

Saeed and Ali

The Relationship Between English Language Anxiety and Academic Performance

<sup>1</sup>Dr Afaq Saeed

<sup>2</sup>Hamad Ali

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| Article Details                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Abstract                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
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| <p>Received: 27 July 2024<br/>Accepted: 26 Oct 2024<br/>Published: 27 Dec 2024</p> <hr/> <p><sup>1</sup>Dr. Afaq Saeed<br/><sup>2</sup>Hamad Ali</p> <p>Copyright @Author<br/>Corresponding Author:<br/>*Dr. Afaq Saeed</p> | <p>English is for millions of learners, not just a subject, but the means of instruction and evaluation. In these environments, the fear of English use can impact not only academic work in English classes, but also students' participation, self-confidence, and curriculum achievement. The current literature is reviewed in this paper as far as theories and studies concerning English language anxiety are concerned, and its correlation with academic achievement. It reviews the evolution of this construct starting from the early studies on foreign language classroom anxiety up to the current metaanalytical evidence, analyses the cognitive and affective mechanisms that have been suggested to account for the relationship between anxiety and performance as well as discusses moderators such as proficiency, foreign language learning context, and individual differences. The review shows that language anxiety is consistently negatively related to language achievement and that the relationship between language anxiety and general academic achievement in English-medium environments could be either negative or positive, although the findings were not as strong and were less studied. It also points out a few issues that are still to be resolved – problems of causal direction, that low levels of anxiety may be facilitating and the scarcity of evidence in many multilingual contexts, such as in South Asia. The paper ends with implications for teaching, assessment and institutional support, and suggests a research design for future empirical research. It is a study of the literature and is not original.</p> |

**Keywords:** English Language Anxiety, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Academic Achievement, Affective Factors, Higher Education, Classroom Anxiety.

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.

<sup>2</sup>MPhil Scholar, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.



## INTRODUCTON

There are many teachers who have encountered a student who knows the subject matter and who is a good writer in private but silent in front of the class when the teacher asks them to speak in English. The student's heart starts to beat faster and faster, words stop coming out, and fear of making a mistake begins to take over. Following this, the student will either not play at all or, over time, will lose skill and confidence. A student might get a good mark in written exams but a bad mark in oral tests, or might have difficulty in subjects that he or she can do well but are delivered in English.

There are studies that have been conducted on this pattern under the name language anxiety: the feeling of tension and apprehension that is unique to language learning and use. Since the 1980s, researchers have been interested in the scope of this phenomenon, the way it is measured, and its impact on achievement. The question is very important. When English is the language of higher education, employment and social mobility, anxiety concerning English can have an impact on who succeeds and who fails.

This paper aims to review the knowledge regarding the relationship between English language anxiety (ELA) and academic performance. It raises questions about the strength of the association between anxiety and poorer achievement, the possible mechanism, environment factors that enhance or inhibit this association, and teacher interventions that might strengthen the association. The paper is a narrative review, not reporting original data.

### 1.1 Research Questions

- 1.What is the definition and measurement of language anxiety, and what is the difference between overall anxiety and language anxiety?
- 2.What empirical research has revealed regarding the link between ELA and student achievement?
- 3.What factors and processes have been suggested to account for this link?
- 4.How is anxiety and support for performance decreased practically?

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.

<sup>2</sup>MPhil Scholar, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.



The Paper is designed to include the following sections:

Section 2 provides an introduction to concepts and theory. The measurement of language anxiety is discussed in Section 3. Section 4 summarizes empirical results. Section 5 discusses mechanisms. Moderating factors are explored in Section 6. Section 7 explores the context, such as multilingual and South Asian contexts. The sources of anxiety are discussed in Section 8. Section 9 offers recommendations. Section 10 suggests future research and Section 11 concludes.

## 2. Conceptual Background

### 2.1 Defining Language Anxiety

The word anxiety is used to describe a feeling of apprehension, tension, worry. Psychologists have differentiated between trait anxiety which is a permanent disposition to feel anxious in any situation, state anxiety which is a short-term response to a current situation and situation-specific anxiety which is a permanent response to a specific situation, such as speaking in public or taking examinations. Language anxiety is seen as an anxiety that is situation specific.

