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Exploring the Psychological Factors Affecting Undergraduate Students' Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in English Language with Teachers in the Classroom

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Article Details

ABSTRACT

Keywords: Willingness to communicate This research explores the psychological factors that influence undergraduate (WTC), Psychological factors, Undergraduate students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English with their teachers in the students, Language anxiety, Rural Education, classroom, focusing specifically on students at a public university in Sanghar, Second Language.

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Pakistan. Using a quantitative approach, data was collected through a structured questionnaire from 200 students. The study examined the role of anxiety, motivation, self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, and perceived teacher behavior in shaping students' willingness to participate in classroom communication in English. The findings analyzed using SPSS revealed strong relationships between psychological factors and students' willingness to speak English, with confidence and teacher encouragement emerging as particularly significant. The study highlights the importance of supportive classroom environments and suggests that reducing fear and anxiety while boosting motivation can meaningfully enhance communication in a second language. These insights can benefit language teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers aiming to improve English language learning outcomes in Pakistan.

INTRODUCTION

According to Ahmed and Pathan (2017), English is considered a global language, and in Pakistan, it holds a strong position in the education system. It is the official medium of instruction in most universities, and students are expected to read, write, and communicate in English. But in reality, not all students feel confident using English, especially when it comes to speaking in class. This is especially true for students from rural areas like Sanghar, where exposure to English outside the classroom is very limited (Ali, 2020). Many undergraduate students understand English, but when they are asked to speak it, they hesitate. This hesitation does not always come from a lack of vocabulary or grammar; it always comes from psychological factors like fear of making mistakes, anxiety, low self-esteem, or simply the fear of being judged (Khan & Jabeen, 2018). According to Reham Khan and Bukhari (2015), students in Pakistan face communication problems in English due to nervousness and pressure to speak perfectly. Another major reason students remain silent in the classroom is the fear of negative evaluation. Students feel that if they say something wrong in English, their classmates or teachers might laugh or correct them harshly, which makes them even more afraid to speak (Farooq, 2016). This fear becomes stronger in rural areas, where students come from Urdu or Sindhi-speaking backgrounds and do not have daily exposure to a speaking environment (Shahbaz & Khan, 2019). In Pakistani classrooms, speaking English is often seen as a sign of intelligence, which puts extra pressure on students who already feel insecure (Zaheer & Zubair, 2021). Students from English medium schools might not face this issue as much, but those who studied in government or non-English medium schools, the problem is more serious. They already have less practice in spoken English and more fear of making mistakes in front of the class (Hassan & Akram, 2019; Shah et al., 2022). That's why it is important to explore what exactly causes this hesitation and how it can be reduced. This study focuses on understanding these psychological barriers among undergraduate students in Sanghar. If we can find out what is stopping them from speaking English in class, then we can suggest ways to support them better.

In Pakistani classrooms, especially in rural areas like Sanghar, many undergraduate students face serious difficulties when it comes to speaking English. Even though they are taught English throughout their academic journey, most students still hesitate to use it in real-life conversations, particularly with their teachers during class. This hesitation is not always due to a lack of vocabulary or grammar knowledge. In fact, many students understand English quite well, but when it comes to speaking, they freeze or stay quiet. This shows that there are deeper issues

involved here, issues related to psychology rather than just language skills. Students often report feeling nervous or afraid of being judged for their accent, pronunciation, or grammar mistakes. Some feel shy or believe their English is not good enough to speak in front of others, especially their teachers. This kind of thinking causes anxiety and makes students avoid participating in classroom discussions. Over time, this not only affects their confidence but also their ability to improve in the language. If students are too scared to speak, they miss out on important opportunities to practice and receive feedback. In Sanghar, these problems may be even more serious because students have fewer chances to use English in their daily lives. Most communication outside school is done in Urdu or Sindhi, so the classroom becomes the only place to use the English language. But if students are too nervous to speak even in class, their language learning becomes passive and limited. This gap in class is a major concern. Unfortunately, in many cases, teachers and institutions focus only on improving students' grammar and writing skills, without paying attention to what students feel emotionally and mentally when speaking. This study believes that psychological factors, such as fear of failure, low self-esteem, classroom anxiety, and lack of motivation, play a big role in stopping students from speaking English. These hidden factors need to be explored so that teachers can better support their students, not just academically but emotionally. This research aims to explore the psychological factors affecting undergraduate students' willingness to communicate in English with teachers in the classroom.

