

## **Causes of Anxiety Among Engineering Students While Making Oral Presentations in English**

**Mehvish Riaz and Muhammad Rizwan Riaz**

University of Engineering and Technology Lahore

The technical and non-technical presentations made in English by the undergraduate engineering students at the University of Engineering and Technology (UET) Lahore include lab and survey report presentations, project presentations, mid-term or final term presentations in English. The goal of the study was to figure out the engineering students' reasons behind feeling anxious while giving presentations in English at UET Lahore. For this purpose, 518 undergraduate engineering students from UET, Lahore filled a questionnaire and responded to an open-ended question to determine the causes of anxiety. The data was coded and categorized using *in vivo* coding system. Findings indicate that the participants mainly experience anxiety due to poor proficiency in English, fear of judgment by the audience, lack of confidence, lack of exposure to speaking English and making presentations in English at school or college level, poor preparation or practice, and insufficient linguistic input. The study has implications for specific lingual assessments, English as a foreign language, and psycholinguistics.

*Keywords.* Anxiety, engineering students, presentation skills

In Pakistan, English is a medium of instruction at universities and activities ranging from administrative correspondence to delivering lectures, from making assignments to doing research projects, and from speaking to making formal presentations in the classroom are performed in English. As English is "the language of science and technology" (Riaz, 2015, p. 23; Riaz, 2021a), its worth and need further increase for the technical and professional degree programs such as medicine or engineering, etc. English is used as a "lingua

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Mehvish Riaz and Muhammad Rizwan Riaz, Department of Humanities and Department of Civil Engineering, University of Engineering and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Mehvish Riaz, Associate Professor, Department of Humanities, University of Engineering and Technology, GT Road, Lahore, Pakistan. Email: mehvisriaz@uet.edu.pk

franca in non-English speaking countries” (Riaz, 2019, p. 412), “and a number of academic and professional fields; and this situation has created a continuing world-wide need for ESP in general, and English for engineering, science and technology in particular” (Buriro & Soomro 2013, p. 84).

Engineering graduates from Pakistan do jobs in national and international organizations. Due to various economic and social factors, they go abroad for their jobs or further studies. They go to other countries such as America, England, Germany, Japan, Canada, and Australia for higher studies. Moreover, to strengthen the economy of the country, they also go to Europe and Middle East for doing jobs. Their proficiency in English helps in availing scholarships and admissions for studying abroad, getting good jobs in Pakistan, as well as, foreign countries, carrying out research in their particular fields, and attaining personal satisfaction and prestige as well. For getting good jobs, scholarships, and admissions, they appear for competitive exams (Akhtar & Riaz, 2019) or GRE tests, and various types of interviews with special focus on English language. They are not only expected to be proficient in English but also refine their communication skills in general. They also need to have a sound command on Technical English because they are expected to write proposals, memorandums, letters, applications, technical descriptions, and instructions. So, learning English is irrevocably essential for them for making effective presentations, writing effective paragraphs for different purposes, and speaking or writing in different contexts (Riaz, 2021b).

It is imperative to mention here that a relatively small number of universities offer engineering programs in Pakistan and majority of the population lives in rural areas. Other factors such as low income and economic instability or lack of resources and awareness also cause challenges so far as effective learning of English is concerned. “Mostly, students don’t speak or learn English at home and academic issues including lack of individual attention paid to the students due to imbalanced teacher-student ratio in colleges, excessive workload on teachers, inattention to the use of diverse learning materials” also inhibit them from developing English language skills (Akhtar & Riaz, 2019, p. 16). Moreover, differences are further maintained due to Urdu/English medium, Madrassa system, and public and private institutes.

Engineering students at UET, which is the oldest public sector engineering university in Pakistan (Riaz, 2013), also have diverse social and academic backgrounds. They are selected through an extremely rigorous scrutiny. Many of them belong to middle class,

rural or less advanced areas, and have studied in Urdu-medium schools or colleges where English is not sufficiently focused on. They are mostly native speakers of *Punjabi*, *Pashto*, *Saraiki*, or other native languages spoken in Pakistan. As they also have command on Urdu, which is the national Language of Pakistan, so vast majority of them can speak or at least comprehend minimum three languages i.e., English, Urdu, and any native language that they speak as their mother tongue (Riaz, 2021b). At UET Lahore, they are taught subjects such as English Communication Skills and Technical Writing and Presentation Skills to hone their speaking and writing skills, improve presentation skills, and apprise them with social and business etiquette (Riaz, 2013). As the medium of instruction is English, so many of them face serious problems in adjusting to the environment and speaking English as fluently as their class fellows with educational qualifications of Cambridge system, studied at private English medium schools and colleges or had opportunities to groom themselves up. Therefore, it is ineffably important to understand the anxiety issues of undergraduate engineering students and give them knowledge and confidence of making presentations in English which may eventually enable them to display their technical knowledge and skills effectively.