Based on the uniqueness of the language learning process, Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) suggested that in the context of language learning, foreign language anxiety is a set of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors that occur in the classroom. They found three components that are related: communication apprehension, fear of failing in evaluative contexts (test anxiety) and fear of negative evaluation, which is concern about how others will evaluate one's performance. This three-part model formed the basis of a large amount of subsequent research.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1989, 1991) proposed that language anxiety needs to be conceptualized as situation-specific, not simply as an expression of general anxiety, and presented evidence showing that language-specific anxiety measures were more predictive of language achievement than general anxiety measures. This is significant, since it indicates that the difficulty is not in an innate personality characteristic, but in the interaction between a learner and language situation.

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.

<sup>2</sup>MPhil Scholar, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.



## 2.2 Anxiety in the Learning Process

There are several theoretical approaches used to explore the relationship between anxiety and L2 learning. Various theories concerning the relationship between anxiety and L2 learning have been employed. Krashen (1982) introduced the affective filter hypothesis, which is concerned with the role of emotions in the language learning process. Affective filter is a construct made up of emotional experiences in the language learning process that block language input from reaching the language acquisition part of the learner's mind. This perspective is that the high anxiety learner is processing less of the input that is the same as other learners.

A more detailed cognitive account was offered by MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) who found that anxiety disrupts processing at the input, processing and output stages. Anxious learners may not hear or absorb what's said at the input. Anxiety can interfere while processing with the organization and storage of material. Anxious learners might not be able to recall what they know at the output. The model proposed here suggests that anxiety has impact at more than just one point, namely not just during speaking.

Dörnyei (2005) placed anxiety in the wider context of the language learning psychology and claimed that it interplays with motivation and self-concept of the learner and that these factors influence learning behaviors. This view disempowers focusing on anxiety alone and encourages a focus on the whole learner.

## 2.4 The Impacts of Language Learning on Language Learning Strategies

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.

<sup>2</sup>MPhil Scholar, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.



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The most frequent study of language anxiety is in relation to its impact on achievement of language courses. However, in English-medium settings, English is the key to learning in other subjects. A learner who is nervous in English may find it difficult to ask questions in a lecture, not participate in group discussion, or find it difficult to show understanding in writing tests, even if he or she understands the content. The issue of language anxiety and content course performance is also less extensively researched but it is reasonable to assume that language anxiety that pertains to the language of instruction may negatively impact the performance in the content courses indirectly by affecting participation, understanding and self-confidence.

### 3. Measuring Language Anxiety

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) developed Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) which is the most widely used instrument. It is made up of statements that describe feelings and behaviors in the classroom of the language, which are rated on an agreement scale by the respondents, e.g., nervousness when talking, fear of being corrected, worry about tests. The FLCAS has been widely adopted across numerous countries and has been translated into various languages, and has been proven to have good internal consistency.

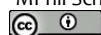
Its structure has been the subject of several research studies. In the United States, Aida (1994) found that the factor structure of the scale was a little different from the original three-component model, indicating that the pattern of anxiety may vary from language to language and across populations. Other measures have been developed to target the specific skill (e.g., speaking, reading, or writing anxiety), which acknowledges that anxiety may be greater in one skill than the other.

Academic assessment usually involves the marking of coursework, taking standardized achievement tests or completion of items developed by researchers. There are pros and cons with each. Grades vary for a number of reasons other than language ability and language tests don't measure classroom requirements.

These variations are partly due to differences in measurement.

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.

<sup>2</sup>MPhil Scholar, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.



Another constraint is that anxiety is typically assessed by self-report. Students can under-report and/or over-report, and cultural norms regarding the expression of fear can affect responses. In some studies, questionnaires have been used in combination with interviews, diaries and physiological measures, but this approach is not as prevalent.

