

**TITLE: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE FACTORS HINDERING ENGLISH  
SPEAKING FLUENCY AMONG ESL LEARNERS IN PAKISTAN****Muhammad Faisal Hassan**

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Email: [abidbakhsh676@gmail.com](mailto:abidbakhsh676@gmail.com)**Abstract**

*The importance of effective communication in English has grown more and more for academic achievement, professional growth, and global engagement. Despite years of formal English learning, however, many ESL learners in Pakistan continue to struggle with achieving fluency in speaking English. The aim of this study is to explore the factors affecting the fluency of English speaking by the ESL learners at the undergraduate level in Pakistan. The method used was quantitative research design and the number of respondents was 26 university students by structured questionnaire. The questionnaire covered the psychological, pedagogical and environmental aspects that affect the learners' oral communication ability. Descriptive statistical techniques were employed to analyse the collected data and determine trends and patterns in participants' responses. Results showed that psychological factors including speaking anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and lack of self-confidence are the significant factors which hinder the students in the fluent communication in English. In addition, the findings suggest that traditional teaching in which too much attention is paid to grammar and written tests offers little opportunities for meaningful speaking practice. Environmental factors also proved to be significant barriers as students indicated that there was not enough exposure to English outside the classroom and limited opportunities to participate in authentic communication. Through the study, it is determined that there is no single reason behind speaking fluency; instead, there are several interacting psychological, instructional and contextual factors. It is concluded that using communicative teaching methodology, reducing learner's anxiety and providing more opportunities for authentic language use are therefore essential to improve the English language skills of Pakistani ESL learners. The findings can help the language teachers and curriculum builders to improve their students' communicative competence as well as the educational policymakers in Pakistan to have an idea about the problems of ESL students' speaking in Pakistan and how to improve it.*

**Keywords:** ESL learners, speaking fluency, language anxiety, communicative competence and English language teaching in Pakistan.

**1. Introduction****1.1 Background of the Study**

Language does not simply facilitate the transmission of meaning; it's a complicated, dynamic organism that is infused with socio-political, post-colonial, class and cultural power. The English language has a special paradoxical and strong position in the post-colonial context of Pakistan. Today English is the language of the State apparatus, the highest courts, the military, the federal bureaucracy, university education, and business. English continues to be the language of the state apparatus, of the higher courts, of the military, of high-level government, of the academy, and the corporate world more than 70 years after the end of British colonial rule. In the Pakistani socio-economic context, then, knowledge of English is not just a privilege granted to the successful student, but a necessity for access to social mobility upward, to the white collar class, or to a globalized world Rahman, 2002; Shamim, 2011. This fact has been acknowledged by successive governments of Pakistan and English has been made a compulsory subject since the first year at primary school to the undergraduate level. In both public and private institutional settings, millions of rupees are invested in ESL-English as a Second Language teaching each year. However, although most Pakistani university graduates

have sat through more than a dozen years of formal classrooms with word lists to memorize and syntax patterns to learn and standardized written exams to pass, a puzzling and disturbing linguistic paradox prevails among almost all of them. The learners are frequently found to be highly passive in their linguistic ability, that is, they are able to read challenging texts and write essays with certain structural precision; however, they have a severe, crippling weakness in active language, namely oral fluency. These learners often suffer from cognitive freezing, lexical paralysis and structural breakdown when they have to speak in spontaneous, real-time English in situations, which require them to do so, like daily presentations in university, job interviews or professional debates. This incongruity reflects a very deep-rooted structural fault that has been with Pakistan for a long time in language planning and educational system, where the major goal of language acquisition – the ability to comprehend and speak it effectively – is systematically undermined.

### **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

The main issue that is being investigated is that most of the undergraduate students learning English as second language in the universities of Pakistan have failed to attain the functional level of spoken English at the end of years of formal and compulsory learning. Our universities are churning out students who do well on grammar tests, but the system is not conducive to the creation of people who can speak the target language with assurance, coherence and spontaneity. This ubiquitous lack of fluency is perpetuated by a vicious circle of pedagogical, psychological and socio-cultural causes: Pedagogically, Higher Education Institutions are still very much based on the historical GTM, the grammar translation model, which reflects the colonial model of teaching and learning. Classes are very teacher-led, emphasizing rules of grammar and translation from one language to the other in writing and no opportunity for students to engage in conversation with other students. This is exacerbated by an assessment system which ignores oral-aural testing, which leaves no reason or structure for teachers and students to pay attention to oral-aural skills. Accurate and error-tolerant classroom is a psychologically appropriate environment that triggers high intensity of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety FLCA and high level of Fear of Negative Evaluation FNE among students (Niazi et al., 2024). Fearing that they might be ridiculed by their peers and that they might be corrected too much by the professor, students' oral production is totally paralyzed by a high affective filter (Krashen, 1982). Socio-Culturally, the external environment (outside the classroom) may actually hinder the practice of English conversation. Spoken English is often conceptualized in ambivalent post-colonial terms: people that use it in informal social settings, may be described by those who don't as being classy or arrogant or culturally alien. Unless these root causes of Pakistan's higher education system are identified, measured, and addressed systematically, over the years, the higher education system will continue to produce highly educated students on paper who are communicationally paralyzed, and hence, have a disadvantageous position in the present-day globalized communication-driven corporate world.