English for specific purposes is an important field in English language teaching, and “technical oral presentations represent one of the many oral communicative events expected of engineers at the workplace” (Bhattacharyya, 2014, p. 344); therefore, improving spoken and written English should be one of the primary concerns of engineering universities. Generally, students enrolled in public sector universities are mostly hardworking, capable, and efficient in their own fields but making presentations fluently in English, at times, poses a challenge. They feel reluctant to express themselves solely because they do not possess sound command on English and this particular aspect must be worked on. Studying the effects of anxiety by reflecting on the doodles created by learners of English as a foreign language, Siagto-Wakat (2017) found that “English language learners go through shimming and shaming experiences, specifically, buffing, baffling, shutting, sweating and shivering, and shattering” (p. 1). Due to the interactive nature of speaking or making presentations, learners find it difficult to speak publicly in a language that they have not mastered completely. Therefore, language anxiety further affects self-esteem, confidence and fluency of the learners and it may lead to withdrawal and isolation (Amengual-Pizarro, 2018). Anxiety is also linked to fear, isolation, helplessness, emptiness, and frustration (Riaz, 2020).

Anxiety can be a trait, a temporary response to an apprehension, or a situation-specific recurrent behavioural response (Galante, 2018). Foreign language anxiety is a commonly experienced “worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language” (MacIntyre, 1999, p. 27). Horwitz, et al. (1986) “identified three sources of foreign language anxiety: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation” (Al-Khasawneh, 2016, p. 140). Relative to other skills, speaking can be the most daunting task or threatening experience in learning English as a second language and making oral presentations can cause anxiety and become a highly intimidating experience for learners of English as a foreign language (Horwitz et al., 1986). Therefore, the courses and teaching methods must meet students’ professional needs in the future. Therefore, this study helps understand the psychological challenges faced by engineering students at UET Lahore, concerning their oral presentations. An engineer who possesses effective communication skills is an asset of a company. Lenard and Pintaric (2018) found that majority of the employers perceive extraordinary proficiency in English to be absolutely crucial for employees in engineering fields. Companies require engineers who are not only proficient in spoken and written English but also make effective presentations and possess various soft skills; however, research shows that there is a competency gap between engineering graduates’ competencies and employers’ expectations (Lenard & Pintaric, 2018).

The present study analyzes the reasons behind anxiety issues experienced by engineering students when they make oral presentations in English. It is important to understand what specifically causes anxiety so that pertinent interventions may be introduced to engineering students at UET Lahore. The broader research objective of the present study is to identify the causes of anxiety experienced by undergraduate engineering students over making presentations in English

So far as the existing studies on language anxiety are concerned, Khan (2015) found high anxiety levels among mechanical engineering students doing communication skills and noted that pedagogical factors involving teaching resources and stressful class environment, learners’ poor economic and academic background, psychological factors such as learners’ self-perception, apprehensions or personality traits, and linguistic factors such as thinking in native language and then translating those thoughts into English cause anxiety. Similarly, Ahmed et al. (2017) found that majority of the students attributed their anxiety to the disappointment experienced by them while trying to speak English. In addition, fear of judgment of accent or errors by the

audience, and fear of making grammatical errors also cause anxiety. Dar and Khan (2014) studied writing anxiety among engineering students in Pakistan. In Malaysian context, Stapa et al. (2014) found that engineering students experienced anxiety due to three reasons including inadequate knowledge of presentation skills, low level of confidence, and poor spoken English skills while making technical presentations. He et al. (2021) recorded the performance of three Chinese students to assess their levels of anxiety and noted that classroom activity types and teachers' feedback are the external factors of foreign language anxiety, while gender and self-efficacy are the internal factors. Using an open-ended questionnaire, Rajitha and Alamelu (2020) studied the foreign language anxiety among undergraduate final year Indian students studying arts and science and noted language, grammar, pronunciation, and peer pressure as external factors, while stage fright, lack of confidence, and shyness as internal factors.

## **Method**

### **Sample**

The sample of this qualitative research comprises of randomly selected, 18–21-year-old male and female undergraduate engineering students studying at UET Lahore. Five hundred and eighteen students participated in the study and filled a questionnaire sent to them via email. Riaz et al. (2021), studying the same sample in the light of the Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (Horwitz et al., 1986) noted that the levels of anxiety are low to moderate, and the main factors involved were communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. To capture the engineering students' perceptions and various causes not included in the Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (Horwitz et al., 1986), the present study is based on an open-ended question included in the questionnaire designed by Riaz et al. (2021).