#### 4. Empirical Evidence

##### 4.1 Early Findings

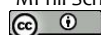
Initial research indicated that students with anxiety were less successful in language courses. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) synthesized the literature up to that time and found that language anxiety had consistently been negatively correlated with achievement, but has varied in strength. They additionally reported method problems, including the use of correlation and lack of conclusions regarding causation.

Besides motivation and attitudes, Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) determined that anxiety was one of the affective variables which was closely correlated with L2 achievement. After a survey of the literature on the correlation between language anxiety and achievement, Horwitz (2001) concluded that, although there was some contradictory evidence, the majority of studies showed that anxiety could be a barrier for many students in learning a second language and warned that anxiety may not be the only or not even the principal cause of problems for students.

**4.2 Meta-Analytic Evidence :** The most in-depth quantitative summary to date is that of Teimouri, Goetze and Plonsky (2019), who conducted a meta-analysis on SLA study on second language anxiety and achievement. They found moderate negative correlation between anxiety and achievement based on large number of studies and participants. They also explored moderators such as the type of anxiety measure, the language being learned, and the measure of achievement; generally, the direction of the relationship remained the same, though the strength of the relationship changed with these moderators.

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.

<sup>2</sup>MPhil Scholar, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.



This discovery is important as it shows that the association is not a creation of a few studies or just a single context. Meanwhile, a moderate correlation indicates that some aspect of achievement is independent of anxiety. Some students who are anxious perform well and many students who say that they are not anxious perform poorly. There are a number of factors, and anxiety is one.

### 4.3 Skill-Specific Findings

Studies indicate that anxiety is most commonly experienced in speech and listening. Liu and Jackson (2008) investigated the FLA of Chinese university students studying English and identified that students' unwillingness to communicate in class was strongly correlated with their high levels of FLA, while the concerns of negative evaluation and low self-rated proficiency were the most significant factors. Their findings indicate that anxiety can have an indirect impact on achievement via the amount of practice received by the students.

Less research exists for anxiety in reading and writing, but there is some evidence that it can impact comprehension and writing. One of the most reported highly stressful situations is examination time when time pressure and high stakes are both present.

### 4.5 Home Learning Environment

There is less evidence linking ELA to performance in content areas. English language studies in the HE context in England indicate that students who have poor levels of English in their language confidence, participate less, may not seek clarification and may memorize large amounts of material without speaking. However, many of the studies are small scale, context specific and descriptive with little focus on controlling for previous academic ability. The connection should thus be considered probable and somewhat substantiated.

Are the arrows pointing in the right direction?4.5 Causal Direction Questions

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.

<sup>2</sup>MPhil Scholar, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.



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There could be at least three ways in which anxiety-performance relationship could occur. Anxiety can interfere with performance. If things don't go well, it can cause anxiety because of repeated failure, which causes lack of confidence. Or both can be a consequence of a third variable, such as lack of skills or lack of preparation. Sparks and Ganschow (1991) suggested that anxiety may be a symptom and not a cause of L2 learning problems, and that problems in L1 learning may underlie both L2 learning problems and the anxiety. It was challenged, but it means they could have a mutual influence. The relationship is now understood to be bidirectional such that anxiety and performance have an influence on one another over time (Horwitz, 2010).

## **5. Mechanisms: How can anxiety impact performance?**

### **5.1 Cognitive Interference**

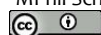
Worry eats up the brain. The fear of failure takes priority over the task and working memory. Eysenck, Derakshan, Santos and Calvo (2007) presented attentional control theory which suggests that anxiety impacts the balance of goal-directed and stimulus-driven attention, making performance less efficient when executive control is required. Under pressure language use is such a task: the learner has to track form, to retrieve the vocabulary, and to track meaning simultaneously. If part of their focus is on their own concerns, they will process slower, and inaccurately. This was consistent with MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) who found that anxiety was correlated with poorer performance on word learning and production tasks.

