



**THE ANXIETY OF ENGLISH AMONG INDIAN STUDENTS:
CAUSES, EFFECTS, AND COPING STRATEGIES**

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ABSTRACT :

As a psychological phenomenon, Language Anxiety is a complex one that cripples learners of English as a Second or Foreign Language regardless of their linguistic or cultural upbringing. In fact, unlike teachers of other subjects where the challenge is to impart knowledge in students, teachers of English face an additional challenge when trying to get their students to speak because even those with a good understanding of English and those who are passably good at writing in it face anxiety when speaking. Addressing this anxiety and helping students overcome it is something most English teachers have to do above and beyond imparting knowledge and developing understanding of the language. This paper looks into the reasons behind this anxiety, the effects it has on students, and suggests strategies and tools that can be employed for better results. In order to provide a holistic view of the problem, it delves into psychological, linguistic, social and educational issues. It also provides a practical understanding of language anxiety to teachers, learners, and researchers, hoping to help them in their respective efforts.

KEYWORDS : *psychological phenomenon , anxiety and helping students , linguistic, social and educational issues.*

INTRODUCTION:

As a psychological phenomenon, Language Anxiety is a widespread issue that significantly hampers effective language learning and communication. It is a complex issue that cripples learners of English as a Second or Foreign Language regardless of their linguistic or cultural upbringing. In fact, unlike teachers of other subjects where the challenge is to impart knowledge in students, teachers of English face an additional challenge when trying to get their students to speak because even those with a good understanding of English and those who are passably good at writing in it face anxiety when speaking. Addressing this anxiety and helping students overcome it is something most English teachers have to do above and beyond imparting knowledge and developing understanding of the language. This paper looks into the reasons behind this anxiety by discussing its origins, manifestations, and implications, and sheds light on the effects it has on students. It suggests strategies and tools that can be employed for better results. In order to provide a holistic view of the problem, it delves into psychological, linguistic, social and educational aspects. It also provides a practical understanding of language anxiety to teachers, learners, and researchers, hoping to help them in their respective efforts. The final objective this paper is to contribute to development of strategies for both teacher and learner so as to minimise the repercussions of Language Anxiety.

DEFINITION AND SCOPE OF LANGUAGE ANXIETY:

Language Anxiety is that specific form of anxiety that gets triggered when a person tries to use a foreign language. If being articulated, it is characterised by symptoms of nervousness like stammering, trembling, sweating, dry throat, palpitations, etc. If written, it would be characterised by an

unwillingness to show the written work to anyone for fear of being judged. If the written work is actually shown to anyone, then the same symptoms as that while speaking may become manifest. Being made to read aloud also sparks the same anxiety. Listening is perhaps the only activity that does not cause severe anxiety as it is more passive in nature. However, having to answer questions relating to what they have listened to may again cause the sudden appearance of some or all of the above symptoms. This anxiety is not to be confused by general anxiety as it refers to anxiety specific to the use of a second or foreign language. The person may otherwise not even be prone to anxiety.

The classroom setting is particularly triggering for students suffering from Language Anxiety as the fear of having to speak or submit a written assignment is forever present. This is even more true of the English classroom. Alleviating this anxiety is crucial to learning since learning cannot happen unless the learner is relaxed. Teachers of English have to be tuned in to the mental framework of their students. If they observe avoidance behaviours like class cutting or not submitting assignments, or not looking at the teacher when a question is asked, or even squirming and general physical discomfort, teachers should recognise these as symptoms of Language Anxiety and take steps to help lessen it. There are several strategies like games, group activities, puzzles, etc that can foster a more inclusive atmosphere and make even slow learners feel included.

Causes of Language Anxiety with Specific Reference to English: English holds a special place of terror in the hearts of many Indian students. There are several causes underlying this factor.

