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A Quantitative Study to Investigate the Speaking Anxiety among ESL Undergraduate Pakistani Students through the Lens of Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis

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Abstract

The anxiety to speak is a known problem of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, especially among undergraduate learners who rely on good oral communication as the key to success in their academic life. Although Pakistani ESL students have been exposed to English lessons over a long period, they all have a feeling of hesitation, fear of being judged negatively, and lose confidence when undergoing speaking tasks. The proposed study is designed to examine the amount and the character of speaking anxiety in ESL undergraduate students in Pakistan using the theoretical framework of the Affective Filter Hypothesis proposed by Krashen. The research questions determined the severity of speaking anxiety, the correlation of the latter with affective variables (motivation and self-confidence), and the interpretation of the results in the context of the theoretical model used by Krashen. The research design used was quantitative research where a structured questionnaire based on the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was utilized. The data was gathered among ESL undergraduate students studying in Pakistani universities and the data assessed with descriptive and inferential statistics. The anticipated findings elaborate common causes of speaking anxiety and to validate the position of affective variables in restraining oral language practice. Pedagogically, the study has major implications because it can inform ESL teachers and curriculum developers in the development of low-anxiety classrooms that can help in oral proficiency and effective language acquisition.

Key words: Speaking Anxiety, ESL undergraduate students, Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis

1. Introduction

In Pakistan, English plays a central role in higher education. It has found application as a medium of instruction in most of the universities, in the academic presentations, classroom discussions, and in professional communication. The undergraduate students are supposed to be able to speak the English language orally in order to be successful in their academic and professional life in the future. Nonetheless, it is seen that a significant number of Pakistani students studying English as a Second Language (ESL) have problems speaking in English even after years of formal classes. Studies indicate that students usually experience hesitation, nervousness, and anxiety when they have to talk in front of the audience (Yahaya & Madzlan,

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2021). This case implies that in oral communication, it is not solely the linguistic knowledge that will guarantee effectiveness.

Spoken language is the most commonly known of the four language abilities that is an anxiety triggering skill of language learning in the second language. Speaking is an instant processing, social performance and answering. These characteristics make learners have more fear of making mistakes and being judged negatively. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) define the anxiety as a foreign language anxiety, which concerns the situations associated with language learning. Their work on the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) gave an empirical base to the study of the anxiety in the language classroom. The study was later followed by other researches that noted, anxiety negatively impacts oral performance and willingness to communicate among learners (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). Anxious learners tend not to engage and they also minimize their oral activities and this restricts their language acquisition (Liu and Jackson, 2008).

Classroom practices in most cases are skewed towards grammar, reading, and writing over speaking especially in most ESL settings, as in the case of Pakistan. Students make most preparations focusing on written tests but not on oral communication. Consequently, they might be able to have grammar skills and have no confidence when speaking English in practical contexts. The research in Pakistan also reported that fear of speaking among students is also due to teacher-centered instructions and the strict atmosphere in classrooms (Hussain, Fareed, & Akhtar, 2020). The results emphasize the need to investigate emotional and psychological aspects which affect oral participation.

The current research explores speaking anxiety in ESL undergraduate Pakistani students using the theoretical framework of the Affective Filter Hypothesis which has been theorized by Stephen Krashen. The Monitor Model contains the Affective Filter Hypothesis and describes the influence of emotional variables on the second language learning (Krashen, 1982). This hypothesis holds aspects like anxiety, motivation and self confidence. These are determinants of how much information can be internalized by the learners using the comprehensible input. In cases where there are high levels of anxiety, the affective filter is powerful and inhibits language acquisition. The learner is better prepared to receive language input and to be more willing to communicate when there are no anxiety feelings and high motivation. This theoretical approach is one of the best to be used in studying speaking anxiety in the ESL classes.

Even though there are extents of literature on speaking anxiety in various international settings, little quantitative research has been conducted to specifically target ESL undergraduate students in Pakistan with a theoretical framework by Krashen. Other studies report the levels of anxiety but fail to directly correspond their results to the Affective Filter Hypothesis. Hence, there is a necessity of a theory-based quantitative study measuring the degree of speaking anxiety and its correlation with such affective factors as motivation and self-confidence.