### **5.2 Avoidance Behavior**

Students who are anxious tend to default to avoidance of situations that in their experience make them uncomfortable. They may be at the back, not make eye contact, be silent, or not attend. With avoidance, there is less practice and feedback, which are important for language development. As time goes on, the difference between anxious and non-anxious students can increase, since the former will have fewer opportunities for using the language.

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.

<sup>2</sup>MPhil Scholar, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.



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### 5.3 Self-Perception and Confidence

Students who think that they have difficulty in English may view difficulties as a sign of an inability to improve, thus reducing effort and persistence. There is a vicious circle between negative beliefs about ability, increased anxiety, and increased anxiety, which in turn feeds into negative beliefs about ability (Dörnyei, 2005). Horwitz et al. (1986) identified a major factor as “fear of negative evaluation,” which refers to the fear of the evaluation of others, such as the teacher and peers. This fear can be especially pronounced in cultures where there is a social cost to public errors.

#### Test anxiety and assessment

Anxiety can be high when taking English exams. Physical symptoms: shaking, sweating, and "blanking out" can hinder performance; students might perform less well than they know they can. This is particularly important for people taking exams in English and using that result as a foundation for access to education or employment – failure has serious repercussions.

The physiological and emotional reactions are discussed. The physiological and emotional reactions are mentioned.

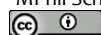
When you're anxious, your body is aroused. Common reactions include speedy heartbeat, muscle tension and sweating, which can be upsetting as well. With continued stress, over time, a person may become disengaged and, in some instances, experience more emotional challenges as well. It is important that the language teacher are aware of the emotional aspect of language learning although he/she is not a clinician.

## 6. Moderating Factors

**6.1 Proficiency Level :** There is often a link between lower proficiency and anxiety, but it is not a straightforward one. For beginners, it can be anxiety provoking because they do not have the language skills to do it, while for advanced learners, it can be anxiety provoking because they have high expectations of themselves. Thus, at the various levels, the direction and intensity of the relationship may vary.

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.

<sup>2</sup>MPhil Scholar, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.



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### 6.2 Facilitating and Debilitating Anxiety (Class)

There's a great debate about whether or not there can be some good anxiety. It has been suggested that there is a difference between debilitating anxiety (limiting performance) and facilitating anxiety (focusing attention and working harder). The evidence for the role of anxiety in language learning is inconclusive, and measurement is problematic. A different approach was taken by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) who investigated anxiety in conjunction with enjoyment, and found that the two were separate, and that enjoyment was a more reliable predictor of positive outcomes, meaning that reducing anxiety is not always the only way to enhance learning, but increasing positive emotion can be as important.

### 6.3 Individual Differences

The experience of anxiety will vary from one person to another, depending on personality, prior experiences, self-perceived competence, and motivation. Students who have positive past experiences and have high self-confidence report low anxiety. There has been some examination of age and gender with conflicting results in different settings, and generalisations with care.

### 6.4 Learning Environment

There is a large impact in the classroom environment. The role of teacher behaviour, error correction and classroom atmosphere in increasing or decreasing anxiety was discussed by Young (1991). Anxiety can be exacerbated by harsh correction, public embarrassment, and competitive comparison, while anxiety can be lessened by supportive, collaborative, and encouraging environments. This indicates that anxiety is not a wholly internal phenomenon and there is an element of it that can be created in the learning environment and thus is partially modifiable.

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.

<sup>2</sup>MPhil Scholar, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.



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### 6.5 Opportunities for Authentic Use

Learners who use English in their daily lives, whether it is in the media, through social interaction or work, may feel more comfortable with the language. For people who are only exposed to English in formal contexts where it is used for assessment and evaluation, its usage can be mainly linked to testing and judgement, which can increase anxiety.

Multilingual and South Asian Contexts

### 7.1 English as a Gateway Language

English is the language of the elite elite occupation, administration and higher education in many countries, South Asia, including Pakistan. The relationship of English with social status and access in Pakistan has been recorded by Rahman (2002) and Mansoor (2005) has explored the role of English in higher education language planning in the country. Students with a non-English speaking home background are thus given a high-stakes, challenging language. A combination of this nature is likely to increase anxiety: grading expectations are high and there might be limited opportunity for practice.

