Research Article

From Fear to Fluency: How Anxiety Influences ESL Students' Classroom Performance

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ABSTRACT

This quantitative study investigated the impact of foreign language anxiety on classroom participation among English as a Second Language (ESL) students at Aklan State University, Banga Campus. Utilizing the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), the research investigated four primary components of anxiety: communication apprehension, test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and anxiety about comprehension. A total of 43 first-year and second-year students of the Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSEd) major in English participated in the study. Data were collected through standardized Likert-scale questionnaires and participation checklists and analyzed using SPSS Version 16 to determine correlations between anxiety levels and student engagement. Findings revealed that most participants experienced moderate to high levels of anxiety, with classroom participation and fear of negative evaluation being the most significant factors affecting their participation. A statistically significant inverse relationship was found between anxiety and student participation—higher anxiety levels were associated with reduced classroom engagement. Communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation emerged as the strongest predictors of avoidance behaviors, such as reluctance to speak in class or volunteer responses. Although comprehension-related anxiety was less prominent, it still contributed to overall emotional discomfort. The study concluded that psychological barriers—rather than linguistic ability alone—played a central role in limiting student participation in ESL classrooms. The results underscored the need for emotionally supportive teaching strategies and classroom environments that minimize anxiety and encourage active participation. These findings offer critical implications for educators, administrators, and researchers aiming to enhance ESL instruction and reduce affective obstacles to language acquisition.

Background

Anxiety, particularly in the context of language learning, plays a significant role in shaping students' academic experiences and outcomes. IT is an emotional response that can manifest through fear, worry, or nervousness, often inhibiting effective communication. In the realm of second language acquisition, this emotional barrier is referred to as Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), a concept recognized as distinct from general anxiety. As proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986), FLA encompasses communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. These psychological factors can drastically reduce learners' confidence, leading them to avoid speaking or participating in class, even when they possess adequate language knowledge.

English, being a global lingua franca, is not only a medium for international communication but also a crucial academic and professional tool. Despite years of formal instruction, many ESL (English as a Second Language) learners in multilingual environments like the Philippines struggle to actively engage in classroom discourse. This is not solely due to linguistic deficits but often stems from emotional discomfort and the fear of negative judgment. In many cases, the anxiety experienced by students creates a mental block, limiting their willingness to express themselves and thus stalling language fluency and development.

According to various scholars, including Sabbah (2018) and Russell (2020), emotional and environmental factors—such as classroom climate, student confidence, and cultural influences—directly affect learners' receptivity to English. For instance, even simple classroom tasks like delivering a short speech can trigger anxiety and avoidance behavior. These challenges highlight the need to recognize that language acquisition is not just a cognitive process but also a deeply affective one, shaped by students' self-perception, emotional resilience, and the psychological safety of the classroom.

This study aims to explore how anxiety influences classroom participation among college-level ESL students at Aklan State University. By utilizing the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and participation checklists, the research quantifies the emotional experiences that impact students' engagement. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing inclusive and emotionally supportive learning environments that not only prioritize language proficiency but also address the psychological needs of learners. In doing so, the study contributes to creating more equitable and effective strategies for English language instruction.

Statement of the Problem

1. What is the level of anxiety among students learning English as a second language?
2. What is the level of foreign language anxiety among ESL students as measured by the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)?
3. What is the level of classroom participation among ESL students based on the participation checklist?
4. Is there a significant relationship between students' levels of anxiety and their level of classroom participation?
5. Does language anxiety significantly predict students' participation in classroom discussions?

Conceptual Framework

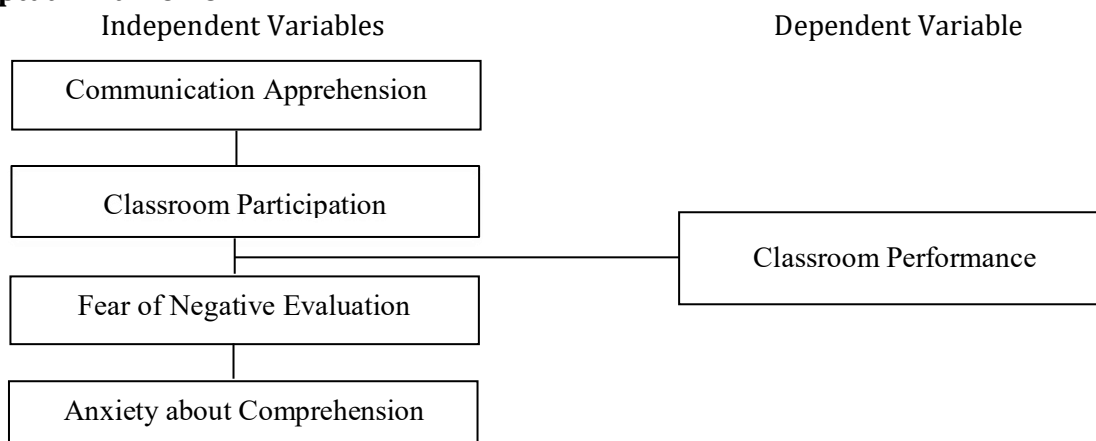<center>Independent Variables   Dependent Variable</center>