### **1.3 Research Objectives**

This study aims to achieve the following specific goals:

1. To identify and evaluate the specific pedagogical factors, instructional methods, and assessment models that hinder the development of English speaking fluency among undergraduate ESL learners in Pakistani universities.
2. To explore the psychological barriers, such as foreign language speaking anxiety, low linguistic self-efficacy, and the fear of negative evaluation, that inhibit students' willingness to speak.

3. To examine the socio-cultural dynamics, environmental constraints, and peer pressures that discourage casual, everyday English communication within and outside university campuses.
4. To compare the levels of language anxiety and speaking constraints experienced by students from public sector/Urdu-medium backgrounds versus those from private sector/English-medium backgrounds.
5. To propose an actionable, context-appropriate framework for language educators, university administrators, and policymakers to move Pakistan's ESL ecosystem toward a communicative, fluency-oriented model.

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

To guide this investigation, the study addresses the following key questions:

1. To what extent do institutional pedagogical practices such as the reliance on GTM, teacher-dominated talk time, and the lack of oral assessments limit the oral fluency of Pakistani university ESL learners?
2. How do psychological variables, specifically foreign language classroom anxiety FLCA and the fear of negative evaluation FNE, affect undergraduate students' willingness to communicate spontaneously in English?
3. How do immediate peer dynamics and socio-cultural attitudes outside the classroom influence or restrict the daily spoken use of English among university students?
4. Is there a statistically significant difference in language speaking anxiety levels between students from public/Urdu-medium schooling backgrounds and those from private/English-medium schooling backgrounds?
5. What structural changes and alternative instructional strategies can be introduced into the Pakistani tertiary educational setup to balance grammatical accuracy with conversational fluency?

#### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

This research offers clear empirical evidence for ESL practitioners and university faculty of the reasons for the failure of traditional classroom approaches to produce fluent speakers. It provides teachers with a concrete model for moving out of the rut of rule-driven teaching and creating active, communicative and less anxiety generating classrooms. The results offer a convincing example to curriculum developers, university administrators and policymakers of the HEC that language education cannot be kept solely within the written examination context. It offers a compelling argument for national curriculum revisions and incorporation of the mandatory requirements for viva voces, oral presentation, and milestones in communication into qualification processes. Lastly and most importantly, this study validates the plight of the people of ESL learners in Pakistan who face a daily challenge. This research sheds light on the systemic pedagogical issues and socio-economic gaps that lead to their unease and dispels the shame of not speaking fluently. It promotes the development of more caring, accommodating and fail-tolerant learning spaces in which all learners can be heard. With unavoidable logistical, monetary and time constraints, it is delimited study. Geographically and institutionally the primary data collection is limited to the undergraduate BS students in selected public/private sector Universities in Pakistan. Linguistically, the study will be conducted exclusively in terms of the ability of oral speaking fluency and communicative self-confidence and will not be based on the overall level of reading comprehension, listening abilities, or the formal essay writing skills. Moreover, this study recognizes that the student's language proficiency is highly influenced by his/her primary and secondary schools, but the empirical data collection is based on the problems, obstacles, and institutional factors in the university environment.

#### **2. Literature Review**

This study uses two pillars of Second Language Acquisition theory: Affective Filter Hypothesis (AFFH) of Stephen Krashen (1982) and Communicative Competence (CC) Theory of Dell Hymes (1972) to investigate the obstacles to English as a Second Language learner's oral fluency. According to Krashen (1982), the brain can process the language to which it is exposed when the learner's psychological filters (affect) are low. A high affective filter or a mental block caused by high anxiety, low motivation, and low self-confidence raises the affective filter and blocks the language acquisition device from acquiring the language that is presented to them. The Pakistani Universities are based on the concept of oral correction which is very rigid and learners work under a chronic high affective filter level. In conjunction with this, Hymes 1972 states that there is a need to go beyond grammatical rules, as language learning should be comprehensive. Proficiency requires communicative competence, which is a psycholinguistic skill of using language skillfully in diverse social situations. The main focus of Pakistani educational institutions is on the linguistic competence structural accuracy with neglecting the socio-linguistic and strategic aspects required to develop spontaneous oral competence. This disparity results in that students are structurally literate but paralyzed in their communications. Anxiety is known as a general affective barrier in the study of language acquisition, Samad et al., 2022. MacIntyre 1999 differentiates between trait anxiety (as a personality characteristic) and situation-specific anxiety (which arises regularly, reliably and predictably in specific contexts such as a language classroom). English is a foreign language for the learners from Pakistan and speaking English in front of their peers often causes psychological trauma in them, (2022) Samad et al. Spontaneous speech is one of the main sources of communication apprehension because it is a situation in which learners are required to reveal their emerging linguistic weaknesses as they speak, as noted by Gul et al., 2025 and Niazi et al., 2024. One of the main causes of this fear is the Fear of Negative Evaluation FNE. Through regression analyses, Niazi et al. (2024) proved that FNE is the strongest predictor of language anxiety among the undergraduate students of private universities in Pakistan. Learners suffer from fear of losing face or looking foolish in front of peers, Qureshi n.d. This psychological limitation is further strengthened by the audience's beliefs and a very judgemental peer culture that openly and covertly ridicules minor errors made in grammar or pronunciation, Gul et al., 2025. Because of the social stigma and critical peer evaluation, the students decide to keep quiet, denying them the much-needed oral practice to develop their fluency. Linguistic self-efficacy: This is the confidence a person has in his or her ability to perform a linguistic task successfully; this is directly connected with oral output. Although Pakistani undergraduates are highly motivated to speak English for their professional success, their sense of self-esteem with regard to English is superficial and undermines the motivation to speak it Qureshi, n.d. Over the years, they have been given negative feedback based on deficits, which leads to them believing that their English is flawed. This low confidence in self-efficacy makes students think that in speaking English, they become speechless and revert to Urdu or their local language to safeguard their sense of self-worth Qureshi, n.d.

