective learners in academic language by identifying and managing the elements that cause language anxiety.

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