The research design adapted in this study is quantitative research design and a structured questionnaire that is based on Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz et al.,

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1986). This study determined the extent of speaking anxiety among the ESL undergraduate learners of Pakistani universities. It also looks into the connection between oral participation, affective factors, and speaking anxiety. Through the interpretation of the results using the Affective Filter Hypothesis, the given research aims to present a theoretical explanation of the emotional barriers that inhibit speaking performance.

The value of the research is its pedagogical and theoretical implications. Pedagogically, the results may assist ESL educators to realize the emotional difficulty in students when performing speaking activities. Classroom settings can be created to support oral participation by teachers through the creation of low-anxiety and supportive classroom settings. Language teaching strategies can also be approached with affective considerations by the curriculum developers. On the theoretical level, the study is relevant to the field of applied linguistics by offering context-dependent empirical data that can be used to prove the applicability of the Affective Filter Hypothesis developed by Krashen in ESL classrooms.

On the whole, a significant impediment to effective oral communication among ESL undergraduate students in Pakistan is speaking anxiety. Fear of being judged negatively, lack of confidence, classroom pressure is some of the emotional factors that lower the willingness of the students to speak. This study is done by conducting a quantitative study on speaking anxiety and explaining it in the context of the theoretical concept presented by Krashen in order to give a better overview of the impact that affective variables have on oral language performance in higher education.

2. Literature Review

Studies of speaking anxiety in second language acquisition have remained to increase over the past few years, as it has been noted to continue to have an ongoing effect on the oral performance and the desire to communicate of the learners. An in-depth analysis of the current literature shows that speaking anxiety is a very important affective construct which prevents acquisition of second language in different contexts. A study shows that foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) is determined by not only internal factors associated with an individual learner but also external ones, including classroom practices, the learning environment and pressures of assessment (Effiong, 2013). This review proves that speaking anxiety is not only a factor that influences oral performance but also lowers intrinsic motivation in learners and raises the cognitive obstacles to effective communication (Peng, 2025).

Fear of negative assessment and lack of self-confidence are always found as the most prevailing causes of speaking anxiety in the empirical studies. Rahmat et al. (2021) found in a research study on undergraduate ESL students in Malaysia that the absence of confidence and fear of judgment were the main cause of anxiety among the students in oral activities. The authors also discovered that the various forms of anxiety, including trait and situational anxiety, were found to mediate the way learners felt about speaking apprehension, that is, there is an interaction between the personal psychological traits and the situational demands (Rahmat et al., 2021). On the same note, Tyana, Maulina, and Setyobudi (2021) found out that most learners were not confident in the process of speaking English, and a significant percentage of them expressed concern about their mistakes, which is a typical emotional barrier to active engagement. These results confirm the thesis that anxiety is a complex

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phenomenon that has strong links with the beliefs of learners toward their linguistic competence.

Other recent studies indicate that speaking anxiety works in conjunction with other affective variables including self-efficacy and motivation. In a study of speaking anxiety in Malaysian ESL students, it was established that general communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation were the main focus of discomfort in learners when communicating in English, despite the fact that demographic factors such as gender did not influence the level of anxieties significantly (Fen et.al., 2020). The researchers also reported that self-efficacy, previous language experience were better predictors of speaking anxiety as compared to demographical aspects indicating that affective variables are stronger predictors as compared to background variables. This is further aggravated by frequent test induced anxiety which builds performance pressure which impacts negatively on the confidence of learners (Fen, et.al., 2020).

In addition to the studies on the individual basis, deeper reviews have pointed out the dynamicity of speaking anxiety in the second language context. Gobena (2025) reviewed various studies on second/foreign language speaking anxiety and discovered that, in spite of the methodological disparities, learners are mostly anxious at moderate and high levels, when it comes to speaking tasks. It was also highlighted in the review that emotional barriers do not only decrease the performance of speaking but also damage the overall learning result of learners, and it is necessary to train them in terms of affecting the learning of the language (Gobena, 2025). This kind of synthesis of the existing studies points out to the fact that there is a clear agreement on the fact that speaking anxiety is everywhere and it has a huge influence on oral communication of learners.