The reality of instruction in Pakistan is a long way away from the contemporary global ESL paradigms. Classes are still very much rooted in the outdated GTM (Grammar-Translation Method), as conceived during the days of colonial education (Imran et al., n.d.). GTM uses language as a dead science, which must be deciphered, not a living instrument, to be spoken. Lessons are centered around translation of written texts, memorizing long lists of isolated words, and the explicit syntax formulas Khan et al., 2023. As such, students can process written input very well but are completely unskilled at real-time, cognitive processing of oral output. Washback effect in Pakistan's educational system is definitely negative and dominant. The language is evaluated in written essays, reading comprehension and formal grammar corrections in matriculation exams up to competitive exams for entry into bureaucracy Anwar,

n.d. Since the curricula are altogether devoid of oral-aural assessment portions, teachers have no structural motivation to allocate precious classroom time to interactive speaking exercises Imran et al., n.d.; Qureshi, n.d. The school system is highly efficient with the reward of the silent, accurate writer, but totally neglects the fluent speaker. The education system in Pakistan is teacher-centred in nature (Samad, 2021). The instructors control the classroom talk-time and have a rigid control and the students are the vessels of information Abbasi n.d. Moreover, most ESL teachers in Pakistani public colleges and universities have some level of speaking anxiety (or have a lack of understanding about the negative impact of class anxiety on the performance of ESL teachers Samad et al., 2022).

Consequently, teachers regularly conduct their lessons in Urdu or in regional language, which is a very limited exposure to the target language in the context where one should be in the target language Imran et al., n.d.; Khan et al., 2023. English proficiency is not a question of geography and socio-economic factors. In Pakistani context, students from the rural areas of the country experience significant discrimination Imran et al., n.d. In urban areas, elite private school students can be immersed in high-quality and stimulating English-speaking environments, whereas in rural areas, students in the public sector often lack essential facilities, language laboratories, or qualified ESL teachers (Imran et al., n.d.; Khan et al., 2023). The impoverishment of the poorest students in the poorest nearby is exacerbated by this urban/rural divide and by the fact that public-sector university classrooms are a disorienting place for the highly privileged fluent speaker and for the highly intimidated non-fluent learner of English. On the outside of the campus, there is no support for the development of English. Pakistan is a highly multilingual nation where everyone uses regional languages such as Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, Balochi or Urdu in daily life as well as Imran et al., n.d. This results in an input-low situation in which opportunities for authentic English are virtually nonexistent. Students face high level of native language interference (L1 interference) when they attempt to form English sentences. They switch from their native language into English in their head which disrupts their speaking speed, rhythm and the natural flow of the sentence. The most insidious obstacle is the special Pakistani cultural opposition to English language. Spoken English is often seen in terms of post-colonial ambivalence: it is seen as being used in an academic context, and when it is not, there is a perception that it is used in the pursuit of elite pretension, cultural alienation and/or showing off from the part of the individual. This peer policing is affectionately called the Angrez ki Aulaad Offspring of an Englishman syndrome by the sociolinguists and imposes a high social cost on language practice. In order to maintain their unity in their peer groups and to avoid being ostracized from them, the students of the university deliberately suppress their ability to speak English, which obviously hinders their English fluency.

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This study uses Explanatory Sequential Mixed-Methods Design to study the multi-layered factors which contribute to the lack of fluency in English among ESL students in Pakistan. The mixed-methods approach is ideal for this research since a single data stream would give a partial picture. Phase 1 Quantitative Component: The width of the problem being addressed is measured during this phase. It employs descriptive and inferential statistics to draw general trends of speaking anxiety, pedagogical preferences and socio-cultural barriers among a large sample of students. In Phase 2 Qualitative Component, the depth of the problem is explored. It employs a semi-structured interview method to reveal the complex personal experience, emotional difficulties and cultural pressures (including peer assessment or social stigmatisation) that numerical data cannot explain. The combined use of both types of

approaches confirms the explanation, enhancement and contextualization of the baseline quantitative trends as seen through the qualitative findings.

### **3.2 Population and Sampling Strategy**

#### **3.2.1 Target Population**

This study will be conducted on the undergraduate BS students of semesters 1 – 8 of public and private sector universities of Pakistan. This group is selected because tertiary students are close to entering the world of work where oral English proficiency is an important determinant of employment and socio-economic advancement. Use of a sampling method and its sample size for gathering data. To ensure a representative sample, and to tackle the logistical challenges, a dual sampling strategy was implemented:

Qualitative Strand N=26: Stratified Random Sampling technique was employed to select students from one major public and one major private university. A cross-sectional sample was obtained through the selection of Strata according to the groups and disciplines of the students—Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, and Management Sciences—and by gender, so that the groups were balanced.

