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Why English Scares Us: A Study of Language Anxiety in Indian Learners

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Abstract: *This study aims to understand the psychological, social, cultural, and institutional factors that contribute to why many Indian learners experience anxiety when it comes to using English, despite its widespread importance in communication, employment, and education. It draws on existing theories of foreign language anxiety, postcolonial theory, and sociocultural theory to develop a comprehensive understanding of the issue.*

To achieve this, the research uses a mixed-methods approach. This involves a quantitative survey of approximately 50 learners from diverse backgrounds (urban/rural, private/government schools, adult learners) and qualitative interviews with a subsample of about 5 participants, including two detailed case studies. Data collection will involve surveys, semi-structured interviews, and secondary data. The collected data will be analysed by merging quantitative patterns with qualitative themes to create useful insights.

The expected findings are anticipated to reveal insights into fear of judgment, shame, perceived stakes (jobs, social mobility), pedagogical triggers, and cultural othering. The case studies will provide in-depth understanding through examples like "Fluent by Necessity" (an adult learner who uses English daily despite no formal training) and "Educated but Frightened" (a university graduate with good English training who avoids public speaking).

Ultimately, the study will discuss how quantitative and qualitative findings align, focusing on the role of power and postcolonial legacy in shaping English language anxiety in India. It will offer implications for teaching practices, suggesting trauma-informed, learner-centered, and trans-languaging approaches. Practical recommendations for classroom practices, teacher training, policy changes, and suggestions for future research shall also be included.

Keywords*: English language anxiety, Sociocultural factors in language learning, Psychological triggers of language anxiety, English proficiency and confidence, Institutional practices in English education, Coping strategies for language anxiety.*

Introduction

English opens doors to higher education, formal-sector employment, global mobility, and digital participation; however, it also operates as an intimidating gatekeeper that can trigger worry, avoidance, and self-doubt. In classrooms, on campus, and in offices, the moment of speaking, writing, or even being evaluated in English can feel like a test of intelligence, aspiration, and belonging. This uneasy blend of aspiration and apprehension is not incidental; it reflects a complex interplay of psychological dispositions, social hierarchies, cultural histories, and institutional practices that frame English as far more than a neutral medium of communication. It is precisely this layered reality that motivates the present study, “Why English Scares Us,” which investigates why English comes to feel frightening, even to those who recognize its undeniable utility.

The Indian context makes this question especially urgent and distinctive. As a language historically tied to colonial administration and, subsequently, to post-independence modernization and meritocratic ideals, English has accumulated symbolic value as well as social risk. Its perceived association with quality education, upward mobility, and urban professional life means that proficiency in English is

frequently read as a proxy for competence and cultural capital. At the same time, that very association can amplify fear of judgment for those who learned English late, unevenly, or in environments that emphasized correctness over confidence. Accent, fluency, and vocabulary become visible markers of status; missteps can feel public and consequential. Learners come to the classroom carrying not only textbooks and notebooks, but also histories of comparison—between urban and rural schooling, English-medium and regional-medium instruction, and the everyday linguistic practices of home and the formal expectations of institutions.

This study uses a framework that brings psychological, sociocultural, and institutional perspectives into the same analytic conversation. Rather than treating language anxiety as a purely individual deficit to be "fixed" through practice alone, it positions anxiety as an experience produced at the intersection of the learner's inner landscape and the external structures that confer meaning on English. It takes into consideration the fact that English proficiency can function as a sorting mechanism, invisibly advantaging those already proximate to it through schooling, social networks, or media exposure.

The aim is not simply to diagnose why English scares us, but to show how carefully designed environments are what is needed to help English fulfil its obligation, and be less a source of fear and more a medium of voice, participation, and opportunity for the people!

Objectives

To identify psychological triggers of English anxiety

To explore the role of sociocultural and institutional factors in shaping learners' attitudes toward English.

To measure awareness of social and cultural divides created by English

To suggest pedagogical strategies and policy implications

Literature Review

English was established as the language of governance and education during British colonialism, promoting its use among the elite and facilitating social mobility. The British Empire's language policies aimed to create a class of English-speaking Indians who could assist in administration, leading to a form of language imperialism (Mastoi et al., 2018) (Vishwakarma, 2023).