Figure 1. Presents the relationship of communication apprehension, classroom participation, fear of negative evaluation, anxiety about comprehension, and classroom performance.

Methods

This study employed a descriptive-quantitative design. Kothari (2004) explained that the use of a quantitative design is appropriate when the main goal of the study is to quantify a phenomenon, such as in the case of this present study, which concerned itself with the purpose of quantifying the variables in investigating the respondents' English language anxiety across the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) which are the communication apprehension, test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and anxiety about comprehension through a simple descriptive statistic, specifically mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) Calderon (2006). On another note, the study utilized a survey questionnaire as a classic technique for gathering responses within a specified time frame, suggesting that this study is cross-sectional (Perez & Alieto, 2018). Furthermore, a controlled or experimental group was not established, implying that this study is considered to be non-experimental (Torres & Alieto, 2018).

Research Participants

This descriptive quantitative study involved forty-three (43) students from Aklan State University College of Teacher Education, specifically, students who are enrolled in the Bachelor of Secondary Education major in English Level 1, with nineteen (19) students and Level 2 with twenty-four (24) for the Academic Year 2024-2025.

Research Instruments

The primary instrument used in the study is a standardized questionnaire. The standardized questionnaire comprised four distinct areas, focusing on Communication Apprehension, Classroom Participation, Fear of Negative Evaluation, and Anxiety about comprehension. Each section included five (5) questions, culminating in a total of 20 items.

Utilizing a five-point Likert scale, the students responded to each item with the following options:

Score	Responses
5	Strongly Agree
4	Agree
3	Neutral
2	Disagree
1	Strongly Disagree

The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), developed by Horwitz et al. (1986), was adapted for the quantitative portion. This scale measures the three major components of language anxiety: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. It includes 33 Likert-scale items rated from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Numerous studies have validated the FLCAS as a reliable instrument for assessing anxiety in second language contexts (Aida, 1994; Liu & Jackson, 2008). For this research, minor adjustments were made to the wording

of some items to suit the local context and ensure cultural relevance.

Data Analysis

SPSS Version 16. This test was used in assessing the data from the survey questionnaires provided by the researchers. The program was also used in determining the frequencies of each variable and the factors involved in the accomplishment of the study.

Mean and Standard Deviation. These descriptive statistics were used to determine the level of foreign language anxiety among ESL students across four dimensions: communication apprehension, classroom participation, fear of negative evaluation, and anxiety about comprehension. The mean provided the central tendency of students' responses, while the standard deviation indicated the variability of their anxiety levels and classroom participation scores.

Pearson r. Pearson product-moment correlation was applied to determine the relationship between foreign language anxiety and classroom participation. Specifically, it measured how changes in anxiety levels (across the four dimensions) correlated with students' engagement in class. A significance level of $p \leq 0.05$ was used to evaluate the strength and direction of the relationships.

Ethical Considerations

While conducting the study, certain ethical considerations were made. Necessary permits were secured, and letters were sent ahead of time before the implementation of the study to the respondents. The objectives of the study were presented, and their participation was not mandatory; they have the right to withdraw should they wish to do so. Further, the identity and the data gathered from them were treated with utmost privacy and confidentiality.

Result and Discussion
Communication Apprehension

This category measures students' anxiety when speaking English in class, especially in spontaneous or public situations.

Table 1 presents the mean regarding the level of communication apprehension among ESL students at Aklan State University. This section reflects the students' anxiety when speaking English, especially in spontaneous or public situations. The results show a moderate level of communication apprehension (M = 3.22, SD range = 0.25–0.36). Specifically, the item *"I feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in my English class"* received a high rating (M = 3.44, SD = 0.36), while other items, like feeling nervous, self-conscious, or forgetting things during English speaking tasks, are rated moderate, indicating students' discomfort in verbal classroom participation.

