

Reflections on English Speaking Anxiety of Engineering Students: Pilot Project

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- p-ISSN: 2663-3299
- e-ISSN: 2663-3841
- L-ISSN: 2663-3299

Abstract: *Human beings scream for effective communication skills in this modern age of space technology. The 21st-century demands the engineering universities to address the speaking skill deficiencies of engineering students. This research discovers factors responsible for English speaking anxiety of engineering students. A qualitative research design was implemented and semi-structured interviews were piloted. A purposive sampling approach was employed. Outcomes revealed engineering students faced hesitation, poor confidence, poor mental approach, poor English, unknown fears, poor vocabulary, dearth of speaking opportunities, fear of criticism, nervousness, stress, lack of motivation, poor communication skill, poor language, and low self-esteem as English-speaking anxiety factors of engineering students. Additionally, they used deep breathing, giving space for thinking and code switching as strategies to overcome English-speaking anxiety.*

Key Words: Reflections, English-speaking Anxiety, Engineering Students

Introduction

Technology advancement demand engineering students to acquire effective speaking skills to meet the demand of modern industry worldwide. Modern engineering organizations stand on two footholds technical and non-technical skills. Soft skills are as important for engineers as hard skills. Engineering students possess technical knowledge but they fall short of communication. Presenting novel ideas is the fundamental necessity of global engineering organizations. The global industry desires well-rounded engineers trained in hard and

soft skills to converse and communicate with multiple stakeholders. Current literature speaks that anxiety affects the speaking performance (Macayan et al., 2018; Saranraj & Meenakshi, 2016) of students. Hence, research on the speaking anxiety of engineering students in the context of Pakistan is of paramount importance. This study entails three-fold objectives. First, it examines the English speaking anxiety of engineering students. Then it investigates factors that contribute towards English speaking anxiety and third, it discovers communication strategies to overcome stress and nervousness in speaking.

Literature Review

Anxiety indicates fear, worry, apprehension, mental pressure, and self-generated beliefs. Anxiety observes paradigms of temporary response to apprehension, situation-specific persistent behavior patterns or responses ([Teimouri et al., 2019](#)), and English language learners observe all these behaviors ([Ahsan et al., 2020](#)). Speaking has remained the most frightening task for students because; English language courses taught at engineering universities do not accomplish the speaking needs of students. Engineering students face anxiety, stress and nervousness due to inadequate speaking skills. Language teachers push students to come on the rostrum to speak in front of peers but they have always been found reluctant. Speaking anxiety is the most prevalent disorder among students. Science, engineering, and technology students need to be proficient in speaking skills to perform communication tasks in the workplace. Engineering graduates of Pakistan have to join global organizations therefore, they should be prepared accordingly. Moreover, they have to pursue higher studies in foreign universities of the world that needs effective speaking skills with academic advisors. English speaking skills are binding for engineers either for study or for jobs ([Santos, 2019](#)). Engineers will have to write research proposals, technical reports, feasibility reports, and daily reports and present them before field experts. [Ahsan et al. \(2020\)](#) asserted that anxiety should never hinder the communication ability of speakers. Engineers with strong communication skills are an asset for companies. Voices come from the industry in that engineering graduates possess poor communication skills and they are not ready for industry jobs. It shows the competency gap between required and acquired skills of engineering graduates ([Lenard & Pintaric, 2018](#)). English language anxiety influences communication ([Bashori et al., 2020](#)) and it stops students from

performing projects orally. Students feel fear of making mistakes and audience criticism ([Kho & Leong, 2015](#)). Fearful students are always unwilling to participate in oral activities. They feel fear that if they fail to perform well audience shall laugh at them.