RESEARCH QUESTION

1. What are the key psychological factors that affect students' willingness to communicate in English with their teachers?
2. How do anxiety and self-confidence impact students' classroom communication in English?
3. How do motivation and attitudes toward English influence students' willingness to speak English in class?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In Pakistan, English is widely used in education, but many students still struggle when it comes to speaking in front of teachers. This chapter looks at different psychological factors that can affect a student's willingness to speak English in class. Since my research is based on Sanghar. Speaking in English is not just about knowing grammar or vocabulary; it also depends a lot on how the students feel. If a student is nervous, lacks confidence, or feels scared of making mistakes, they might choose to stay silent even if they understand everything. Researchers in Pakistan

have pointed out many such reasons why students avoid speaking in class, even at the university level. This chapter discusses five main psychological factors: motivation, self-confidence, anxiety, fear of making mistakes, teachers' behavior, and how they affect communication.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, two main theories are used to understand how psychological factors affect students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English. These are Krashen's affective filter hypothesis and the willingness to communicate (WTC) model. Both of these frameworks help explain why some students speak confidently in English while others remain silent even when they know the answers.

KRASHEN'S AFFECTIVE FILTER HYPOTHESIS

Stephen Krashen's theory is one of the most popular ideas in language learning. According to him, even if a student is getting good input like English lessons or practice, they might still not learn properly if their "affective filter" is high. The affective filter is a mental block caused by emotions like fear, anxiety, low confidence, or lack of interest. In simpler words, if a student feels nervous, judged, or uncomfortable in the classroom, their mind blocks the learning process. This especially happens when teachers are too strict or when students are afraid of being laughed at for speaking English incorrectly. In a place like Sanghar, where English exposure is already limited, this filter becomes even stronger, so reducing anxiety and boosting confidence are necessary to lower the affective filter and help students speak up more.

WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE (WTC) MODEL

The WTC model explains the student's personal choice to speak in English when given the chance. It does not only depend on their English skills, instead it depends more on how confident, motivated, or relaxed they feel. This model was first discussed by MacIntyre et al. (1998) and has since been applied to different countries, including Pakistan. In this model, factors like motivation, self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, and teacher support all come together to affect the students' decision to speak or stay silent. A student may have excellent vocabulary, but if they are afraid of being corrected or do not feel safe, they will choose not to speak. On the other hand, even an average student might speak confidently if the environment is friendly and encouraging.

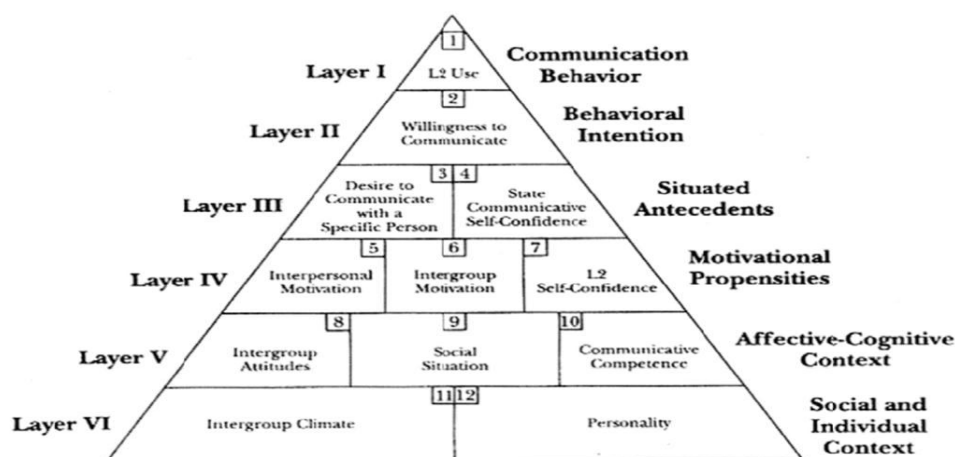


Figure 1. MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) L2 Willingness to Communicate (WTC) Heuristic Pyramid Model