Teachers and classroom conditions have gained more and more popularity as factors influencing the anxiety of learners. Recent research in the field of Egyptian higher education found that in most cases, teachers noticed anxiety about foreign languages in their students (especially in speaking) and also demonstrated the significance of instructional support in reducing the difficulties (Attia & Algazo, 2025). The perception of teachers supports the idea that anxiety grows and hinders the learning of a language in cases when learners are psychologically not supported or when classroom activities are highly assessive, but they are not supported by scaffolding (Attia & Algazo, 2025). This is consistent with the results obtained in Malaysian settings, where positive classroom relations were connected with lower anxiety (Fen, et.al., 2020).

Theoretical studies highlight the intricacy of the speaking anxiety issue in the second language acquisition. Papi and Khajavy (2023) stressed that the second language anxiety was a construct well-developed, with both complex outcomes on the learners, such as, reduced readiness to communicate, and higher cognitive burden when performing speaking roles. According to them, anxiety is a factor that is interacting with other emotive variables and their measurement and conceptualization are still developing in the field of applied linguistics, which implies that speaking anxiety needs to be analyzed within the scope of affective and cognitive variables (Papi & Khajavy, 2023).

Nonetheless, there are few studies, which specifically examined speaking anxiety of Pakistani ESL undergraduate students through a strict theoretical framework like Affective Filter

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Hypothesis of Krashen. Though there are certain studies that explain the language anxiety in Pakistan descriptively, not many of them quantify the connection between the language anxiety and some affective factors such as motivational factor and confidence. It is therefore an important gap that has been filled by the current study since it uses a quantitative method and supports the results through the theoretical lens of Krashen by relating emotional experience of learners to the existing second language acquisition theory.

The recent studies conducted in 2020 and later prove that the problem of speaking anxiety is still highly common in the ESL and EFL contexts. Anxiety during oral communication is rather moderate and high as learners are afraid of negative assessment, they lack confidence, as well as they feel pressured to perform well. These results justify the necessity of the instructional techniques and theoretical explanations of the language learning process, which takes emotional facets into consideration, so the present study is timely and relevant to the Pakistani ESL classrooms.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The research design used in this study is a quantitative research design to explore the issue of speaking anxiety among ESL undergraduate Pakistani students. The quantitative approach is suitable because it will be possible to measure the level of anxiety systematically and analyze the correlation between variables of affect and speaking anxiety statistically. It is a cross-sectional study because the data will be gathered at one time to investigate the experiences learners have regarding speaking anxiety in ESL classrooms.

3.2. Population

The population of the study comprises ESL undergraduate students enrolled in universities located in Lahore, Pakistan, where English is taught as a second language and used as a medium of instruction. The target universities include:

- Lahore College for Women University (LCWU)
- Government College University, Lahore (GCU)
- Superior University, Lahore
- University of Education, Township Campus
- Minhaj University, Lahore

3.3. Sample Size

The target population of the study is a sample of 200 undergraduate ESL students and chosen through convenience sampling because accessibility and voluntary participation are the major factors to be taken into account in the studies of the educational sphere (Dornyei, 2007). The respondents are sample of male and female students pursuing different academic fields and those who have taken English as a mandatory subject.

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3.4. Data Collection Tool

A structured questionnaire is used to collect the data. The questionnaire consists of demographic data and 20-25 questions that rated using the five-point Likert scale so that they are contextually relevant to ESL classrooms in Pakistan without losing the original theoretical background.

3.6. Data Analysis

The gathered data is analyzed by use of Statistical Package of the Social Sciences (SPSS). The level of speaking anxiety established using descriptive statistics, reliability analysis (Cronbachs alpha) determines the internal consistency of the questionnaire, and the inferential statistics, i.e., correlation analysis done to identify the correlation between speaking anxiety and affective factors. The SPSS is chosen due to its reliability and accuracy as well as its wide application in applied linguistics studies (Larson-Hall, 2015).