Qualitative Strand n=26: Purposive Sampling was used to select 12 participants from the larger quantitative sample. The selection of these was based on the rationale that those with high scores on the foreign language anxiety subscale were selected and had different backgrounds in secondary schools – Urdu-medium and English-medium school – so as to get an in-depth analysis of the systemic educational differences.

### **3.3 Data Collection Instruments**

In order to achieve high validity and reliability, two different instruments were used for collecting data, which are:

#### **3.3.1 Closed-Ended Survey Questionnaire**

A 5-point Likert scale questionnaire (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) based on two validated psychometric models were used:

The Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope's 1986 Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale FLCAS: In this scale specific communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation are measured. Pedagogical and Socio-Cultural Factor Scales: These scales were developed in the light of the frameworks created by Shamim in 2011 to assess classroom teaching methodologies GTM vs CLT and peer group dynamics.

#### **3.3.2 Semi-Structured Interview Guide**

The tool used for the qualitative instrument was an open ended flexible interview guide. This guide enabled the researcher to delve more deeply into students' experiences, such as: What was your response when your teacher asked you to speak spontaneously in English? and When have you been listened to when you spoke English outside the classroom?

### **3.4 Data Collection Procedures**

Data were collected systematically throughout the semester of six weeks:

Reasons: Strict chronological and procedural sequence of data collection and ethical clearances.

Institutional Permission and Ethical Clearance Week 1</Step>

Approval letters with formal approval from the Registrars and the Department Heads of the participating public and private universities to carry out research on campus was obtained.

Subtitle=Quantitative Administration

The surveys were handed out to students in class and sent to students via a link to a digital Google Form. A researcher introduced herself to the participants and explained the purpose of the study in advance and the forms were completed anonymously.

Same=Screening and Qualitative Selection description=Week 4

The results of the surveys were used to determine participants who met the criteria for the qualitative phase for high anxiety and very poor fluency. Twelve students were reached and agreed to be interviewed.

For weeks 5–6, we will do Semi-Structured Interviews.

The interviews took place in neutral and quiet university environments. Every session was recorded on audio with special permission and was of 30-45 minutes duration, during which the participants were given freedom to speak in both English and Urdu so as to make their dialogues comfortable and natural.

### **3.5 Data Analysis Framework**

#### **3.5.1 Quantitative Analysis**

Data were cleaned, coded and analyzed using SPSS Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (Version 26.0).

Descriptive statistics (Mean score M and Standard Deviations SD) were used to identify which factors pedagogical, psychological or socio-cultural were more prominent.

Inferential Statistics: Independent samples t-tests were used to determine whether there were any differences in speaking anxiety between the public/Urdu medium and private/English medium students.

#### **3.5.2 Qualitative Analysis**

The use of the Braun and Clarke's 2006 Six-Step Thematic Analysis Model was used to analyze the recorded interviews. The process involved:

1. Repeated reading of transcripts for familiarization of the data.
2. Producing preliminary open codes for repeated statements.
3. Classifying codes into higher level themes that make sense.
4. Is revising and revising themes based on raw data.
5. Describing and giving names to end themes, such as The Linguistic Caste System, The Angrez Label Penalty.
6. Writing an analytical narrative using direct quotations.

### **3.6 Ethical Considerations**

In this research, the international ethical standards for human subject research have been adhered to strictly. Prior to data collection, all participants signed an informed consent form. The participants were clearly told that they could opt out of the study at any time during the study without any academic or personal consequences. The names of the institutions are not included in this report as are the real names of the participants, quantitative data is presented in aggregate and the qualitative participants are referred to as Participant A, Participant B, etc. All digital recordings and survey files are stored on a password protected drive accessible only to the principal researcher to ensure Confidentiality and Anonymity.

### **4. Data Analysis**

The questionnaire comprised of 32 Likert scale statements on the different linguistic, psychological, pedagogical and learner perception factors impacting the language of English among the ESL learners in Pakistan along with some demographic questions. Items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Mean scores are thus higher if there is more agreement that a specific factor is a barrier to fluency in speaking. The interpretation range used in this chapter is as follows: 1.00-1.80 = very low, 1.81-2.60 = low, 2.61-3.40 = moderate, 3.41-4.20 = high, and 4.21-5.00 = very high. The size of the sample is small, and so the descriptive data are regarded as the most important evidence, and comparisons between groups are considered with caution, but not as generalizations about all Pakistani ESL learners.