ANXIETY AND WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE

Anxiety is one of the biggest reasons why many students hesitate to speak English in class. Even when students know the right words, they sometimes go completely blank when the teacher asks them something. I have seen this myself during my classroom sessions; students often avoid eye contact or pretend to be busy to escape being invited to speak. This kind of fear is called communication anxiety. In Pakistan, several studies have shown that anxiety is a serious issue for English language learners. For example, Khan and Riaz (2019) studied students from Punjab and found that a large number of them felt nervous when speaking English in front of others. Most of them were scared of being judged or laughed at. In another study, Ahmed and Aslam (2017) noted that students with high levels of English anxiety often skipped speaking activities even when they had strong grammar skills. This fear mostly comes from the pressure to speak correctly. Many students think they must speak “perfect” English, and this puts extra stress on them; if they make a small mistake, they feel embarrassed, especially in front of classmates. In rural areas like Sanghar, this issue is even more common because students have less exposure to English and less confidence in their abilities. Some even develop a belief that English is only for “city students”, which lowers their motivation. Another important point is how teachers correct them harshly or laugh; it increases anxiety. But if the teachers are friendly and supportive, students feel more relaxed. Rehman and Bukhari (2020) found that classrooms with kind and patient teachers had much lower levels of anxiety among students. Krashen’s affective filter hypothesis also supports this. It says that when anxiety is high, the brain kind of blocks language input, and students cannot process or produce language properly. So, anxiety does not just affect speaking; it blocks learning itself.

MOTIVATION AND WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE

Motivation plays a very big role in helping students speak English in the classroom. When students are motivated, whether by personal interest, teacher encouragement, or career goals, they are more likely to take part in speaking activities. I noticed during my classroom observations that the students who spoke most were often the ones who had a reason behind it, like wanting to become a teacher, going abroad, or passing IELTS. Naseem and Shah (2020) found that when students clearly see how English can help them in their career or future, like getting a good job or studying abroad, their willingness to speak increases. Their study from Karachi showed that goal-oriented students pushed themselves to speak more, even if their English was not perfect. Another survey by Iqbal and Rehman (2019) from Balochistan highlighted that students who had encouraging and friendly teachers felt more motivated to try speaking, even if they made mistakes. The positive environment gave them hope that they could improve. This also links with the idea that motivation can come both from inside the students (intrinsic motivation) or from outside sources like teachers, parents, or media (extrinsic motivation). On the other hand, students who did not feel a strong purpose for learning English were usually quiet in class. They did not put much effort into communication unless forced by the teacher. Ali and Khan (2021) compared students from rural and urban backgrounds and found that urban students were more motivated due to better access to English media. In rural areas like Sanghar, the lack of such exposure weakens motivation, which leads to a low willingness to speak English.

SELF-CONFIDENCE AND WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE

Self-confidence is one of the most important things when it comes to speaking English in the classroom, from what I have personally seen in Sanghar, students who believe in themselves, even a little, are much more likely to try speaking, while those who doubt themselves stay quiet, even if they know the answer. Confidence does not mean knowing everything. It means being okay with truly, even when you are not perfect. Aftab and Malik (2020) observed in their study from Lahore that students with high self-confidence would raise their hands more and speak during discussions. These students were not always fluent, but they dared to try, and that made a big difference. Unfortunately, many students in rural areas have very low confidence when it comes to English. This is because they are not used to hearing or speaking the language outside of school. Tariq et al. (2021) studied students in Islamabad and pointed out that a lack of speaking opportunities at home or in daily life often leads to poor confidence. Students feel shy,

scared, or think, “I’m not good enough”. It is also true that confidence builds slowly over time. Shahbaz and Fatima (2022) found that students who had past success, like when a teacher praised their English or when they performed well in a speech activity, gained more confidence and were more active in future tasks. One small positive experience can push a student forward. There is also a strong connection between confidence and how others react.