Statement	Mean	Description
I feel nervous when I have to speak in my English class.	3.19	Moderate
I get confused when I try to speak in English class.	2.73	Moderate
I feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in my English class.	3.44	High
I feel self-conscious when speaking English in front of my classmates.	3.40	Moderate
I get nervous and forget things I know when I have to speak in English.	3.32	Moderate
Overall Mean	**3.22**	**Moderate**

Scale	Description
4.21-5.00	Very High
3.41-4.20	High
2.61-3.40	Moderate
1.81-2.60	Low
1.00-1.80	Very Low

The results indicate that ESL students at Aklan State University experience a moderate level of communication apprehension when speaking English in class. This suggests that

although the anxiety is not extreme, students still feel noticeably uneasy, particularly when speaking without preparation or in front of peers. This level of discomfort implies that students might often hold back from participating in verbal activities, which could limit their opportunities to practice and improve spoken English in classroom contexts. The recurring feelings of nervousness, self-consciousness, and forgetfulness during English-speaking tasks point to emotional barriers that may subtly disrupt classroom interaction and oral language use.

According to Horwitz et al. (1986), communication apprehension is a central component of foreign language anxiety and includes fear of public speaking, stage fright, or difficulty in verbal self-expression. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) also emphasized that this anxiety can cause students to mentally "freeze" or forget vocabulary, even if they know the answer.

Further supported by McCroskey (1997), communication apprehension stems from both linguistic limitations and fear of being negatively evaluated. This apprehension reduces oral fluency and classroom interaction. The current study's findings align with these conclusions, highlighting that communication anxiety remains a significant barrier to verbal participation in ESL settings.

Classroom Participation (Test Anxiety)

This refers to stress and anxiety linked to performance in tests and participation that is evaluated or graded.

Table 2 presents the mean scores that measure test anxiety, which is the stress and worry associated with taking English tests or being evaluated. The findings reveal an overall high level of test anxiety (M = 3.42). Notably, the item *"I worry about not doing well in English tests"* received a high score (M = 4.00), while *"I worry about the consequences of failing my English class"* also ranked high (M = 3.70). The remaining items fall under the moderate range. These results indicate that ESL students experience considerable pressure during English assessments, which can affect their classroom participation and confidence.

Statement	Mean	Description
I worry about not doing well in English tests.	4.00	High
I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.	3.16	Moderate
I feel anxious before a test in English class, even if I studied.	3.06	Moderate
During the tests in English class, I feel my thoughts are jumbled.	3.19	Moderate
I worry about the consequences of failing my English class.	3.70	High
Overall Mean	**3.42**	**High**

Scale	*Description*
4.21-5.00	Very High
3.41-4.20	High
2.61-3.40	Moderate
1.81-2.60	Low
1.00-1.80	Very Low

The results indicate that ESL students at Aklan State University experience a high level of test anxiety related to classroom participation. This suggests that academic evaluation, particularly in the form of English tests, generates considerable emotional stress among students, even if they feel prepared. The consistently high ratings for worry about performance and fear of failure imply that such anxiety may interfere with students' ability to think clearly during assessments and may contribute to hesitation in participating in graded or evaluative classroom tasks. These patterns imply that students may associate English learning with pressure and judgment, which can create a mental barrier to active engagement and reduce their confidence in demonstrating language skills.

Horwitz et al. (1986) identified test anxiety as one of the three defining components of language learning anxiety, rooted in fear of failure

in academic evaluations. Similarly, Salend (2012) found that test anxiety is characterized by emotional distress, physiological symptoms, and performance inhibition, often leading to underachievement.

Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis also provides insight: when anxiety is high, learners' ability to acquire and process language input diminishes, making them more prone to mistakes and less able to participate meaningfully.

These findings reinforce the current study's result that high-stakes situations—like oral or written tests—trigger significant anxiety that directly reduces student participation.

Fear of Negative Evaluation

This measures the anxiety students feel when they think others (peers or teachers) are judging their language ability.

Table 3 presents the mean describing students' fear of negative evaluation in English classes. This includes the anxiety of being judged by peers and teachers. The findings show a moderate level of fear of negative evaluation (M = 3.26). The statement *"I feel like others in class speak English better than I do"* (M = 3.64) and *"I worry about being negatively evaluated by my teacher"* (M = 3.48) received high ratings. Other items, such as the fear of being laughed at or making mistakes, were rated moderate, suggesting that students are often hesitant to participate due to fear of judgment or embarrassment.