Post-independence, English has become integral to India's global engagement, serving as a lingua franca in business, science, and technology (Sridhar, 2024). The rise of Indian English, influenced by local languages and cultures, showcases a unique adaptation of English that reflects India's multilingual identity (Nair, 2012) (Sridhar, 2024).

Despite its benefits, the legacy of English continues to evoke debates about cultural imperialism and social inequality, as access to English education remains uneven (Chandran, 2016) (Nair, 2012).

English is often treated as cultural capital due to its association with social status, economic opportunities, and educational advantages. This perception is shaped significantly by peer, family, and social environments, which influence attitudes towards the language. The following sections elaborate on these dynamics.

English is viewed as a symbol of privilege and access to better educational and professional opportunities, reinforcing social inequalities (Malik & Mohamed, 2014).

Bourdieu's theory highlights how cultural capital, including language proficiency, can perpetuate social stratification, as those with English skills often gain advantages in educational settings (Wildhagen, 2010).

Peers can either reinforce or challenge the value placed on English, impacting motivation and engagement in language learning (Chen, 2020). In environments where English is celebrated, students may feel encouraged to pursue proficiency, while in less supportive contexts, they may disengage.

Family educational background significantly influences students' attitudes towards English; those from educated families often have greater access to resources and support (Assulaimani & Althubaiti, 2021). And social environments, including community attitudes towards English, can either foster a positive outlook or contribute to feelings of inadequacy among learners (Lareau, 2016).

Conversely, some argue that the emphasis on English as cultural capital can marginalize non-English speakers and their cultural identities, leading to a homogenization of cultural values and practices. This

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perspective highlights the need for a more inclusive approach to language education that values diverse linguistic backgrounds.

A dominant cause of anxiety is the fear of being judged negatively by peers and instructors, which affects students' willingness to participate in class activities (Hidayat et al., 2022). Students often feel anxious due to a lack of confidence in their speaking abilities and insufficient vocabulary or grammar knowledge ("Language Anxiety Among English Foreign L...", 2023). High levels of anxiety are linked to reduced academic performance and reluctance to use the language, highlighting the need for supportive pedagogical strategies (Vasquez & Aguirre, 2024). The anxiety also significantly impacts students' oral skills, making them more reticent to engage in speaking activities (Vasquez & Aguirre, 2024).

Teachers can reduce anxiety by creating a relaxing classroom environment, using student-cantered learning approaches, and incorporating technology to make learning more engaging (Atifnigar, 2024). And students can actively work on reducing their anxiety by employing positive thinking strategies and seeking support from family and peers (Atifnigar, 2024).

While foreign language anxiety poses significant challenges, it is essential to recognize that not all students experience anxiety to the same degree. Some students may have positive attitudes towards learning English, which can mitigate the effects of anxiety and enhance their learning experience (Hidayat et al., 2022).

The intersection of proficiency and perception in English significantly influences language learning outcomes for non-native speakers. Proficiency encompasses the ability to use English effectively, while perception relates to how learners and their interlocutors view their language skills. Together, these factors shape the learning experience and outcomes for non-native speakers. Non-native speakers often face hurdles such as grammatical complexities, pronunciation issues, and native language interference, which can hinder their proficiency (Janardhan, 2024).

Research indicates that L2 users struggle to generate expectations during language processing, impacting their ability to judge sentence acceptability compared to native speakers (Goldberg, 2015).

Listeners' attitudes towards non-native speakers can significantly affect their perceived intelligibility and proficiency, leading to potential biases in communication. The perception of "standard" English can impose unrealistic expectations on non-native speakers, resulting in discrimination and affecting their confidence and learning outcomes Lindemann, 2010).

Achieving near-native-like fluency can present challenges, including issues of identity and cultural authenticity, which may complicate communication dynamics (Jasuli & Adi, 2023).

Recognizing L2 users as competent speakers in their own right, rather than as approximations of native speakers, can foster a more inclusive learning environment (Cook, 1999).