TEACHER BEHAVIOR AND WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE

The teacher’s behavior has a huge impact on whether students feel comfortable speaking English in class. In fact, I have noticed that students are much more open and talkative when the teacher is kind, patient, and strict, or humiliated students for making mistakes, even confident students go silent. In classrooms, the teacher is often seen as the authority figure, so their attitudes really matter. Farooq and Ilyas (2019) conducted a study in Sargodha and found that when teachers had a harsh or “bossy” tone, students avoided participation. They were afraid of being scolded or corrected in front of everyone. This fear made them stay quiet, even if they had the answer. But when teachers show support, like smiling, using students’ names, praising efforts instead of just results, students feel more relaxed. Bukhari and Zafae (2020) studied classrooms in Hyderabad and found that students were more willing to speak English when the teacher was approachable and gave them confidence instead of criticism. In Sanghar, I noticed that in classrooms where teachers allowed students to talk without interrupting or correcting every word, students spoke more freely. But in classes where teachers stopped students midway to correct grammar or pronunciation, the flow was lost, and the students got nervous. According to Sultana and Hussain (2021), teachers’ tone, body language, and facial expressions all influence how safe students feel in the classroom. A small gesture like nodding, smiling, or saying “good try” can make a big difference. This aligns with Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, which highlights the role of interaction and social support in learning. If the teacher becomes a supportive guide (not a judge), the students learn more and speak more. In short, the teacher’s attitude can either be a door or a wall. A supportive teacher opens the door for communication. A critical or cold teacher closes it. That is why teachers’ behavior is one of the strongest factors in shaping students’ willingness to communicate in English.

FEAR OF MISTAKES AND WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE

One of the biggest reasons is the fear of making mistakes. This fear is not just about getting grammar wrong; it is also about being laughed at, corrected harshly, or feeling embarrassed in front of others. Especially in rural areas, where students do not get many chances to practice

English, this fear becomes even more serious. Imran and Khalid (2020) studied students in Peshawar and found that many of them stayed quiet during English lessons because they did not want to be corrected in front of their classmates. Even if they had something to say, the fear of “saying it wrong” kept their mouths shut. It is not that they did not know; it is that they did not feel safe. Fear of mistakes is often linked to classroom culture. If students think that the teacher or classmates will laugh, tease, or judge them, their confidence drops. Jamil and Zahra (2021) reported in their Faisalabad study that students described speaking English in class as a “risky” thing. They feared that one wrong word could bring shame, especially if they were already shy or from less privileged backgrounds. This fear can even lead to what is known as communication apprehension, a kind of anxiety that blocks students from speaking at all. Some students might even pretend they do not know the answer to avoid embarrassment. And sadly, once they get used to staying silent, it becomes a habit. But there is hope. Anwer and Fatima (2022) observed students in interior Sindh and found that when teachers created a relaxed and non-judgmental environment, students slowly started participating more. Just the teachers saying, “It is okay to make mistakes; we are all learning.” Made a big difference. Fear of mistakes is also connected to how students view themselves. If they believe that making a mistake means they are stupid or weak, they avoid trying. But if they are taught that mistakes are a natural part of learning, their willingness to speak slowly improves.