4. Results

A total of 200 undergraduate ESL students participated in the study. The demographic profile of the respondents is presented below.

Table 4.1 Shows Gender Distribution (N = 200)

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	92	46%
Female	108	54%

The sample was composed of 54 and 46 percent females and males respectively, which is fairly balanced. The slightly higher number of female respondents are a manifestation of the trends in the enrolment in specific universities, and do not pose a significant gender imbalance in the data.

Table 4.2 Presents Self-Rated English-Speaking Ability (N = 200)

Ability Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very Weak	18	9%
Weak	36	18%
Average	78	39%

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Good	50	25%
Very Good	18	9%

A majority of the students (39%) rated their speaking ability as average with 25 percent of them rate themselves as good speakers. Only one in every nine rated themselves as very weak. This implies that even though the students believe that they are moderately competent, they might experience anxiety which in turn impacts their performance in the classroom.

Table 4.3 presents the statistics analysis

Variable	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**
Communication Apprehension	3.15	0.58
Fear of Negative Evaluation	3.19	0.58
Self-Confidence	3.17	0.60
Classroom Environment	3.18	0.60
Affective Filter	3.17	0.59
Overall Speaking Anxiety	3.17	0.29

The total condition of speaking anxiety of 3.17 shows that the ESL undergraduate students have a moderate degree of anxiety. Fear of Negative Evaluation has the highest mean (3.19) of the subscales; this implies that students are highly sensitive to the opinion of peers and criticism. Classroom Environment (3.18) is also an important factor that leads to anxiety which means that strict teaching and grading practices can make one nervous. Communication Apprehension (3.15) proves that students feel uncomfortable when making oral participation. The average standard deviations demonstrate a logical variation but not an excessive range of variability in answers.

Table 4.4 shows Selected High-Anxiety Items

Item Statement	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**
I worry that classmates will judge me	3.24	0.71
I feel anxious when speaking is graded	3.22	0.69
I panic when answering orally	3.20	0.73

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Fear of mistakes blocks my ability	3.21	0.68

These findings have shown that evaluative pressure and fear of error is important in escalating speaking anxiety among the ESL students. Learners would be more self-conscious and shyer to engage in oral activities when they expect the teachers or other learners to criticize them. These results indicate that emotional responses will be heightened especially in an environment where performance is publicly evaluated or judged. In these situations, fear can be not only linguistic in nature but also the fear of social stigma and being negatively assessed.

Table 4.5. Shows Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's Alpha	**Number of Items**
0.882	25

The Alpha value of 0.882 is high hence a significant level of internal consistency between the 25 questionnaire items. This result indicates that the items are highly correlated with each other and measure the same underlying concept of speaking anxiety because the value of above 0.80 is good in any social science research. It is also associated with the scale giving a steady and consistent response among the participants with a very low level of measurement error. Thus, the tool can be considered to be credible and applicable to the measurement of speaking anxiety and the corresponding affective variables in ESL undergraduate students.

Table 4.6. Shows Correlation Between Major Variables

Variables	**Overall Anxiety (r)**
Communication Apprehension	.960
Fear of Negative Evaluation	.952
Self-Confidence	.917
Classroom Environment	.957
Affective Filter	-.853

The values of the correlation show that there are strong positive relations among the variables speaking anxiety and communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and classroom environment. This implies that the more these factors are raised, the more the speaking anxiety is raised. There is a very high negative relationship (-.853) between affective filter and overall anxiety which is the indication that the supportive environment

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and low-stress environment play a major role in decreasing anxiety levels. The findings are entirely consistent with the aim of the study which was to investigate affective effects on ESL speaking anxiety.

Table 4.7. Indicates Overall Anxiety Level Categories

Anxiety Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Low	4	2%
Moderate	164	82%
High	32	16%

Most of the respondents (82) are included in the moderate category of anxiety and 16% are high anxiety. Only 2% report low anxiety. It is also represented in the below graph.