- **Colonial Hangover:** During the times of the British, English was not only the official language of administration, but it was also the language of the rulers of India, thus giving it the status of the language of those superior to us. Thus, people proficient in English were considered 'better' and the rest could only aspire to such superiority. Unfortunately, this attitude of treating English as a superior language did not wane away with the departure of the British. Speaking correct, fluent, and fast English is still a benchmark, and striving to achieve it causes anxiety.
- **Perceived Monetary Superiority:** Even today, English is perceived to go hand in hand with social status in India, with those speaking fluent English are considered more learned and intelligent. The cause is perhaps that most people achieve fluency through an immersive education, meaning that they take school education in the English medium. Since English medium schools are more expensive and only the better off can afford them, fluency in English is seen as a mark of monetary superiority. Trying to match speakers of English, and hence, their economic strata, causes anxiety.
- **Medium of Instruction:** Here too the urban elite have an upper edge over the rural, economically challenged populace. Nearly all urban financially well off children get sent to private English medium schools where they learn the language almost as their first one. Rural students, however, only have access to vernacular medium schools. While we are slowly coming to the realisation that education in the mother tongue is more effective, the ground reality is that students of vernacular medium schools are made to feel less accomplished. Under the circumstances, trying to learn English can certainly be anxiety inducing.
- **Opportunity of Upward Mobility:** Since good English leads to better employment opportunities, there is high pressure to perform well in the subject. The pressure comes from all parts of society - parents, peers, market, and even self. From early on, it gets drilled in the minds of children that they must learn good English in order to succeed. When they see that it is also unfortunately actually true, they feel the pressure building up and this becomes a major cause of anxiety.
- **Market Forces:** As mentioned in the above point, job opportunities are better and higher paying for aspirants who are good at English. Particularly in the IT sector, BPOs, and multinationals, strong English communication skills are often a bigger factor than the specific job skill itself. Companies are willing to put up with the cost of training candidates in the required skills, but English is a non-negotiable. In trying to learn English while striving for these jobs amid a very competitive environment, youngsters feel great pressure leading to language anxiety.

- ***Fear of Ridicule:*** There are two factors at work here. One, the class that is fluent in English often looks down upon the one that isn't, and ridicules everything from wrong grammar to regional accents. Another, if someone not particularly proficient finds the courage to speak, others equally or even more inept at English also ridicule to person trying to speak out of jealousy. Because they don't speak English and don't have the initiative to learn, they knock down anyone who is willing to give it that kind of an effort. Thus, the new speaker finds no sympathy in either strata and the hostile atmosphere is another significant cause of language anxiety.
- ***Anxiety over Failure:*** In a society where academic success is highly valued to the extent that Indian students are often found to be highly stressed due to academic pressures, failure is a very real fear. This gives rise to avoidance behaviours where students would much rather stay away from any language related activities than fail at them. If this anxiety had not been present, there was a better chance that the student might actually learn English. Here starts a vicious cycle where anxiety gives way to avoidance, avoidance to lack of skills, and lack of skills to more anxiety.
- ***Profusion of languages:*** India is a richly diverse land and this diversity finds echoes in languages too. But with no fewer than 22 official languages and hundreds of dialects, communication often becomes a problem. Add to this the fact that many regions would rather speak a foreign language than the national language Hindi, which they feel has been forcibly thrust upon them, we have a situation where English becomes the Lingua Franca in the South as well as the East. This builds pressure to learn English, and Language Anxiety finds yet another reason to make its presence felt. It is further compounded because most of us learn a new language through some kind of a translation method. However, the structure English and that of Indian languages is vastly different. European languages like French or Spanish or Italian are much closer in structure and vocabulary, and native speakers of those languages find it far easier to learn English. Indians face a much steeper and anxiety inducing challenge.
- ***Cultural factors:*** Asian cultures are strong on hierarchy. Respect for elders and figures of authority is taken very seriously (too seriously, it may be argued) and there is a fear of reprimand upon making mistakes in front of them. The fear extends to speaking in front of fluent English speakers because making mistakes in front of them is tantamount to exposing oneself to being judged by superiors.
- ***Traditional learning:*** Traditionally, the Indian education system has placed a high premium on being able to learn things by rote. While rote learning vast texts is an admirable talent, it is not of much use where imagination or application of logic is needed. Teachers often give written notes to students such that, if they learn them by rote, they will pass with excellent marks. The good marks have nothing to do with whether the student has understood what he or she has memorised. However, this is not how language learning works. Even those students who have a large vocabulary, using logic to string a sentence together is still required. Improper or incomplete grasp over the mechanism behind construction of sentences induces anxiety.
- ***Grammar focused learning:*** Students are often told early on in school that if they don't learn proper grammar, they won't be able to learn English. This is actually far from the truth. Grammar evolved after language when the general rules of sentence formation were observed and put down in writing. This is why there are exceptions to nearly all rules. That is also why it becomes easier to understand the grammar of a language once we understand the language itself. Without that, grammar is a tedious set of rules to which there are numerous baffling exceptions. This makes grammar learning difficult, and students are given a feeling of inadequacy for not being able to grasp grammar. Having to filter every sentence before articulating is challenging and it is not surprising that Language Anxiety gets triggered.
- ***Lack of exposure:*** Not everyone has access to immersive education. Those who do not have the benefit feel left out and suffer an inferiority complex when faced with those who do have the benefit. The complex is anxiety inducing.