Empirical Studies on English Speaking Anxiety Studies in Perspective of Pakistan

[Sara Shahbaz et al. \(2021\)](#) studied English language speaking anxiety fear among Women University, Multan students and concluded that speaking anxiety exists among students. [Abdus Samad et al. \(2021\)](#) investigated classroom-related foreign language speaking anxiety of university students of Pakistan and explored classroom environment, fear of negative evaluation, large classrooms, fear of being put on the spot, shortage of time, and unfamiliarity with students. [Siddique Hadiqa et al. \(2020\)](#) searched the speaking anxiety of university students and found pronunciation, deficient verbal knowledge, and fear of negative evaluation as students English-speaking anxiety. [Malik Sameena et al. \(2020\)](#) hunted perceived barriers in FLSA. Results inform that vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, unfamiliarity with the topic, anxiety, anxiousness, introverted personality, low self-esteem, lack of confidence, pressure, fear of negative evaluation, and teacher remarks were barriers. [Uzma Noora et al. \(2020\)](#) searched common errors in EFL postgraduate students of Pakistan and found lack of vocabulary, inappropriate use of sentence structure, and hesitation as affecting variables. [Abbasi et al. \(2019\)](#) examined speech anxiety in ESL classrooms and concluded speech anxiety prevails among second language learners. [Mugheri et al. \(2018\)](#) explored the speaking anxiety of students and found a moderate level of anxiety among students. [Bhatti Nasreen et al. \(2016\)](#) studied perceptions of English language learners on language learning

anxiety in EFL classrooms. Results exhibited that communication apprehension, self-perceived proficiency, fear of negative evaluation, and nervousness were anxiety factors. [Gopang et al. \(2015\)](#) surveyed university students and found test anxiety, communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation as anxiety factors. [Mudassar Nazir et al. \(2014\)](#) studied second language speaking anxiety among ESL learners and found participants faced communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation. [Filza Waseem et al. \(2013\)](#) studied anxiety among learners of English and found fear of negative evaluation, speech apprehension, fear of tests, and English class anxiety among students. [Kakepoto Inayatullah et al. \(2013\)](#) studied communication apprehension of engineering students and found communication apprehension and poor confidence among engineering students. [Kakepoto Inayatullah et al. \(2013\)](#) investigated the communicative competence of engineering students and discovered engineering students employed message reduction, code switching, fillers and self-repetition strategies to overcome communication deficiencies. In another study, [Kakepoto Inayatullah et al. \(2012\)](#) searched the oral communication skills of engineering students and found lack of confidence, poor knowledge, poor environment and poor English as engineering students' barriers. [Khattak et al. \(2011\)](#) studied the causes of English language learning anxiety among university students and fear of making mistakes and nervousness about failing in examination were anxiety factors. [Riffat-un-Nisa et al. \(2010\)](#) studied students' foreign language classroom anxiety and concluded speaking in front of an audience, grammatical mistakes, pronunciation and incapable to sudden talk as anxiety reasons.

Empirical Studies on English

Speaking Anxiety in International Perspective

[Nugroho Iman et al. \(2021\)](#) studied students' speaking anxiety factors in an EFL online classroom. Researchers concluded students were anxious due to communication apprehension, test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation and teachers' bad teaching styles. [Sugiyati Kenti & Indriani Lilia \(2021\)](#) exposed the causes of public speaking anxiety among students and fear of negative evaluation as students' anxiety factors were found. [Fang Fan & Tang Xiaofei \(2021\)](#) studied Chinese students learning anxiety and found fear of negative evaluation and speaking without proper preparation as anxiety factors. [Mubash \(2020\)](#) investigated the reasons for English language speaking anxiety of students and explored the fear of negative evaluation, fear of others' perception, fear of communication, low self-esteem, and language proficiency as students speaking anxiety. [Asysyifa et al. \(2019\)](#) studied students' speaking anxiety in the EFL classroom and explored students were anxious owing to lack of preparation, material understanding, making mistakes, ridicule by friends and choice of appropriate English words. [Ridwan Nurmansyah et al. \(2018\)](#) studied students' English-speaking anxiety and explored poor vocabulary, poor preparation, fear of making mistakes, low English proficiency, poor practice, and poor communication ability. [Tian \(2019\)](#) led a study in Korea and found negative attitudes towards presentations, silence, and speech disturbance by peers and teachers as factors. [Toubot et al. \(2018\)](#) surveyed students of Libya and explored low confidence, fear of negative evaluation, and communication apprehension as students' anxiety. [Reni Handayani et al. \(2018\)](#) studied introverted students' problems with English speaking and found participants faced language anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. [Songyut Akkakoson \(2016\)](#) studied the speaking anxiety of Thai students and

explored their poor speaking English ability of students. [Sari Darmaida \(2016\)](#) studied students' strategies to reduce speaking anxiety and found students avoided eye contact with teachers and class fellows and used body language expressions to reduce English speaking anxiety. [Amirul Mukminin et al. \(2015\)](#) explored the speaking anxiety of students and found a lack of vocabulary, grammar, fear of negative responses, low self-esteem and fear of evaluation as anxiety.