While proficiency is crucial for effective communication, the perception of non-native speakers plays a pivotal role in shaping their language learning journey. Addressing both aspects is essential for enhancing language education and fostering a supportive environment for learners.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative, qualitative, and interpretive elements. The rationale for this design lies in the complex nature of language anxiety: while it can be measured through structured surveys, its psychological and sociocultural dimensions are best understood through lived experiences and contextual narratives.

Accordingly, the research employs:

- A structured survey questionnaire to gather quantitative data on learners' proficiency, perceptions, and experiences of anxiety.
- A review of relevant literature to situate the study within established theories and prior findings.
- A qualitative case study interview to capture a personal narrative of someone who acquired English pragmatically, as a necessary skill for survival and advancement in daily and professional life.

Participants, Sampling and Data Collection

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- Survey: Approximately 50 learners were targeted, representing diverse educational and social backgrounds, including urban and rural settings, government and private institutions, and both students and working adults. The survey comprised nine sections, covering demographics, proficiency, perceptions, psychological triggers, peer/family influences, sociocultural factors, institutional practices, coping strategies, and open-ended reflections. Question types included multiple-choice questions (MCQs), rating scales, short-answer responses, and long-answer reflections. An optional proficiency mini-test was incorporated to validate self-reported proficiency levels and reduce the risk of response bias.
- Case Study: One participant was purposively selected as a case study because their trajectory exemplifies a phenomenon of interest: acquiring English informally, outside of structured classrooms, purely as a "tool of necessity." This participant's narrative provides insight into the intersection of survival, work demands, and language acquisition. A semi-structured interview was conducted with the selected participant, who learned English pragmatically as part of their trade and professional environment. Questions focused on the participant's motivations, experiences of anxiety or confidence, coping strategies, and reflections on how English shaped their opportunities. The narrative was analyzed as a case study, offering depth and personal insight that complements the broader survey trends.
- Literature Review: Secondary data was collected through academic journals, books, and reports relevant to foreign language anxiety, postcolonial theory, sociocultural learning, and Indian educational contexts. The review served two purposes: (a) to establish the theoretical framework of the study, and (b) to identify gaps in existing research that the present study could address.

Ethical Considerations

- Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained prior to data collection.
- Anonymity and confidentiality were assured, with no identifying details published in the report.
- Sensitive questions (such as those on identity, social divides, or personal struggles) were handled with empathetic wording and the option to skip.
- For the case study, the participant's narrative was anonymized and presented with consent, ensuring dignity and respect.

Findings and Discussion

The study recorded N = 52 respondents, predominantly 18–25 years old (45), with 35 identifying as female and 17 as male, and most enrolled in undergraduate study (37) across varied schooling types, ensuring a useful snapshot of early-tertiary learners engaging English in mixed-contexts.

Most respondents rate their English proficiency modestly, with "speaking" and "grammar" identified as the most difficult skills by a clear margin. English is used rarely to occasionally for most, predominantly in classroom, online, or social media contexts rather than at home or in daily life. Those from private, English-medium schooling report slightly higher usage and confidence, while government school and regional-medium backgrounds correlate to greater hesitation and lower self-appraisal of competence.

Parental English proficiency has a clear influence on the level of encouragement at home. Families with fluent English-speaking parents consistently promote its use, while households where parents do not speak English rarely or never encourage it. Those with limited proficiency fall in between, though the pattern leans more toward rare encouragement.

Anxiety is most acute in public or evaluative contexts (speaking in class, in front of teachers, or in formal settings). "Fear of judgment," "fear of mistakes," and "being judged by others" are the most cited sources of anxiety, with some reporting physical symptoms such as sweating and faster heartbeat. Many recalls specific instances where they avoided speaking English, especially during oral assessments or presentations. Anxiety is often intertwined with self-confidence—students reporting high anxiety also tend to feel less competent and are more likely to believe their English anxiety impacts their broader identity and self-esteem.

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Respondents who reported a low impact of English anxiety on their confidence indicated that comparing themselves to fluent speakers had a minimal to moderate effect on their motivation. In contrast, those who reported a significant impact of English anxiety on their confidence overwhelmingly stated that social comparison had a considerable to profound negative effect on their motivation to learn. This suggests that as English-related anxiety increases, so does the susceptibility to diminished motivation stemming from social comparison.