- **Lack of opportunities to practice:** One of the theories of sociology is that social stratification may not be absolute like in the days when 'varna' was rigidly followed, but it is also not easy to move from one strata to another. A scaling down is more common than a scaling up. Thus, people who are lacking in English skills tend to be in more or less the same strata. This makes it difficult to practice since they don't enjoy the company of those they can learn from, keeping them where they are, and the continued inability to speak in English is cause for anxiety.
- **Insufficient base:** The best time to learn a new language is childhood. This is the time when the mind is like a sponge, picking up details that miss the adult mind. Unfortunately, primary education often does not make enough of this opportunity. Instead, teaching is oriented towards having maximum students pass even if it means rote learning. Students reach college after at least eight years of learning English with barely any results, and by this time the advantage is gone. By this time, students are already riddled with anxiety when they try to learn.
- **Improper teacher training:** While we do have formal government recognized courses that are oriented towards teacher training, there is no specialised training in aiding language learning within the course. Plus, the focus is more on imparting the content of prescribed texts than on improving language. Thus, students learn little language skills because the teachers themselves are not equipped enough to aid language acquisition.
- **Improper assessment:** When we say that rote learning is encouraged and the focus is on content delivery rather than language acquisition, it follows that the aim of assessment is to gauge if the student has understood the content of a piece of prose or a poem, and if the given notes have been memorised. More often than not, skills like listening and speaking are totally ignored although they are equally important for articulation. This is no help to learning language.
- **The role of media:** Media today is all pervasive and youngsters have a very high rate of exposure to it. On it they see reinforced the idea of English being the language of sophistication, success and elitism. Without that advantage, youngsters feel inadequate. It is true that the same media can be used to learn English rather than fret over their lack of language skills, but this is easier said than done. There is no guidance as to how to proceed about it, and most people are ill equipped to undertake systematic learning on their own. For most, the reality is that the world of success and glamor is beyond them because they can't speak English. Anxiety also gets triggered by these feelings of inadequacy.
- **Limited practical application:** Apart from the tendency of people fluent in English speaking in this language despite it being their second language and despite speaking to people who share their mother tongue, the practical applicability of English is hardly anything much. It is seen that English is really required only in two instances - technical studies or a technical field of work where the terminology is in English, and when actively working or associating with foreigners who are unfamiliar with any of the Indian languages. Apart from these two specific situations, there is hardly any need for proficiency in English. Since there is no sense of immediate need, and since English is perceived as one of the toughest subjects, study is not taken up very enthusiastically.

Effects of Language Anxiety: Having Language Anxiety is a debilitating condition and has far reaching consequences to the extent that it may, and often does, affect where one lands in the race of life.

- **Affective Filter as a hindrance:** When learning a second language that brings on anxiety, something called the Affective Filter comes into play. This filter acts as a hindrance to language learning and is a direct result of feelings like apprehension, stress, embarrassment, fear, etc. What is happening here is that these feelings are kept uppermost in the mind, affecting retrieval of appropriate vocabulary, grammar usage, and overall language comprehension. The result is fumbling for words, making the person believe that they are incapable of learning English. However, this phenomenon of keeping anxiety uppermost itself reduces a person's capability to acquire a second language.

- **Harming prospects in life:** Even though giving preference to English speakers in jobs where no such skill is required reeks of prejudice, the fact is that it is happening rampantly. The only quick way out is to learn English and join the so called elite. However, people suffering from Language Anxiety feel stress and embarrassment when faced with a situation that requires them to speak or write in English. These feelings are harmful in themselves, but become more so when such people start avoiding situations where they may have to use the language they fear so much. The thing about language learning though, is that constant usage is required to not only become, but stay proficient. Even if a person has learnt a language as a child, lack of subsequent exposure or usage will result in the proficiency levels going down significantly. So when people who could have benefitted from added exposure avoid it, they end up harming their chances further. So severe is the anxiety that people would rather forego better prospects in life than learn the language and, worse still, use it in the presence of others who are fluent.
- **Frustration:** Sustained inability to learn English and a refusal to face their fears head on leads to frustration for many people. Those who are great at certain skill sets may not necessarily be good at English. But when they see their chances scuttled despite being skilled and when they see lesser skilled people land jobs on the basis of better English, frustration is the only thing they are left with. This discriminatory attitude of the industry towards less fluent or less proficient people is hurting potential employees psychologically.