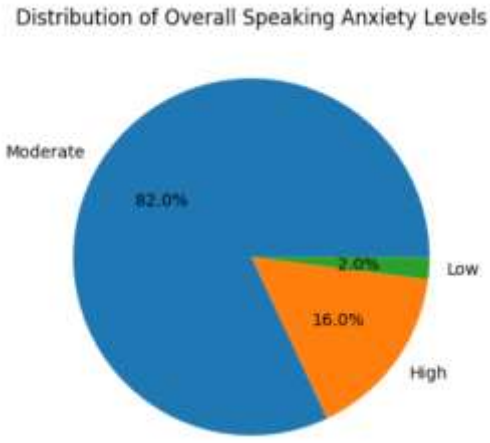


Figure 1: *It indicated the level of speaking anxiety among ESL undergraduate students*

This shows clearly that speaking anxiety is a common problem with the ESL undergraduate students in Lahore.

The results show that the anxiety of speaking among undergraduate students of ESL is moderate but common. The fear of being evaluated negatively becomes the most influential factor, which means that peer and teacher judgment are important determinants of the willingness to speak in students. The levels of anxiety are also worsened by classroom environment and grading pressure. Students themselves, although they tend to grade themselves as average or good speakers, still have emotional barriers that prevent oral participation. The high reliability coefficient proves that the instrument is always consistent whereas the correlation analysis shows that the affective variables have a significant impact on speaking anxiety. In general, the findings confirm the theoretical assumption that emotion factors are a key component in the second language speaking performance.

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5. Discussion

This research paper has examined the extent of speaking anxiety among ESL undergraduate students studying in Lahore and analysed the connection between speaking anxiety on the one hand, and affective factors, such as communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, self-confidence, classroom environment, and affective filter, on the other hand. The results showed that the level of speaking anxiety among ESL students is moderate (M = 3.17) and a significant size (16 percentage) of students feeling high anxiety. These results show that speaking anxiety has been an important and consistent problem in Pakistani ESL classes.

The moderate speaking anxiety is in line with the recent international studies that showed that speaking skill is the skill most frequently reported to be the cause of anxiety in the second language learning (SLA) situations (Teimouri et al., 2022; Zhang, 2020). In a large-scale meta-analysis, Teimouri et al. (2022) also concluded that language anxiety is still a negative predictor of language achievement in various educational settings. The current research proves that the same phenomenon is also clear in Pakistani institutions of higher learning.

The sub-dimensions, fear of negative evaluation (M = 3.19) was found to be the most effective contributing factor to speaking anxiety. Students said that they were concerned about peer judgments and teacher critique as well as grammatical errors. This finding aligns with the current subject of study that emphasizes the role of evaluative pressure as the key to influencing speaking anxiety (Botes, Dewaele, & Greiff, 2020). Dewaele et al. (2022) claim that peer comparison and social evaluation in the classroom setting increase the levels of self-consciousness in learners, especially in cultures with collectivist practices where the social connotations of the respective performances are rather high. Pakistani context with its academic assessment usually focusing on the correctness and formality, students can interpret the speech miscues as a threat to their academic identity. On the same note, Lee, (2007) indicate that fear of embarrassment and ridicule are serious predictors of oral participation avoidance in the South Asian ESL contexts. The current results thus support the claim that evaluative classroom climates exacerbate anxiety and lower the desire to communicate.

The high degree of association was found between communication apprehension and general speaking anxiety (r =.960) indicating that spontaneous oral interaction is a significant cause of discomfort. Physiological symptoms like nervousness and panic were reported by the students when they were asked to speak without any preparation. The results are aligned with more modern cognitive-emotional theories of SLA, that point to the fact that real-time language production can cause cognitive load and increase the process of self-monitoring (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). Anxious learners use attentional resources on worry instead of linguistic processing, thus they achieve less fluency and are more hesitant. This model of cognitive interference justifies the current findings which point to the fact that anxiety is not just an emotional reaction, but also a cognitively distorting reaction. Communication apprehension is especially high under classroom conditions where students are just called upon unexpectedly (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012).