### 7.2 Education attainment and inequality

When students enter the University, they are coming from diverse educational environments. Students from schools where English is the medium of instruction tend to be more confident than those in schools where English is a taught language by teachers who are less proficient in the language. Language anxiety can thus reflect social injustice, and students who are already vulnerable are likely to be the most affected.

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.

<sup>2</sup>MPhil Scholar, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.



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### 7.3 Cultural Factors

Expressions of anxiety can be shaped by cultural attitudes towards errors, authority and performance. This fear of negative evaluation can be heightened in classrooms where teachers are very evaluative and errors are addressed in front of the class. But prudence must be exercised: cultural generalizations can be misleading and there is considerable individual variation. In some studies conducted in Asian context, patterns of reticence were attributed to culture, but more recent studies indicate that feelings of anxiety and lack of willingness to communicate are the result of classroom practices and perceptions of proficiency (Liu & Jackson, 2008).

### 7.4 The Evidence Gap

The bulk of the basic research has been done in North America, particularly in the classroom with students learning languages such as French, Spanish, and Japanese. Research on English language anxiety in multilingual postcolonial contexts in which English is used as an L2 and as medium of instruction is increasing but not consistent. These findings are only transferable to another context with the help of local studies. All statements regarding particular areas in this review are tentative and should be verified with local primary sources.

## 8. Sources of English Language Anxiety

There are a number of regular anxieties identified in the literature and these are summarised in a way that is helpful for teachers.

Worry about taking risks and being judged. Students are concerned with mispronunciations, grammatical mistakes, and difficulties with word recognition; also that they will be ridiculed by their peers and/or criticized by their teachers.

Self-evaluation, comparison, low ability. Students make comparisons with more fluent classmates and draw the conclusion they are not good enough.

High-stakes assessment. There is pressure on students through examinations and graded presentations, especially if the results of these have consequences for progression or future opportunities.

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.

<sup>2</sup>MPhil Scholar, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.



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Teaching practices. A strong focus on accuracy rather than communication and a high level of anxiety may be caused by cold calling, public correction (Young, 1991). Mismatch between expectations and ability. Students who need to read, write, and discuss complex content in English, but aren't ready yet, could be feeling overwhelmed.

Few opportunities for exposure and practice. Students that do not use English frequently in low stakes situations have less opportunities to develop ease.

Issues related to social and identity issues. There may also be social implications to using English, for example, in some contexts it may be perceived as a demonstration of wealth or ostentation and/or a lack of English may be interpreted as a failure in the individual.

## 9. Recommendations

The suggestions that follow are based on the literature and represent possible options that can be taken into consideration, but cannot be guaranteed as solutions.

### Establish a Positive Culture in the Classroom (9.1)

Young (1991) noted that a key way to decrease anxiety is to establish a classroom atmosphere where making mistakes is considered a normal aspect of learning. Tolerance of errors, encouragement and not humiliating correction can be modeled by teachers. If a student makes an error that hinders communication, the teacher can correct it without reacting negatively and wait until the student has completed his or her sentence to correct the error.

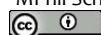
### 9.2 Take advantage of low-stakes speaking situations.

Pair and small group exercises enable students to practice speaking in front of others before speaking to the entire class. Rehearsal time, preparation opportunities, and structured tasks can help to alleviate stress. The idea might be discussed with a partner before it is shared with a group and then, finally, presented to the whole class.

### 9.3 Ensure Assessment is Fair and Transparent

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.

<sup>2</sup>MPhil Scholar, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.



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Reducing test anxiety can be achieved through clear criteria, practice opportunities, and a variety of assessment types. Low stakes quizzes and formative feedback make it more familiar for students to the assessment demands, where possible. Providing students with an understanding of what is expected, and examples of successful work, can minimize uncertainty.

#### **Build Positive Emotion and Enjoyment (9.4)**

According to Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014), enjoyment is a key factor to consider in balance with anxiety. Games, engaging discussion on a student's topic of interest, collaborative projects, and other activities that are engaging, relevant, and playful, can create positive experience using English and boost motivation.