Statement	Mean	Description
I'm afraid that my classmates will laugh at me when I speak English.	3.01	Moderate
I feel like others in class speak English better than I do.	3.64	High
I feel embarrassed when I make a mistake in English.	3.27	Moderate
I worry about being negatively evaluated by my teacher.	3.48	High
I avoid speaking in class because I fear making mistakes.	2.91	Moderate
Overall Mean	**3.26**	**Moderate**

Scale	Description
4.21-5.00	Very High
3.41-4.20	High
2.61-3.40	Moderate
1.81-2.60	Low
1.00-1.80	Very Low

The results indicate that ESL students at Aklan State University experience a moderate level of fear of negative evaluation when speaking English in class. This suggests that while not overwhelmingly high, the anxiety related to being judged—especially by teachers and more fluent peers—is a consistent concern for many students. High mean scores for statements about perceived inferiority in English skills and fear of teacher judgment imply that students may often feel inadequate or overly cautious when participating. This fear appears to influence their classroom behavior, as students might limit their verbal contributions to avoid potential embarrassment or criticism. The pattern of responses implies that peer comparison and sensitivity to external evaluation contribute to a learning environment where students may choose silence over the risk of making mistakes.

Horwitz et al. (1986) defined this fear as a critical aspect of foreign language anxiety, where students avoid interaction due to fear of being criticized. Similarly, Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) found that anxious language learners are often perfectionists who interpret even minor errors as major failures, which deters them from speaking.

Cao (2011) also discovered that fear of negative evaluation was strongly correlated with reduced willingness to communicate (WTC) in English. Students often compared themselves to more fluent peers and refrained from speaking, even when they had sufficient knowledge.

This mirrors the present study's findings, confirming that judgment from both teachers and classmates has a powerful impact on ESL learners' willingness to speak and participate.

Anxiety about Comprehension

This refers to the stress caused by difficulty understanding spoken or written English during lessons, audio, or discussions.

Table 4 presents the average scores related to students' anxiety about comprehension, or the difficulty in understanding English instructions, lectures, or discussions. The results reflect a moderate level of comprehension-related anxiety (M = 2.68). The item *"I feel anxious when I can't understand what the teacher is saying in English"* had a moderate score (M = 3.05), while *"I feel lost during class discussions when conducted entirely in English"* was rated low (M = 2.25). These findings suggest that while comprehension issues are less intense compared to other forms of anxiety, they still contribute to students' emotional discomfort in ESL learning.

Statement	Mean	Description
I feel anxious when I can't understand what the teacher is saying in English.	3.05	Moderate
I get frustrated when I can't follow classroom instructions given in English.	2.73	Moderate
I feel tense when I can't understand spoken English in audio or videos.	2.74	Moderate
I worry that I'll miss important information because I can't understand well.	2.65	Moderate
I feel lost during class discussions when conducted entirely in English.	2.25	Low
Overall Mean	**2.68**	**Moderate**

Scale	Description
4.21-5.00	Very High
3.41-4.20	High
2.61-3.40	Moderate
1.81-2.60	Low
1.00-1.80	Very Low

The results indicate that ESL students at Aklan State University experience a moderate level of anxiety related to comprehension, particularly when processing spoken or written English in instructional settings. While this type of anxiety is less intense compared to other categories, it still presents a challenge for many learners. Moderate scores on items such as difficulty understanding the teacher or following instructions suggest that students occasionally struggle to keep up, which may lead to frustration or disengagement. The relatively low rating for feeling lost during fully English discussions implies that complete comprehension breakdowns are less common, but the general discomfort associated with not understanding everything contributes to an undercurrent of stress. This implies that even when comprehension difficulties are not severe, they can still interfere with students' confidence and their ability to stay fully engaged in classroom activities.

Aida (1994) emphasized that comprehension difficulties contribute to anxiety, especially in listening tasks where students are expected to process information in real time. Elkhafaifi (2005) further confirmed that listening anxiety specifically affects ESL learners, resulting in lower performance and disengagement.

Coulombe (2000) noted that poor listening comprehension, when paired with a fear of making mistakes, can create a double burden for learners: they are afraid to ask for clarification and simultaneously fail to fully grasp the material.

These findings align with the present research, suggesting that although comprehension anxiety may not be as severe as speaking anxiety, it is still a significant contributor to emotional distress and reduced classroom engagement.