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The research has also found out that the classroom atmosphere plays an important role in speaking anxiety (M = 3.18). Students have reported that graded speaking activity and strict teachers make them feel more nervous, whereas supportive instructors make them feel more confident. This result can be compared to the views of positive psychology of SLA that underline the importance of teacher immediacy and emotional support (Dewaele & Li, 2021). Recent empirical research proves that the positive behaviours of a teacher, including positive feedbacks, encouragement, and team tasks, can significantly decrease anxiety in the classroom and foreign language. Conversely, the authoritarian type of teaching gets performance pressure. High correlation between classroom environment and total anxiety in the current study indicates that learning experience with regard to emotion of learners is directly influenced by the institutional practices and pedagogical strategy.

Even though the levels of self-confidence were moderate, correlation analysis showed that there existed a strong relationship between confidence and anxiety among students. The modern research in the field of SLA is becoming more and more concentrated on the dynamic relationship between the positive and negative emotions. According to Deweael and Li (2021), the enjoyment and anxiety of foreign languages may co-exist in the same learner, varying in accordance to the type of task and the classroom atmosphere. The current results are that even students who feel in the middle of competence can feel anxious when performing evaluative speaking activity. This confirms the conclusion of Teimouri, Goetze, & Plonsky (2022) that the self-perceived competence does not eradicate anxiety; therefore, the situational factor is the mediator.

The empirical evidence of the Affective Filter Hypothesis is the fact that the negative correlations are strong between affective filter and overall anxiety (r = -.853). The theory proposed by Krashen states that anxiety, motivation, and confidence are emotional variables, which define the level of processing the input to a language acquisition. Recent confirmations of the affective variables in SLA (Dastgoshadeh, & Javanmardi, 2021) support that emotional control is an important predictor of the speaking performance and intention to communicate. In the current research, the students stated that they felt more comfortable in low-stress and conducive classroom settings, which show that the minimization of emotional barriers would improve communicative participation. This observation has implicated that anxiety of speaking is not a weakness of an individual but rather a situational phenomenon which can be influenced by instructional design.

The most important analysis of the findings shows that speaking anxiety among Pakistani ESL undergraduates is multidimensional and socially constructed. It is not just a case with a lack of language proficiency but a result of the classroom assessment system, pattern of teacher-students interaction, and comparing systems. The interrelationships of the variables are very high which implies that communication apprehension, fear of evaluation, and classroom environment do not act as independent variables. This is in line with the dynamic systems theory of SLA that considers the information about language learning emotions as being interconnected and context-dependent (Botes, Dewaele, & Greiff, 2020). Moreover, the fact that the majority of students estimate their speaking skill as average and still have moderate anxiety is a strong indicator of the gap between the competence and performance.

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This difference supports the argument that any linguistic knowledge cannot be effectively expressed in real-time communication because of emotional factors.

6. Conclusion

The current research finds that speaking anxiety is moderate in ESL undergraduates in Lahore universities. The most effective predictors of anxiety are fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and classroom environment. Despite moderate levels of self confidence, evaluative pressure and expectation of performance in front of audience are still proving to cause emotional discomfort. The discovery validates the current SLA studies about the significance of the affective variables in language acquisition. Emotional aspects play a major role in influencing willingness to talk and classroom attendance by the students. Thus, to alleviate speaking anxiety, it is necessary to conduct pedagogical reforms that facilitate low-stress environments, which support students.

Practically, they would be expected to limit over correction in oral work, promote collaborative speaking and create psychologically safe classrooms. Another change that must be considered by universities is the assessment strategies that rank or compare the speaking performance of students publicly. On the whole, this study may be added to the accumulating body of research supporting the need to approach the teaching of ESL affectively. The issue of speaking anxiety is crucial to the growth of communicative competence, as well as the overall academic self-confidence and involvement of students.

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