#### **9.5 Educate on anxiety and coping strategies**

Students can learn that anxiety is normal and controllable. Talk about strategies, including preparation, positive self-talk, breathing and communicating rather than perfecting. If students think that they are not in their own, they feel less distressed.

#### **9.6 Give additional support to those at risk**

Bridging courses, language support centres and peer-mentoring schemes, including for students with less English language exposure in their educational background, can be offered by universities. This support should be described in positive terms, as access to resources, instead of remediation. If the anxiety is a major problem that is impacting on wellbeing, professional counseling services can be considered as a referral.

#### **9.7 Use Home Languages as a Resource**

The use of students' home language to support understanding and planning should be allowed, which can help to lower stress and enhance understanding, but with English as the primary language for assessed work. Teachers must take care not to spend too much time on English and also provide adequate English practice.

#### **9.8 Institutional and Policy Measures**

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.

<sup>2</sup>MPhil Scholar, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.



Institutions can recognize that English proficiency is a variable factor, and give students a transition period to become proficient in academic English rather than taking it for granted. Attention can be given to the affective factors in language learning in teacher training.

#### **10. Methodology for future research is proposed.**

No primary data were collected in this paper, so an alternative research design is suggested for those interested in an empirical study of this question.

**Design.** A mixed-methods study with a quantitative correlational approach and a qualitative follow-up (preferably longitudinal to give directionality to the findings).

**Participants.** First and second year undergraduates sampled from across the disciplines and from various school backgrounds in an English-medium or English-intensive programme.

**Instruments.** The FLCAS or an adapted version validated in the local context; a skill specific anxiety scale for speaking; a standardized English language proficiency scale; course marks (language and content); and a brief background, English exposure, and confidence questionnaire.

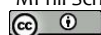
**Procedure.** Anxiety and proficiency would be assessed at the beginning of the term and at the end of the term and grades recorded at the end. A subset of participants would be selected to represent high, medium and low anxiety and participate in interviews about experiences and coping strategies.

**Analysis.** Relationship would be explored between anxiety and performance after controlling for previous ability and schooling background through correlation and regression analysis. A cross-lagged analysis might be used to investigate the relationship between early anxiety and later performance, and the relationship between later performance and its earlier correlates of anxiety. Themes would be identified from the interview data.

**Ethics.** Consent, confidentiality and sensitivity in regard to distress responses. Those with severe distress should be referred to the appropriate supports.

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.

<sup>2</sup>MPhil Scholar, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.



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This would include evidence from a particular context, direction of influence and students' own accounts, a design that would combine these.

## 11. Conclusion

English language anxiety is a true and common phenomenon experienced by students who study or work in English as an additional language. As demonstrated in this paper, there is a consistent moderate negative correlation between language anxiety and language achievement which has been supported by the results of the literature review, as well as by the results of the meta-analysis. Anxiety is seen to impact performance in the following ways: cognitive interference, avoidance of practice, negative self-perception, test-related stress – effects of proficiency, individual difference, learning environment.

The picture is not straightforward, though. This is probably a two-way street, anxiety is rarely the only factor that determines performance, positive emotions like enjoyment are also a part of the picture, and the impact of language learning courses last only a moment and in many multilingual contexts is not yet adequately researched.

The message here is a positive one that is applicable to practice. The learning environment helps to create anxiety, so a certain amount of it can be modified. Supportive classroom climates, gradual speaking opportunities, transparent assessment, attention to enjoyment, and institutional support can help to reduce anxiety and facilitate students' demonstration of their knowledge. In universities where English is the 'doorway to opportunity' the emotional aspect of language acquisition is not 'a luxury', it is part of good and just teaching.

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<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.

<sup>2</sup>MPhil Scholar, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.



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<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.

<sup>2</sup>MPhil Scholar, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.



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<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.

<sup>2</sup>MPhil Scholar, Department of English University of Peshawar, Peshawar.



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