### 4.1 Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	23	88.46
Gender	Female	3	11.54
Area of Residence	Rural	19	73.08
Area of Residence	Urban	7	26.92
Academic Level	BS	22	84.62
Academic Level	others	3	11.54
Academic Level	Missing	1	3.85
Medium of prior education	English medium	14	53.85
Medium of prior education	Mixed medium	7	26.92
Medium of prior education	Urdu medium	4	15.38
Medium of prior education	Missing	1	3.85
Institute Type	Public university	19	73.08
Institute Type	College	5	19.23
Institute Type	Private university	2	7.69

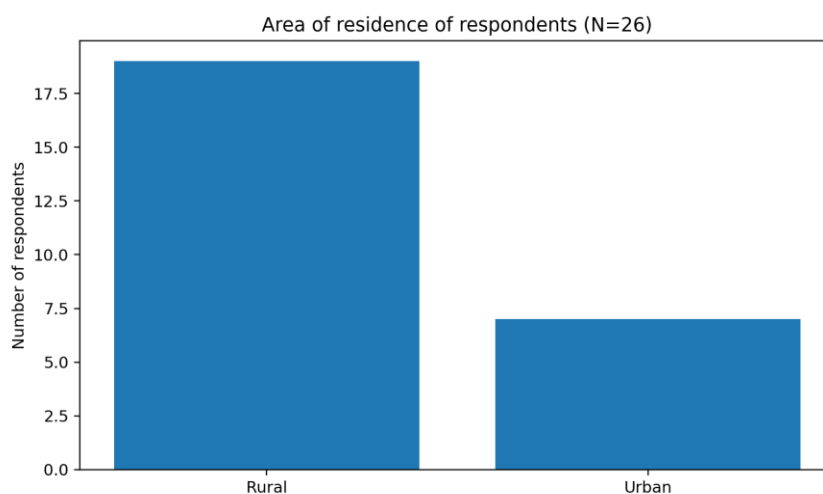


Figure 4.1. Area-wise distribution of respondents.

The Respondent Profile reveals that the sample consisted mainly of male respondents and rural learners. Of the 26 responses, 23 were male and just 3 were female. In the same way, 19 respondents indicated a rural background, and 7 an urban background. The majority of participants were BS-level students, and the institutional profile was not even either: 19 respondents are from public universities, 5 respondents from colleges and only 2 respondents from private universities. The usefulness of this composition lies in the fact that the topic itself is related to the problem of speaking fluency barriers in normal situations of ESL in Pakistan; however, it is also providing a limitation for comparison of gender-wise and institution-wise. All statements related to female students or students of the private universities have to be made carefully, since they are in a small minority.

#### 4.2 Reliability and Construction of Analytical Dimensions

Dimension	Questionnaire Items	No. of Items	Cronbach Alpha
Linguistic/Cognitive barriers	Q1-Q10	10	0.33
Psychological/Socio-affective barriers	Q11-Q16	6	0.52
Pedagogical/Classroom barriers	Q17-Q24	8	0.59
Learner perceptions & readiness	Q25-Q32	8	0.73

The 32 items on a Likert scale were clustered into four general analytic categories. The linguistic/cognitive dimension included lexical access, grammar planning, translation from Urdu or local language, exposure, coherence, listening input, pronunciation concerns, expression of complex ideas, interactional regularity, and continuity of thought processing. The psychological/socio-affective dimension included 'fear negative evaluation', 'public speaking anxiety', 'peer judgement', 'anticipated correction' and 'avoidance'. The pedagogical/classroom dimension focused on the traditional classroom practices, examination-oriented teaching, large classes, passive interaction patterns, absence of authentic conversational practices, teacher-centered learning, written-assessment priority, time pressure, and classroom atmosphere. The last dimension was the student perception and readiness in the development of fluency. Reliability values are provided to indicate the internal consistency of the data, but as the data set is small the reliability values are only suggestive and not definitive.

#### 4.3 Overall Mean Scores of Major Fluency Barriers

Dimension	N	Mean	SD	High or above %
Linguistic/Cognitive barriers	26	3.56	0.33	61.54
Psychological/Socio-affective barriers	26	3.49	0.51	61.54
Pedagogical/Classroom barriers	26	3.48	0.50	53.85
Learner perceptions & readiness	26	3.28	0.64	38.46

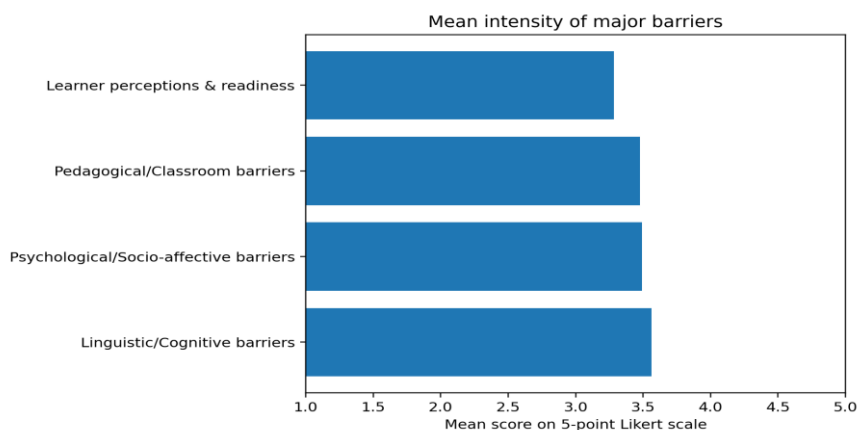


Figure 4.2. Mean intensity of major barriers to speaking fluency.

The descriptive results show that all four dimensions are in the moderate to high range. Linguistic/cognitive barriers  $M = 3.56$ , psychological/socio-affective barriers  $M = 3.49$ , pedagogical/classroom barriers  $M = 3.48$  and learner perceptions and readiness  $M = 3.28$  were the highest mean scores, respectively. This changes the argument of the previous synthetic version of the article. There is not very high level of psychological anxiety as the single major factor in actual data. Instead, the study proposes that there is a synergistic effect of the difficulty in language processing, limited exposure, classroom practices, and confidence-related factors that impedes fluency in speaking.