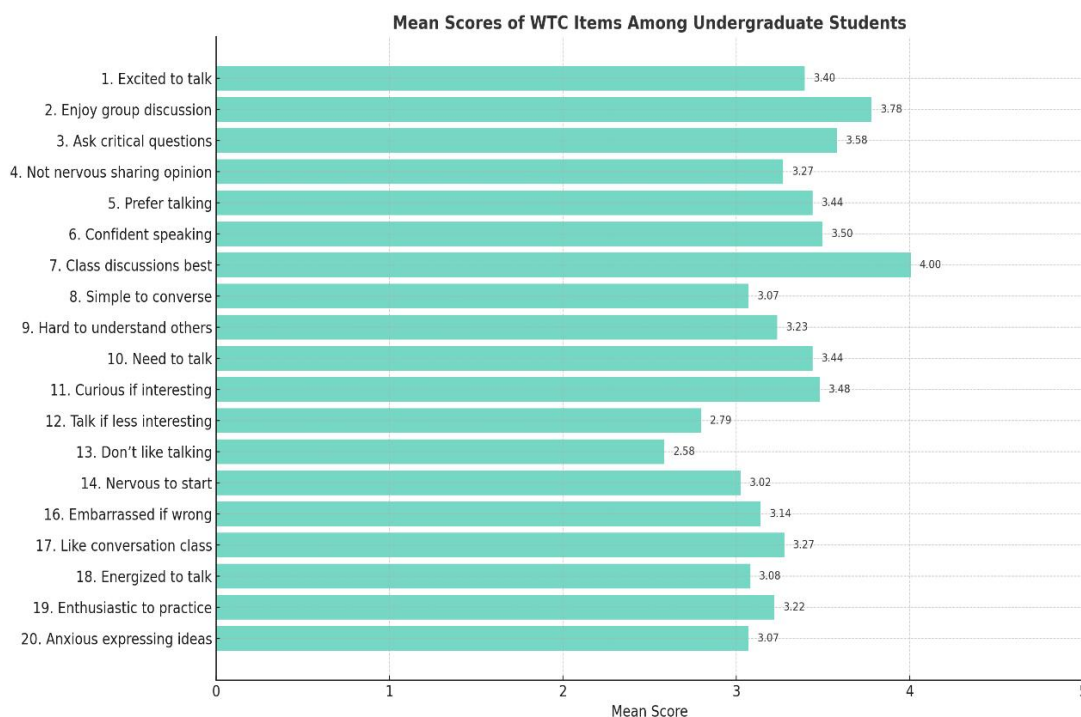
METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore the psychological factors, like anxiety, motivation, self-confidence, fear of mistakes, and perceived teacher behavior, that affect undergraduate students' willingness to communicate in English with their teachers inside classroom settings. Given the complexity and subjective nature of these internal factors, a quantitative research design was employed to allow for measurable, statistical insights while capturing the students' lived academic experiences. A survey method was selected, primarily because it will enable researchers to reach a wider audience in a relatively short time while maintaining anonymity, which can be especially important when dealing with sensitive psychological aspects such as anxiety or fear. Surveys are a valid approach for examining individual attitudes and perceptions across a population, particularly in language learning research. The participants were 200 undergraduate students from a university located in Sanghar, Pakistan. The students were enrolled in English-medium degree programs, but their first language was not English grammar many hesitated to speak during classroom interactions. That hesitation, that moment of doubt before raising a hand,

is the very moment this study seeks to understand. The primary tool for data collection was a structured questionnaire, consisting and a few optional open-ended prompts. The data was analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), which is widely used in educational and psychological research due to its ability to handle large data and conduct complex statistical procedures. Descriptive statistics were used to determine relationships between the factors and WTC. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their participation was entirely voluntarily. Informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured that their identities would remain confidential. Since the topic touches personal emotions and academic insecurities, this ethical consideration eas especially important.

FINDINGS

The data derived from a survey of 200 students (107 male, 93 Female) reveals key trends in confidence, anxiety, and motivation. Below are the critical findings.



Gender differences in WTC when a student speaks and their classmates laugh or make fun, their confidence drops immediately. But if teachers and classmates support them, even with mistakes, it boosts their beliefs in themselves. I remember one student in Sanghar who would never speak, but after the teacher praised her once for trying, she started participating more. That is how powerful a little encouragement can be.

- Male students reported slightly higher confidence in speaking activities (mean = 1.47, SD

= 0.50) compared to female students, aligning with prior research suggesting gendered socialization impacts language participation (Macintyre et al., 1998).