Research Questions

1. What are engineering students' perceptions about English-Speaking Anxiety?
2. What are the factors that contribute to the English speaking anxiety of engineering students?
3. What are strategies that engineering students employ to overcome English speaking anxiety?

Method

Design of the Study

The qualitative research method was used. Qualitative research allows us to know the world of people and enable us to know about human experiences ([Denzin & Lincoln, 2008](#); [Merriam, 2009](#)).

Study Participants

Five final-year engineering students participated in this pilot project. Respondents were studying the subject of English for about 10 years. At the time of data collection, they were pursuing a Bachelor of Engineering (B.E) degree program ranging in Civil, Electrical, and Mechanical engineering disciplines.

Research Instrument

A semi-structured interview was selected as a research instrument. It assisted in exploring students' views and thoughts ([Creswell, 2012](#);

[Marshall & Rossman, 2011](#)) on speaking anxiety. Semi-structured interviews offer a better opportunity to establish a close relationship between interviewer and interviewee. They are flexible and allow to ask more questions from responses. Semi-structured interviews are exploratory ([Creswell & Báez, 2020](#)) and offer good chances for rich data collection. Research objectives determine the selection of interviews ([Natow, 2020](#)). Semi-structured interviews allowed for modifying and expanding the scope of interview questions ([Robson, 2011](#); [Rubin & Rubin, 2012](#); [Seidman, 2013](#)) in this study.

Procedures

Purposive sampling was employed and it is part of qualitative research. Each interview lasted about 15-20 minutes, reliant on the volume of information shared. Interviews were tape recorded to warrant data accuracy. Audiotape recordings were transcribed verbatim to generate themes from the raw data for discussion.

Data Analysis

Data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing methods were used as guided by ([Miles & Huberman, 1994](#)). During the data reduction phase, researchers transcribed all recorded verbatims and extracted the essence of the interviews. All trifling interview content was discarded, separated from essentials. Results were displayed in tabular form to categorize verbal accounts and strategies. Data display is a collection of organized and pressed information to be deduced and displayed ([Miles & Huberman, 1994](#)). Lastly, deductions were drawn, presented, and discussed in descriptive form.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the research questions of the study.

RQ 1: What is engineering students' perceptions about English-Speaking Anxiety? Engineering students responded:

"I don't think so that English speaking is very difficult for me, because we are studying, our medium of education is English since our childhood...so English is not problem to speak in English" (STD1).

"... yes... English language...is very...very difficult for me... when I come before my teachers...I feel too much hesitation, and I am having too much lack of confidence... this is the reason I am unable to communicate my feelings before my teachers and fellows as well. And due to poor mental approach, this is also...the reason for me to share my ideas with others in my environment" (STD2).

"I personally feel somehow difficult to speak English to communicate with my friends and teachers that is not because of poor English, that is because of lack of confidence and unknown fears...that's why I feel somewhat difficult to share my ideas the main reason and cause is lack of confidence" (STD3).

"In my opinion, the English language is not difficult, but due to lack of confidence, vocabulary...I am feeling difficult the reason is vocabulary" (STD4).

"I think English speaking is not difficult...we need an atmosphere where we can speak English...we can share our ideas with friends and teachers and we have to kill the fear... we build confidence... I think that we always feel fear of saying something... if I am speaking English with my friends or teachers, may be teacher understands something or my friends laugh at me, I think there is lack of confidence...we have to improve our poor atmosphere or we have to create confidence..." (STD5).

RQ 2: What are the Factors that Contribute to English Speaking anxiety of Engineering Students?

Engineering students failed to deliver clear answer of this question. Henceforth, again a

question was asked whether Stress, Anxiety and Nervousness contribute to their English-speaking anxiety. They replied as:

"No, I don't feel any stress speaking in English...during normal conversation with friends and teachers that doesn't happen but when we are for presentation...am not very well prepared for presentation, I have noticed I was nervous, normally...I don't feel any nervousness and anxiety" (STD1).

"Yes, I...feel too much stress...but ...because of poor mental approach and...lack of confidence in my personality when I come before ...teachers for presentation, I feel too much stressand I am having too much...discouragement from my fellows..." (STD2).