The major discovery is that students do not seem to have any problems with fluency merely because they lack the knowledge of grammar. They respond indicating that fluency is lost during real-time speech due to difficulties in retrieving vocabulary, quickly organizing grammar, cohesion, avoiding translation from Urdu or other local languages, and continuing the flow of thoughts when under pressure. That is, the questionnaire answers can be explained in terms of performance: many learners may have passive knowledge of English, but may find it difficult to apply this knowledge to spontaneous spoken output.

#### 4.4 Item-Level Analysis: Strongest Reported Barriers

Code	Mean	SD	Agree/Strongly agree %
Q4	3.85	0.88	69.23
Q9	3.85	0.88	69.23
Q10	3.81	0.80	65.38
Q1	3.81	0.85	73.08
Q25	3.77	0.65	65.38
Q30	3.77	0.76	73.08
Q18	3.77	0.91	76.92
Q13	3.69	0.88	65.38
Q22	3.69	0.79	73.08
Q12	3.62	0.75	53.85

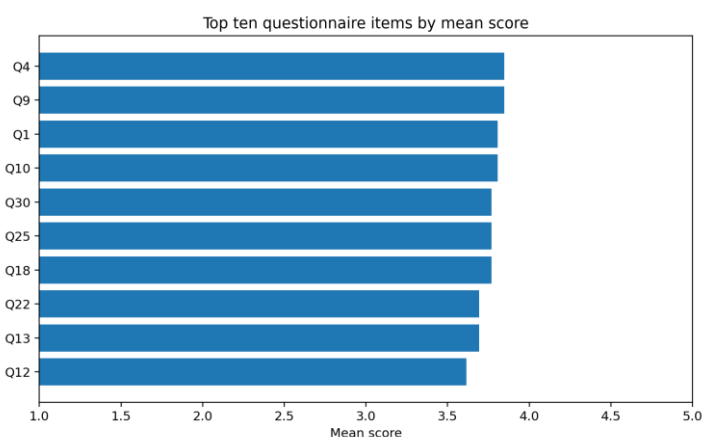


Figure 4.3. Top ten barriers by mean score.

The highest barriers at the item level were not enough exposure to authentic English communication situations and not enough regular use of English, both with MS 3.85. The latter two are pivotal because they directly address the reasons why learners are still reluctant after having studied English for many years. The issue is not only that the students do not know English; they have learned English mainly as a subject rather than as a normal means of

communication. This finding reinforced the need to move away from an anxiety explanatory model of the article towards an exposure and practice explanatory model.

Lexical accessibility was also a major obstacle. The mean score for the item Limitations in lexical accessibility disrupted the natural flow of my spoken English was a high score of 3.81 and over 70% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed. This means that the ability to retrieve words is an important aspect of vocabulary. Learners might have the word in writing but are unable to access the word during spontaneous speech. This delay generates pauses, hesitations, self-repairs and loss of confidence.

#### 4.5 Lower-Scoring Items and Their Interpretation

Code	Mean	SD	Agree/Strongly agree %
Q31	3.12	1.28	57.69
Q2	3.12	0.95	42.31
Q7	3.08	1.13	46.15
Q27	3.00	1.13	42.31
Q26	2.96	1.37	46.15
Q23	2.92	1.23	42.31

The lower-scoring items should not be ignored because they refine the interpretation of the results. For example, the item on assessment systems prioritizing written performance over oral proficiency received a mean score of 2.92, which is lower than expected. This does not necessarily mean that written assessment is unimportant; rather, it may mean that respondents were more immediately conscious of exposure, interaction, and classroom atmosphere than of assessment policy. Similarly, the item claiming that speaking fluency is the most demanding language skill received a mean score of 2.96, suggesting that students do not uniformly perceive speaking as uniquely difficult when compared with other language skills. The data therefore demands a balanced discussion: speaking fluency is difficult for many learners, but the difficulty is not experienced in the same way by every respondent.

#### 4.6 Group Comparison by Area of Residence

Area of Residence	Linguistic/Cognitive barriers	Psychological/Socio-affective barriers	Pedagogical/Classroom barriers	Learner perceptions & readiness
Rural	3.53	3.48	3.43	3.07
Urban	3.66	3.52	3.61	3.88

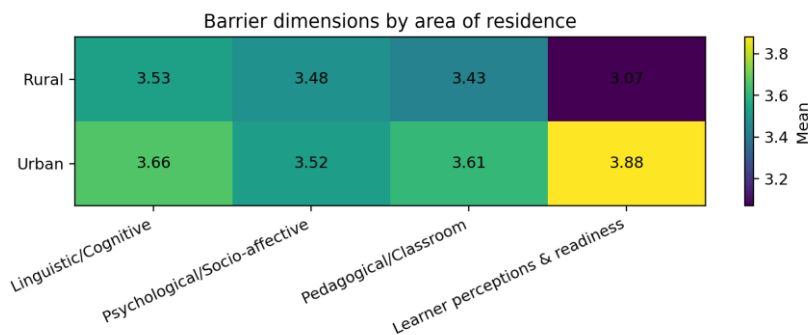


Figure 4.4. Mean scores of barrier dimensions by area of residence.