- However, both genders exhibited moderate anxiety levels (e.g., 14: “I am nervous about starting a conversation,” Mean = 3.03, SD = 1.42), indicating that anxiety is a universal barrier.
- English majors (61.5% of respondents) showed the highest WTC (mean = 2.29, SD 0.93), likely due to familiarity with the subject.
- IT and Business students displayed lower engagement (mean 3.27-3.78), possibly due to the perceived irrelevance of English to their fields.

KEY PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

CONFIDENCE AND SELF-EFFICACY

- High confidence was linked to enjoyment of group discussions (item 7: Mean= 4.01, SD= 1.10), reinforcing that structured activities boost WTC.
- Conversely, 46.5% of students feared embarrassment if their answers were wrong (item 16: mean=3.14, SD=1.38), highlighting the role of face-threatening environments.

ANXIETY AND NERVOUSNESS

- 30% of students felt anxious expressing ideas (item 20: mean = 3.07, SD=1.30), mirroring studies on language anxiety.

MOTIVATION AND INTEREST

- Intrinsic motivation drove participation when topics were interesting (item 11: mean 3.48, SD = 1.38). This aligns with self-determination theory.

CLASSROOM DYNAMICS

- Students preferred interactive methods like group discussions (item 2: mean 3.40), underscoring the need for collaborative learning.
- A surprising 32.5% avoided discussions entirely (item 13: Mean 2.59), hinting at cultural factors like respect for authority inhibiting questioning.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the significant role that psychological factors play in shaping undergraduate students' willingness to communicate in English with teachers during classroom interactions. Among all the variables explored, self-confidence and teacher behavior stood out as

the strongest influences. Students who felt confident in their English abilities were more likely to participate in discussions, ask questions, or speak voluntarily, which supports previous studies like MacIntyre and Charos (1996) that place self-confidence at the core of the WTC model. In a context like Pakistan, where many students come from non-English speaking backgrounds, confidence becomes even more crucial. Similarly, the way teachers behave in the classroom, whether they encourage students, correct mistakes gently, or create a safe space, was also found to affect students' willingness to speak strongly. Teacher encouragement seemed to boost students' sense of belonging and reduced hesitation, while negative reactions or fear of embarrassment made some students go completely silent. This aligns with research by Mahmood and Asghar (2020), which found that respectful and supportive teacher behavior plays a key role in classroom communication. This echoes the idea put forward by Horwitz et al. (1986), who explained how language anxiety can discourage even capable learners. Motivation, while important, seems to work best when paired with a comfortable classroom environment. Many students were motivated to learn English for academic or career goals, but they still needed emotional support actually to speak in class.

Overall, this study confirms that WTC is not just about language knowledge; it is about how students feel inside the classroom. If they feel safe, supported, and valued, they are much more likely to communicate. These insights remind teachers and curriculum planners that psychological comfort is just as important as academic content when it comes to language learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Address anxiety: integrate low-stakes speaking tasks like pair work to reduce fear of judgment.
- Leverage interest: use discipline-relevant topics for non-English majors to enhance relevance.
- Gender-sensitive: encourage female participation through mentorship or female-led discussions.

The data paints Sanghar's students as eager communicators hindered by psychological barriers as an opportunity for pedagogical innovation. As one respondent noted, 'I want to speak, but my mind goes blank,' a sentiment that calls for empathy-driven teaching.

CONCLUSION

The gender distribution of the participants, as visualized in the clustered bar chart, offers a clear understanding of the demographic composition of the sample population involved in the study. The chart displays both the frequency and percentage of each gender category, male, female, allowing for a comprehensive comparative analysis. The data shows that male participants slightly outnumber female participants, with 107 males constituting 48.2% of the total sample, compared to 93 females, making up 41.9%. This minor imbalance suggests that male voices are marginally more represented in the study. While the difference is not overwhelming large, it may have subtle implications for interpreting results, particularly in gender-related analysis. Overall, the gender distribution chart provides valuable insight into the sample's composition and highlights both the representation and underrepresentation within the dataset. Recognizing this distribution is essential for understanding the context in which psychological factors related to willingness to communicate in English are being examined. Any interpretations drawn from this data should remain mindful of the slight gender imbalance and the impact of the slight gender imbalance and the impact of incomplete responses.

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