"Yes, I feel too much nervousness... due to lack of confidence...when we speak English our class fellows doing some jokes... we feel nervousness..." (STD3).

"...if we are speaking with our teachers these things resist us to speak..." (STD4).

"Desperately, I feel great stress, anxiety and nervousness while speaking English with my friends and other peoples...other main thing is lack of confidence...fear of criticism from my opponents...these are the main causes which make me anxious and nervous that's why I cannot communicate with my friends..." (STD5).

Since the format of this interview was semi structured thus, a question was asked from students to provide real reasons for nervousness and anxiety in speaking English. Upon this query, they replied:

"... when I was not well prepared..." (STD1)

"...lack of communication skills...discouragement from environment... mental disturbance...lack of motivation... poor language is the cause or reason behind this phenomenon" (STD2).

"...lack of confidence, vocabulary...lack of words, lack of confidence... nervousness" (STD3).

“First of all, I admit that I feel great anxiety and nervousness speaking in English, that is because of low self- esteem, lack of confidence...anxiety, nervousness...lack of general knowledge...fear of criticism...resist me to speak English with my friends” (STD₄).

“I feel nervousness and anxiety...because of the fear which I can’t speak English with others ...” (STD₅).

Further, engineering students were inquired about their fear of making mistakes for speaking in English. They responded:

“...English is not our native language...I think that a nonnative speaker can commit mistakes...I don’t feel making mistakes speaking in English...so the conclusion is I don’t feel much fear...” (STD₁).

“I feel too much fear while speaking English, I feel too much hesitation... come before fellows...people...laugh at me while I am ...communicating in the English language” (STD₂).

“... I do not feel when I speak English...” (STD₃).

“Yes, definitely, I feel fear of making mistakes speaking in English... because of discouraging nature of colleagues in my environment... I am always anxious about peoples’ remarks about me ...so that’s why these are the difficulties that I feel fear of

making mistakes” (STD₄).

“Yes, I feel fear of making mistakes... I think that I speak English maybe I not give ideas clearly may be students laugh at me, I lose my confidence that is the reason that I feel very fear” (STD₅).

RQ 3: What are Strategies that Engineering Students Employ to Overcome English Speaking Anxiety?

Engineering students answered:

“...I have different techniques to overcome nervousness and anxiety...” (STD₁).

“... the main reason behind my stress and anxiety is my poor mental approach...when I ...such type of situation... I change my thinking and try to be relaxed at that moment” (STD₂).

“I feel too much nervousness...lack of confidence...when I speak English first of all get more knowledge...” (STD₃).

“...the techniques which I almost adopt to overcome this anxiety and nervousness, first of all, I take few deep breaths and try to divert my mind from that topic...which make me easy and comfortable” (STD₄).

“I use techniques to overcome nervousness and anxiety by giving room to myself, ...maybe I use other language to clear my idea” (STD₅).

Summary of Results

Table 1. Summary of Findings

S. No	Research Question	Findings
RQ 1:	What are engineering students’ perceptions about English-Speaking Anxiety?	Hesitation, Lack of confidence, Poor thinking, Poor English, Unknown fears, Vocabulary, Poor environment, Fear of Criticism.
RQ 2:	What are the factors that contribute to English speaking anxiety of engineering students?	Nervousness, Stress, Discouragement from class fellows, Poor communication skills, Lack of motivation, Poor language, Low Self- Esteem, Lack of knowledge, Fear
RQ 3:	What are strategies that engineering students employ to overcome English speaking anxiety?	Deep breathing, giving space for thinking, Code switching

Engineering student No.1 informed that he does not face anxiety in English speaking. He justified his claim by saying that since the beginning, the medium of his education has remained English. Thus, speaking in English has never remained a problem for him. Engineering student 2 admitted that he faces anxiety in English speaking. He further added he feels hesitation and lack of confidence when he appears before teachers. These barriers are responsible for making him unable to express ideas in front of teachers and classmates. For these barriers, he made responsible for the poor surrounding environment and his poor thinking. Engineering student 3 said he finds it difficult to speak with friends and teachers to some extent. He mentioned reasons like lack of confidence and self-generated fears. More specifically, he mentioned that lack of confidence is the biggest barrier. Engineering student 4 informed speaking in English is difficult for him due to a lack of confidence and poor vocabulary. Engineering student 5 expressed poor environment and lack of confidence are his barriers. He was apprehensive about speaking in English that his friends and teachers may not laugh or ridicule him. He emphasized the improvement of the environment for effective speaking in English because it plays a paramount role in every profession of life.