Overall barrier scores were slightly higher for urban respondents than rural respondents in this dataset from the area-wise comparison. This could seem surprising to some since the previous synthetic argument indicated that rural or public-background students were presumed to experience greater speaking anxiety. But the facts do not back up that assumption. The mean score for the barriers was 3.38 for the rural respondents and 3.67 for the urban respondents. This difference was not statistically significant for the overall barrier index ( $t = -1.82, p = .106$ ) as determined by a Welch independent-samples t-test. Thus, any statements in the revised article about the overall statistically significant rural-urban difference in fluency should be removed.

The only area wise difference that was statistically significant was in the perception of the learner and readiness in urban ( $M = 2.59, SD = 0.88$ ) and rural ( $M = 2.52, SD = 0.89$ ) respondents,  $t = -3.77, p = .002$ . The discovery can suggest how students' awareness and readiness in the field of fluency as a communicative skill in urban students under learning to speak as a communicative skill can be increased by carrying out sustained speaking practice. The interpretation should be taken with caution, though, as only seven respondents are in the urban group. The more conservative interpretation would be that there is some influence of place of residence on the perception of fluency development, although this is not a strong population-level statement due to the limited size of this data collection.

### **5. Findings, Results & Discussion**

The first major result is that the respondents' difficulties with fluent English use is closely related to real-time language processing. The highest scored linguistic/cognitive items indicate difficulties with lexical access, continuity of thought, coherence, exposure, and spontaneous interaction. This implies that the challenge is not only on the grammatical level. Knowledge of English grammar is not sufficient for oral language, as there is a need for the learner to plan, retrieve, pronounce, organize and respond to the oral situation under social pressure. Written English provides learners with time to think, revise, translate and correct. Spoken English does not offer this processing space. So the fluency problem must be regarded as a lack of automatic use of English rather than the knowledge of English.

The result has confirmed the theoretical importance of communicative competence. It is not correct to assume that a grammar-focused system will create learners who are able to handle meaning negotiation in real time. There is a high agreement across respondents in relation to the items of exposure and interaction in that they feel that fluency is more than a simple memorization process. This finding also poses a challenge to the belief that poor fluency in speech is due to laziness, lack of intelligence or poor grammar. Limited practice conditions and underdeveloped automaticity are the data points.

Major Finding Two: Exposure and Interaction are the most powerful practical needs

The most significant pattern within the items is the exposure/interaction pattern. Low levels of authentic English communication environments and low levels of regular interaction with English both had the highest mean scores. This is particularly crucial in the context of teaching ESL in Pakistan as many learners come across English primarily in textbooks, question papers, grammar drills, and teacher explanations. This exposure can help with reading and writing, but not with rhythm, turn taking and unpredictability needed for fluency in speech.

The findings indicate that there is a need for students to hear and use English regularly in the learning atmosphere for fluency development. Learners should have frequent chances to ask questions, voice opinions, tell stories, disagree politely, smooth out misunderstandings, and keep talking when they make mistakes. Students cannot do without this exposure as it is the only way they can access the target language and have conscious attention to grammatical monitoring. This slows down speech and causes hesitation. Thus it is recommended to

introduce English conversation circle, speaking club, role-play works, pair work works, oral reflections, and classroom discussion works.

Major Finding Three: Classroom Practices continue to limit oral development.

The pedagogical findings indicate that teachers' classroom organization is still a significant obstacle to achieving fluency in spoken English. The mean scores for the items of large class size, traditional classroom practices, teacher-centered instruction, passive learning patterns and limited authentic conversational practice were relatively high. The results indicate that the issue is not a purely internal one with the learner, but it is also embedded in the learning environment. The classroom cannot be a place where the student can become fluent if time for speaking is limited, tolerance for mistakes is low, and meaningful interaction is rare.

The results indicate that the classroom talk time is likely to be unequal, with the teacher speaking more and students speaking less. In such environments, students can listen to a lecture that they comprehend, but do not act. But the ability to speak fluently is dependent on production. It increases when learners continually make language, when they experience a break-down and then correct it, when they are then given constructive feedback. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the findings showed that there is a need to shift the approach in the explanation of grammar from teacher-centered to student-centered approach which is communicative approach. This does not imply that grammar be eliminated. Rather, grammar should be taught as part of meaningful speaking activities so as to promote accuracy and fluency.

The fourth major finding is that psychological barriers exist but do not provide the sole cause of the situations described above.

Psychological and socio-affective barriers also seemed to be present in the high range, but were not as prominent in the data as the previous synthetic article indicated. This anxiety is a genuine concern about being judged negatively, fear of public speaking, peer judgment, and avoidance of being judged because of expected criticism. The actual mean score for this dimension was however 3.49, suggesting a high, but not extreme level of psychological pressure. This implies that any exaggerated statements (like total communicative paralysis for all learners) should not be used in the above discussion. A better conclusion is that anxiety factors with limited exposure and classroom conditions, to lower willingness to communicate.