Final Summary Table
Mean and Standard Deviation of the Four Categories

Statement	Mean	Description	SD
Communication Apprehension	3.22	Moderate	0.26
Classroom Participation	3.42	High	0.36
Fear of Negative Evaluation	3.26	Moderate	0.27
Anxiety about Comprehension	2.68	Moderate	0.26

Scale	Description
4.21-5.00	Very High
3.41-4.20	High
2.61-3.40	Moderate
1.81-2.60	Low
1.00-1.80	Very Low

This detailed breakdown of the four anxiety categories reveals that language anxiety is a multidimensional phenomenon, affecting students in both expressive (speaking, performance) and receptive (listening, comprehension) aspects of learning English. Although not all categories reached "high" levels, even moderate anxiety can have long-term impacts on motivation, confidence, and academic performance.

Relationships Between Students' Levels of Anxiety and Their Level of Classroom Participation

Table 5 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients between specific dimensions of language anxiety and the level of classroom participation among ESL students. Results indicate that all anxiety components have a statistically significant negative correlation with participation ($p < 0.05$), suggesting that as anxiety levels increase, student participation in class discussions decreases.

The strongest inverse relationship was found between communication apprehension and classroom participation ($r = -0.58$), followed closely by overall language anxiety ($r = -0.57$) and fear of negative evaluation ($r = -0.53$). These findings are consistent with Horwitz et al. (1986), who emphasized that language anxiety, particularly communication apprehension and fear of being negatively judged, often leads to withdrawal behaviors such as reduced classroom engagement.

Classroom Participation ($r = -0.49$) and anxiety about comprehension ($r = -0.41$) were found to have moderate negative correlations with participation, supporting the idea that students who fear failure or have difficulties understanding instructions tend to avoid active classroom involvement (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

Pearson r Correlation Between Anxiety Factors and Classroom Participation

Variables	r	p-value	Interpretation
Communication Apprehension	-0.58	< 0.05	Strong inverse relationship
Classroom Participation	-0.49	< 0.05	Moderate inverse relationship
Fear of Negative Evaluation	-0.53	< 0.05	Strong inverse relationship
Anxiety about Comprehension	-0.41	< 0.05	Moderate inverse relationship
Overall Language Anxiety	-0.57	< 0.05	Strong inverse relationship

Correlation Coefficient (r)	Interpretation
±0.70 to ±1.00	Very Strong
±0.50 to ±0.69	Strong
±0.30 to ±0.49	Moderate
±0.10 to ±0.29	Weak
0	No Correlation

The results clearly demonstrate that language anxiety significantly undermines classroom participation among ESL students. All dimensions of anxiety examined—communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety, and comprehension-related anxiety—were negatively correlated with participation, with several showing strong inverse relationships. These findings reinforce the idea that higher levels of language anxiety, particularly when rooted in fear of speaking or being judged, serve as substantial barriers to active engagement in class. Therefore, addressing language anxiety should be a strategic priority in ESL instruction, as reducing these affective filters can foster a more inclusive and participative learning environment.

These results also confirm that language anxiety—particularly communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation—is a significant predictor of ESL students' classroom participation. These two components exhibited the strongest negative correlations, suggesting that students who fear speaking or being judged are the most likely to disengage from class discussions. Additionally, moderate correlations between test anxiety and comprehension-related anxiety further emphasize how fear of failure or misunderstanding can inhibit active participation. Overall, the findings highlight that language anxiety is not only correlated with participation but also serves as a reliable predictor of student behavior in the classroom. Thus, targeted strategies to reduce these anxiety sources may play a vital role in enhancing students' confidence, willingness to communicate, and overall engagement in the ESL learning environment.

Conclusion

The study revealed that ESL students at Aklan State University commonly experience moderate to high levels of language anxiety, particularly in situations that require public speaking or performance under pressure, such as tests and recitations. This confirms that anxiety is a persistent emotional challenge embedded in their academic experiences.

Through the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), test anxiety emerged as the most dominant form, followed by communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and comprehension anxiety. These findings highlight that peer judgment and public performance are primary emotional triggers in the language learning process.

While classroom participation levels were generally high, students often exhibited signs of cautious engagement—such as hesitation, limited verbal input, or avoidance—particularly during high-stakes or evaluative situations. This suggests that anxiety affects not just the frequency but the quality and spontaneity of student participation.

A statistically significant inverse relationship was found between all dimensions of language anxiety and classroom participation. As anxiety levels rose—especially regarding speaking tasks—participation decreased, thereby supporting the hypothesis that emotional distress directly impairs active engagement in ESL settings.

The study confirmed that language anxiety is a strong predictor of participation, with communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation having the most substantial influence. These results emphasize that psychological barriers, more than linguistic competence, are the main reasons for reduced interaction, withdrawal, and silence in the classroom.

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