

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ANXIETY AMONG RURAL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS: A Survey-Based Study

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Abstract:

Many Indian students spend a major part of their educational journey learning English. From kindergarten to post-graduation, English continues to be a compulsory and significant subject. In many Indian schools, greater emphasis is placed on teaching the English alphabet even before introducing children to their mother tongue. However, despite years of formal instruction, English language proficiency remains a major concern for many learners due to several constraints such as improper use of punctuation, strong influence of the mother tongue, grammatical misconceptions, incorrect sentence formation, and difficulties in pronunciation. Rural students, in particular, face several challenges in learning and speaking the English language due to limited exposure, lack of trained teachers, and minimal opportunities for practice. Moreover, parents and society often attach higher credibility and social status to children who speak English fluently from a very young age, which turns English into a source of pressure and anxiety rather than a tool for communication. These challenges hinder effective communication and reduce learners' confidence in using English in academic and social contexts. The study examines graduate students from rural backgrounds who face difficulties in learning English, focusing on the key language-related problems that create anxiety and prevent them from confidently expressing their thoughts and ideas.

Keywords: English language anxiety, rural learners, undergraduate students, speaking apprehension, ESL learning

1. Introduction

English has emerged as a key language for higher education, employment, and global communication. In the Indian context, competence in English significantly influences students' academic success and career prospects. Despite its importance, many learners—especially those from rural areas—face emotional and psychological challenges in acquiring English proficiency. Among these challenges, English language anxiety plays

a crucial role, often resulting in hesitation, lack of participation, and reduced performance in classroom interactions. Identifying and understanding the factors contributing to this anxiety is essential for developing effective teaching strategies in rural higher education settings.

2. Review of Literature

Research in second and foreign language acquisition consistently highlights anxiety as a key affective factor influencing language learning. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) conceptualized foreign language anxiety as a situation-specific phenomenon associated with classroom learning. Subsequent studies have shown that fear of committing errors, anxiety about peer and teacher evaluation, and inadequate opportunities for authentic language use contribute significantly to learners' discomfort. Studies focusing on rural Indian learners emphasize that limited exposure to English outside the classroom and regional-language schooling backgrounds intensify learners' anxiety and reduce confidence levels.

3. Objectives of the Study

The study was conducted with the following objectives:

- To assess the level of English language anxiety among undergraduate students.
- To identify the major sources of anxiety in English language classrooms.
- To examine the influence of rural background and medium of instruction on learners' confidence.
- To suggest remedial measures to reduce English language anxiety.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

A descriptive survey design was adopted to investigate English language anxiety among undergraduate learners.

4.2 Sample

The sample comprised undergraduate students enrolled in B.Com and BCA programmes. The respondents included both male and female students from rural, semi-urban, and urban areas, with a predominant representation of students educated in rural settings.

4.3 Instrument for Data Collection

The data were gathered using a structured questionnaire designed to measure various dimensions of English language anxiety, such as nervousness while speaking, fear of making mistakes, anxiety during examinations, reactions to correction, and the perceived impact of rural background. Responses were recorded using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree'.

4.4 Method of Analysis

The collected responses were analyzed through percentage-based descriptive analysis to identify general trends and patterns.

5. Analysis and Discussion

The analysis of the survey responses indicates that a large proportion of students feel nervous when required to speak English in front of teachers and peers. Many learners reported hesitation in participating in discussions due to fear of committing grammatical or pronunciation errors. Anxiety related to peer reactions, particularly the fear of being ridiculed, emerged as a significant concern.

The findings further reveal that students from rural backgrounds perceive themselves as less confident compared to their urban counterparts. The absence of an English-speaking environment outside the classroom was identified as a major factor contributing to learners' anxiety. Additionally, students who had completed their schooling in regional-language mediums displayed higher levels of apprehension than those from English-medium backgrounds. These observations corroborate earlier research emphasizing the role of affective variables in second language learning.

6. Findings of the Study

The major findings of the study are as follows:

- A significant number of undergraduate students experience anxiety while speaking English in classroom contexts.
- Fear of making mistakes and negative peer evaluation are prominent sources of English language anxiety.
- Rural background and limited exposure to English adversely affect learners' confidence levels.
- Students educated through non-English medium schooling exhibit comparatively higher anxiety.

7. Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions

To reduce English language anxiety among rural learners, the following measures are suggested:

- Teachers should foster a supportive and encouraging classroom atmosphere.
- Interactive and collaborative activities such as group discussions, role plays, and presentations should be incorporated regularly.
- Error correction should be handled sensitively to avoid discouraging learners.
- Institutions should provide opportunities for increased exposure to English through language labs, clubs, and digital learning platforms.

8. Conclusion

English language anxiety remains a significant challenge for rural undergraduate students and has a direct impact on their classroom participation and overall language development. Addressing this issue requires empathetic teaching approaches, learner-centered methodologies, and institutional initiatives aimed at increasing exposure and confidence. By reducing anxiety and promoting positive learning experiences, educators can help rural learners achieve greater proficiency and academic success in English.

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