Respondents are deeply aware of sociocultural divides. English is routinely equated with intelligence, success and urban cosmopolitan status. Many mention a sense of exclusion when lacking fluency, often linked to gender ("women expected to be correct and polite, men to be confident"), class, and rural-urban divides. A number of students perceive being "looked down upon" for mistakes in English or for speaking regional languages, but some also contest the notion that English should influence self-worth or social standing.

Institutional practice around error correction and public speaking strongly affects anxiety. Environments perceived as judgmental or strictly English-only increase student tension, while flexible and mixed-language classrooms reduce it. Support from peers (such as practicing together informally, or using WhatsApp/social groups) is valued for both skill building and anxiety reduction. Teacher encouragement and inclusive, low-pressure approaches are consistently requested. Trauma from past ridicule (by teachers or classmates) emerges as a recurring theme in students' narratives.

The findings strongly support a view of English anxiety as a product of systemic, not just individual, factors. English is imbued with symbolic power in Indian education and employment; hence, proficiency is closely tied to socioeconomic status, cultural capital, and perceived social inclusion. Anxiety is not merely a reaction to low skill, but to public pressure, institutional expectations, and the spectre of negative comparison—with classmates, with native speakers, and with societal ideals. These pressures are heightened in environments that penalize mistakes or reinforce an "English-only" norm.

Private-school and higher education backgrounds buffer somewhat against anxiety, largely due to early, immersive exposure and familial or teacher support. By contrast, students from regional medium or rural backgrounds face intersecting disadvantages: lack of home practice, fewer role models, and the stigma attached to accents or non-standard grammar. Women, first-generation learners, and those from lower-income backgrounds report the sharpest insecurity. Yet, even among "advantaged" students, fear of judgment in public or academic settings remains pervasive.

The Case Study

The participant is a 28-year-old male entrepreneur from a semi-urban area in India, with education completed up to the secondary school level in a regional-medium school. Formal English instruction was minimal and largely theory-based, with limited practical exposure during schooling. English entered his life predominantly through his work in sales and small business, where communication with clients and vendors from varied linguistic backgrounds required at least functional English skills. He describes English as a "necessary tool" that enabled him to navigate professional spaces and pursue growth beyond local boundaries.

"I didn't really learn English properly in school. It was all about grammar rules and reading stories, but no one taught us to speak confidently. I learned most of what I know now by just speaking with customers and watching videos online."

The participant first realized his need for English when business opportunities required communication with outside clients who used English for negotiation, emails, and documentation. Early challenges included embarrassment at limited vocabulary and inability to express himself clearly.

The learning occurred primarily through informal strategies, like regular workplace conversations where English was necessary, observation of coworkers and clients' speech patterns, self-study via mobile videos, news clips, and gradual practice in real-life trade interactions.

A decisive moment was an important client meeting where gaps in English skills caused misunderstanding and lost sales, prompting a focused effort on improvement.

"I remember losing a big deal because I couldn't explain the product well."

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At the outset, feelings were mixed—nervousness, fear of ridicule, and low confidence dominated, with occasional excitement when able to communicate successfully. Anxiety peaked during formal or public speaking contexts, especially customer meetings or document drafting.

"Once, during a presentation, a client laughed when I mispronounced a word. It hurt a lot, and for some time, I avoided speaking much in meetings."

Currently, while self-confidence has improved substantially, anxiety still arises in high-stakes situations such as pitching to new clients or attending workshops where English proficiency is presumed.

"Now I am more comfortable, but if I have to present in front of many people, my heart races. I try to prepare a lot to avoid mistakes, but sometimes I feel the old fear creeping back."

Family was largely indifferent, with some scepticism about English's relevance beyond schooling. Peers from similar backgrounds shared mixed attitudes—some supportive, others dismissive of "rough English." The participant felt a persistent cultural divide between his informal style and the polished English of urban, educated speakers.