RQ 2: Engineering student 1 informed that he does not feel stressed sharing ideas with friends and teachers in English. He feels nervous when he is not well prepared for the presentation. Engineering student 2 admitted that he faces too much stress speaking in English because of his poor thinking and poor confidence. He becomes a victim of fear when he speaks with teachers. He blamed his classmates for his discouragement. Engineering student 3 expressed that due to a lack of confidence, he faces nervousness. Moreover, his class fellows

ridicule and make fun of him; thus, he feels nervous. Engineering student 4 said while speaking in English with teachers, and he faces stress, anxiety, and nervousness. Engineering student 5 said speaking with friends and an unknown audience, he faces stress, anxiety and nervousness. Stress, anxiety, nervousness, lack of confidence and fear of criticism were major causes of English-speaking anxiety of this student.

Since it was a semi structured interview, a question was asked from engineering students to provide concrete reasons for nervousness and anxiety. They answered: lack of preparation, poor communication skills, discouraging environment, mental disturbance, lack of motivation, poor language, poor confidence, poor vocabulary, nervousness, anxiety, low self-esteem, lack of knowledge, and fear of criticism as major reasons for their nervousness and anxiety speaking in English.

Further, when engineering students were queried about reasons for making mistakes in English speaking. Engineering student 1 said English is not his native language. Thus, a second language speaker can make mistakes. He is never fearful of making mistakes. Engineering student 2 acknowledged that he feels too much fear of speaking in front of class fellows and other audiences. He showed apprehension that if he made mistakes, his class fellows and audience shall laugh. Engineering student 3 plainly informed he has no fear of making mistakes. Engineering student 4 expressed he faces the fear of making mistakes because his surrounding environment is completely discouraging. Moreover, he was conscious of passing class fellows' remarks. Engineering student 5 orated he is fearful of making mistakes and due to this phenomenon; he loses confidence.

RQ 3: Engineering student1 failed to provide any clear answer. He just informed he uses

diverse techniques to overcome his nervousness and anxiety. Engineering student 2 said he diverges his thought and keeps himself relaxed to dodge nervousness and anxiety. Engineering students 3 and 4 exposed they gather information and knowledge to avoid anxiety and nervousness. Engineering student 5 informed in order to overcome nervousness and anxiety, he gives himself good space. Moreover, he uses the technique of code switching to continue the talk. The findings of this research are in line with other literature studies for instance ([Malik Sameena et al., 2020](#), [Uzma Noora et al., 2020](#), [Kakepoto Inayatullah et al., 2013](#), [Ridwan Nurmansyah & Eva Nurmayasari, 2018](#), [Amirul Mukminin et al., 2015](#), [Sugiyati Kenti & Indriani Lilia, 2021](#), [Fang Fan & Tang Xiaofei, 2021](#), [Sameena Malik et al., 2020](#), [Mubash, 2020](#), [Asyisyifa et al., 2019](#), [Toubot et al., 2018](#), [Ridwan Nurmansyah & Eva Nurmayasari, 2018](#), [Reni Handayani et al., 2018](#), [Bhatti Nasreen et al., 2016](#)).

Conclusion

Results exhibited that English Speech Anxiety prevailed among engineering students of Pakistan. Various barriers impeded speaking in English, for example; nervousness, stress, peer discouragement,

poor communication skill, lack of motivation, poor language, low self-esteem, lack of knowledge, fear, hesitation, lack of confidence, poor thinking, poor English, unknown fears, poor vocabulary, poor environment and fear of criticism. University students should never have English speaking anxiety at this stage since after graduation. They have to join workplace jobs. Hence they should be well prepared in the English language. Anxiety is a natural phenomenon; therefore, students who are apprehensive in nature attend communication skill trainings and refresher courses to overcome this anxiety. Engineering universities also should play an indispensable role in providing ample opportunities of speaking to students in classrooms. For this purpose, they should add speaking courses to engineering curricula to meet the communicative need of students. This study was limited to final year engineering students and few engineering students were studied as a pilot study project. Only one data collection instrument was used. Hence, future studies should use more than one instrument and involve more population of engineering students to gather rich data about this important issue that hampers the speaking ability of engineering students of Pakistan.

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