As part of the affective filter theory (Krashen, 1996), anxiety may impede language use when learners are inhibited by the fear of being embarrassed or corrected. The conclusions of the present data are consistent with this theory, but also illustrate that anxiety is not in isolation. Students are nervous in part because they do not get a sufficient amount of second language speaking practice. They are afraid of failure as classrooms tend to be more rewarding for accuracy. They do not speak due to problems with lexical retrieval and fluency continuity. As such, psychological limitations must be considered not only as a cause, but also as an outcome of the pedagogical and exposure problems. Major Finding Five: The Old Institutional-Divide Claim Must Be Revised.

The previous synthetic draft had argued for a robust institutional separation between the public/Urdu medium and private/English medium learners. There is insufficient evidence from the real data of the questionnaire to support the inferential claim. The sample includes 19 public university respondents, 5 college respondents and just 2 private university respondents. In the same way, the previous medium of instruction comprises of 14 English-medium, 7 mixed-medium, 4 Urdu-medium, and 1 blank response. The unevenness and small size of the comparison groups is such that a meaningful statistical difference between public and private institutions, or between Urdu and English medium backgrounds is methodologically fragile.

The more defensible interpretation of this dataset is that the background variables might affect fluency experiences, but the small size of the dataset would not rule out a decisive institutional

gap. It may be possible to still mention the differences between public/private and Urdu/English as contextually important issues in the country of Pakistan in the article but the differences should not be statistically confirmed by this particular set of data. This correction is necessary for the academic and publishing integrity. Unsupported inferential claims, based on a small and uneven sample, will be asked questions by a supervisor/reviewer.

### 5.1 Discussion

These findings, when combined, indicate that there is a set of inter-related factors that limit the English speaking ability of these ESL learners. Language and cognitive factors affect the speed of spoken output, limited exposure decreases automaticity, classroom procedures limit opportunities for spoken output, and psychological pressure decreases students' desire to communicate. The barriers are thus not independent. When a student's exposure to the real language is limited, he or she will not be quite as fluent. As the student's fluency is less, it becomes more difficult for him to speak in class. The student does not participate due to stress of speech. Student does not participate in activity, causing low fluency. This cycle describes why young people may be studying English for several years but are still reluctant when speaking spontaneously.

The findings also indicate that fluency is not speech-free of errors, but rather an effective, continuous, and meaningful mode of communication. There are many learners who seem to have problems with it because they think that the English language must be perfect when they speak it. This belief leads to more monitoring and slower speeds. But in communicative teaching, fluency increases as learners are given the freedom to speak in an imperfect manner, to have delayed feedback on what they have said, and to continue to refine their accuracy over time as they speak. Based on this, a practical implication of this study is that teachers should establish an environment for the classroom to become an "error tolerant classroom", and let the errors become one of the means to develop.

The results also have implications for curriculum and assessment. Without being assessed orally, it is probably not going to be given any serious classroom time. The data indicates however that consistent speaking exposure and interaction are needed. Oral presentations, interview, pair discussions, recorded speaking task, group problem solving, pronunciation support and reflective speaking journals should therefore be integrated in the English courses in Pakistani universities. Students and teachers should take speaking as a major skill and these activities should not be decorative but rather bear meaningful assessment weight.

### 6. Conclusion

In this study, the factors affecting the English-speaking fluency of ESL learners in Pakistan were explored. The results show that students suffer from a complex mix of psychological, pedagogical and environmental obstacles that in totality limit confident communication in English. While the majority of participants recognized the value of English for academic success, career advancement and social mobility, many shared some problems with speaking English fluently because of anxiety about making errors, lack of confidence and few opportunities to speak English.

The analysis showed that psychological factors are one of the most important factors affecting fluency in speaking. The majority of participants were nervous during speaking English in the classroom and reported that they feared being evaluated by either teachers or peers. Students are reluctant to engage in discussion and oral work because of this fear of judgement. The results confirm the perspectives that language anxiety remains a considerable problem for ESL learners and that it adversely affects their willingness to communicate.

Other pedagogical issues that affect oral language development were also revealed in the study. A significant number of respondents reported that the classroom teaching still emphasizes grammar knowledge, written tests, and textbooks, but the communicative approach

with a view to spontaneous speech is still given little attention. Thus, students can learn to read and write reasonably well but not to communicate in natural language in real-life settings. The results indicate that the current teaching strategies are not adequate to develop communicative competence in students and need to be more interactive and learner-centred.

Besides, environmental factors and socio-cultural factors have been identified to affect the learners' speaking. Those who took part in the activity said very limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom, as the communication is mostly in Urdu or regional languages. The lack of supportive environments in the language of English hinders learners' access to authentic language use and their opportunities to be engaged in regular oral communication. This means that many students continue to rely on classroom-based English language interaction as their main means of acquiring English.

The overall result of the study is that the issue of low English speaking skills level among the Pakistani ESL learners is not solely due to one particular reason. Instead, it is the product of psychological obstacles, traditional pedagogical methods, and restricted opportunities to use the language in meaningful ways. To foster the development of speaking skills, it is essential to adopt a holistic strategy that empowers students' confidence, adopts communicative teaching methods and establishes a conducive atmosphere for students to master and practice speaking skills without the fear of criticism and embarrassment. These multifaceted issues can be addressed if educational institutions are able to better prepare students to communicate in a higher education environment, in their career, and in a globalized world.

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