"My family didn't really push me to learn English, they said 'just do your work.' Among friends, some joked about my accent but also helped me with difficult words. I felt there is a difference between me and those who went to English schools, like they had a head start."

The participant's schooling did not encourage practical English use, focusing more on rote grammar. At the workplace, English was encouraged as a business necessity but formal training was absent.

"In school, if anyone spoke in a local language during English class, teachers scolded them. But after school, there was no training at work—everyone had to learn on the job."

The participant felt institutions often worsen anxiety by valuing "perfect" English and punishing mistakes, rather than fostering a supportive learning environment.

"If teachers or bosses mock your English, it kills confidence. I think schools and companies should stop treating mistakes like crimes."

Participants' coping strategies included continuous exposure through digital media (YouTube tutorials, English news, social media), mimicking phrases and practicing dialogues with peers, blending English with his mother tongue (Marathi), which eased anxiety while maintaining communication.

"I still mix Marathi and English, especially when I don't find the right English word. It helps me stay connected and feel less afraid."

Reflecting on his journey, English has opened doors for business growth and social mobility, enabling communication beyond local boundaries.

"Without English, I wouldn't have been able to expand my business or meet clients from bigger cities."

He feels that if English anxiety had not been a barrier, his progress would have been faster and less stressful.

"I wasted a lot of time being afraid of mistakes. I wish I had a place to practice without fear."

The survey and case study data highlight that environments allowing code-switching, incremental public speaking (small groups before large audiences), and formative, low-stakes practice can measurably reduce anxiety and improve both self-confidence and skill. Peer support both inside and outside formal learning (e.g., social media, WhatsApp groups) helps normalize mistakes and foster risk-taking. Teacher modelling—for example, making and correcting their own errors publicly—further destigmatizes failure and builds trust, while trauma-informed, inclusive approaches are essential to prevent the long-term psychological effects of ridicule or exclusion.

Recommendations

Classroom Practices

- Teachers should openly model making errors in English and correcting them. This reduces the "fear of judgment" culture.
- Allow students to mix English with their mother tongue during discussions, gradually scaffolding toward full English use. This prevents alienation while still building competence.
- Instead of one learner speaking to the whole class (a high-anxiety trigger), start with small group or pair tasks where anxiety is lower. Gradually expand to larger audiences.

- Incorporate formative tasks (presentations, dialogues, journal entries) that are graded on effort and communication rather than perfect grammar.
- Encourage learners to practice English through WhatsApp groups, YouTube explainers, or podcasts they already enjoy. This connects classroom learning with real-world use.
- Train teachers in trauma-informed pedagogy: Many learners' anxiety comes from past humiliation or punishment. Teachers should learn to create safe spaces where mistakes are seen as growth.

Institutional Strategies

- Instead of punishing students for speaking regional languages, institutions should adopt flexible language policies that gradually integrate English without excluding other identities.
- Offer short, intensive "English confidence" modules at the start of college years, focusing on communication strategies rather than just grammar.
- Create peer support circles where students can practice English without fear of formal evaluation.

Policy Implications

- Integrate multilingualism in NEP implementation: While NEP 2020 stresses mother-tongue education, policies must also balance English as a skill for employability, without positioning it as a cultural "superior."
- Equity initiatives: Government and NGOs should fund English learning programs targeted at rural, underprivileged, or first-generation learners, to bridge divides.
- Public campaigns: Normalize "Indian English" in media and policy discourse, reducing the stigma of accents and making learners proud of their variety of English.
- Industry collaboration: Employers should offer workplace-based English support rather than rejecting candidates outright. Policies can incentivize companies that provide such training.

Future Directions

- Pilot programs: Schools and colleges should pilot anxiety-reduction strategies (peer circles, flexible assessments) and share best practices across institutions.

Limitations

This study is limited by its relatively small sample size of about 50 learners, which may not fully represent the diversity of India's linguistic landscape. Participation was voluntary, raising the possibility of selection bias, as those with higher confidence in English may have been more willing to respond. The optional proficiency test provided useful validation but cannot replace standardized language assessments. Finally, the single case study offers depth but restricts generalizability, making the findings more exploratory than conclusive.

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