Coping on an individual level: Since Language Anxiety is a psychological phenomenon, it will have to be approached accordingly. On an individual level, the following steps can be taken:

- Working on negative thoughts
- Setting goals and having a plan for achieving them
- Practicing positive reinforcing self-talk
- Practicing mindfulness while listening or reading
- Practicing relaxation techniques before entering a situation where you have to speak in English
- Seeking support of peer groups where fear of ridicule is less
- Actively pursuing opportunities for speaking in safe environments such as clubs

Change on a social/policy level: Individual efforts can bring a lot of change, but as mentioned earlier, not everyone is capable of these efforts on their own. They not only need guidance, but also some major changes at the social as well as policy level. Some of the most desirable changes are listed here.

- **Role of Educators:** Educators should not perpetuate the stereotype that learning English is a near impossible task, thus putting fear in their students. On the contrary, they should make an effort to understand the psychology behind the fear and take steps to address it. Even new learners from vernacular medium, who learn English for the first time in the 5th Grade, come to school with the notion that English is going to be the toughest subject because they have been so told repeatedly at home. It is the job of educators to allay those fears and come up with fun activities that will relax students' minds and put them in a better frame of mind to learn. Particularly in multicultural classrooms, it is important to take the differences into account and proceed in a way that makes the multicultural milieu a strength instead of a weakness. Incorporating technology in language learning is a great tool that is widely available today. Even learners with the most basic means have at least one smart phone that is shared by the family. Educators can make use of this and suggest a plethora of free apps that aid language learning. There are several online language communities where students can get the opportunity of talking to someone to practice their skills. If even this is overwhelming, there are virtual assistants that help you practice with them and correct mistakes. The multiple advantages are that learners can take their own time over mastering components of language without having to keep pace with a class. They can practice these skills in the safety of

anonymity, thus significantly reducing stress and reducing the anxiety over immediate negative evaluation.

- **Role of Policy Makers:** On a policy level, research on language anxiety would be a good place to start. Does age make a difference? Or social strata? Economic status? Does gender affect Language Anxiety? Or maybe your domicile? Or is it a combination of factors? Not much research has been done in these areas, and perhaps attempts to answer these questions may lead to a better approach to language teaching. Individual teachers are working on many such problems, but if a more effective pedagogy is to be evolved, it is necessary to make this effort on a bigger level - one that influences policy. Going deeper into the problem, it would be pertinent to ask why English should be given such a place of premium anyway. It is up to the policy makers to make education in the vernacular more attractive, and to end the discrimination about English at educational institutes and among market forces. Many developed countries choose to communicate in their mother tongue and refuse to use English even in a group that has only English as the common language. While this is taking things too far and is an actual hindrance to communication, it would be hugely beneficial to remove English from all areas of life where it is non essential. Even after that, policy makers can work on the stigma of not being fluent in English. This will require a widespread socio-psychological approach and cannot be effectively undertaken by individuals.

CONCLUSION:

Language Anxiety is a problem that has many angles and is not localised anywhere. It is a widespread global issue for populations that neither speak English as a first language, nor are proficient in it as a second language. It affects self esteem, it affects livelihoods, it affects the prospects of upward mobility for a large aspiring class. With this much at stake, it is high time redressal was put in motion. What is needed is a collaborative multi pronged approach by educators, researchers, and also learners, in understanding the cause and effects of Language Anxiety, and to find coping methodologies. This is the only way to create confident and competent speakers of English.

Language Anxiety regarding English is particularly high in India, and the sad part is that it has nothing to do with the difficulty of learning a new language. Learning English is just as easy or difficult as learning any other second language. Rather, historical factors such as the British colonial rule, social factors such as English being a gateway to a higher strata, and cultural factors such as speakers of English being looked at as refined and elite, are the real reasons why learners try extra hard and suffer anxiety, or shy away for fear of failure and again suffer anxiety. The place English enjoys in education and employment is in a large part responsible for this state of affairs. Policy makers need to wake up to the fact that English is no longer central to a means of livelihood and with this in mind, they need to reduce the burden of English from the already overworked shoulders of our youngsters. This would be a bigger game changer than first giving students anxiety and then finding means of lessening it. If measures can be taken to take English off its unnecessary pedestal and learning this language is put across as a beautiful experience that opens doors to fascinating areas like art, history, literature, culture, architecture, etc., we have a better chance of alleviating language anxiety with specific reference to English.

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