### **Instrument**

The Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (Horwitz et al., 1986) has been used in numerous empirical studies (Amengual-Pizarro, 2018; He et al., 2021; Riaz et al., 2021) to find out the levels of anxiety and the correlation between language anxiety and other variables; however, it deals with causes specific to communicative competence, audience involvement, and test anxiety. The present study, on the other hand, aims at exploring various contextual and academic causes

of anxiety as perceived by the engineering students with reference to the complex, diverse, and context-dependent ecosystems of their classroom interactions in Pakistan. The questionnaire consisted of a few demographic questions regarding the gender, session, communication skills courses, personality type and academic background, such as the medium of instruction at the schools or colleges of the participants (Riaz et al., 2021). The following are the responses to the questions about the participants' demographic information. Students from 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017 sessions participated in the study including 70.5% male and 29.3% female. Moreover, 76.1% studied at English medium schools and colleges, while 23% studied at Urdu medium schools and colleges. In addition, 21.8% and 12.9% had done English Communication Skills, and Technical Writing and Presentation Skills, respectively, 68.9% of the participants had done both the compulsory courses at UET Lahore. It suggests that all of them had learnt how to make presentations and practised as well. While 25.5% responded that they felt comfortable giving presentations and 35.3% indicated that they could get anxious or remain calm, 39.2% responded that they could get nervous or anxious while making presentations.

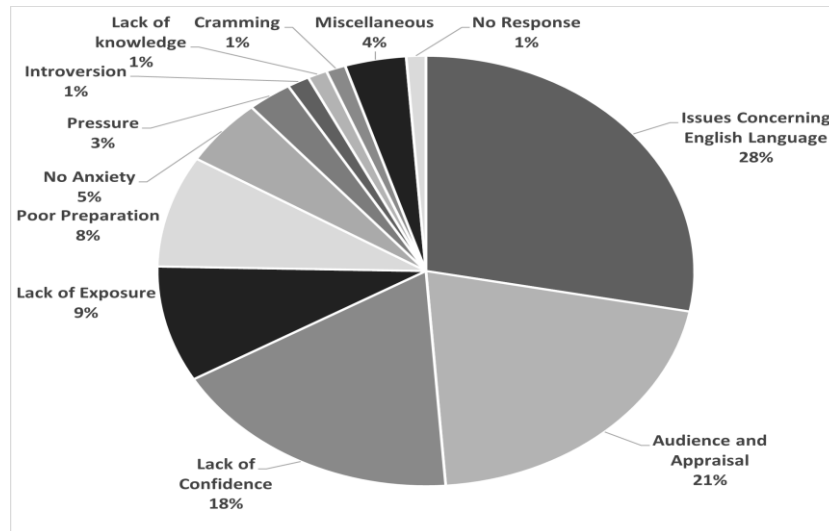
For thematic realization of the data in the form of responses to the open ended question inquiring the causes of anxiety, the responses of the 518 participants were coded according to *in vivo* coding system (Spencer et al., 2014) and displayed in an Excel sheet. Categories were developed, major themes were tabulated, illustrated in Figure 1, and discussed qualitatively.

## Findings

Figure 1 shows that according to the participants, issues concerning English (28%), audience and appraisal (21%), lack of confidence (18%), lack of exposure or poor grooming (9%), and poor preparation (8%) are the main causes of anxiety among undergraduate engineering students when they make presentations. 5% of the participants have not stated any reason but suggested that they did not experience anxiety. Psychological pressure (3%), introversion (1%), lack of knowledge (1%), and cramming (1%) also cause anxiety. While 1% did not respond to the question, 4 % shared miscellaneous causes including fear of grades, overthinking, questioning, mood, pace, and past experiences.

The Figure 1 shows the causes of anxiety experienced by undergraduate engineering students at UET Lahore:

Figure 1. Causes of Anxiety Experienced by Engineering Students



### *Issues Concerning English language*

Issues concerning English language, which according to the findings mainly cause anxiety, are multiple including poor vocabulary, tenses, and accent cause anxiety. In addition, Urdu-medium background, teacher's or peers' judgments about English, grading based on spoken English are other related issues. Participants suggested that they get anxious because the audience may laugh at their accent or errors. Many of them linked their grammatical errors, non-native accent, and the incorrect use of vocabulary and tenses to embarrassment and anxiety. As they do not speak English in their day-to-day conversation, so they often do not find suitable expressions in English. In addition, they often lack fluency due to less practice or a need for translation from Urdu to English while making presentations. Many of them reinforced that meaningful thoughts should be given precedence over expressing those thoughts in English, and students should be allowed to express themselves in Urdu. A participant stated, „sentences which I thought in my mind couldn't be delivered in another language'. Another participant stated, „we are not native speakers of English and we have not been given a platform at college and school levels to debate in front of peers. Secondly, our English is restricted just to our course. There is no rehearsal of speaking English with others'. Another mentioned, 'the reason is that I don't like

*English*'. One of the participants stated, *'I have an understanding of English tenses and phrases. I can write the same thing that I am going to present (in English) but cannot speak in front of an audience. While giving the presentation, there is always a fear of being mocked. Some people make fun of your tenses and verbs. I can speak the same thing in Urdu (my native language), no matter how large the audience is'*. Another participant also reinforced, *'well, it is always stage pressure coupled with a language i.e., English imposed on us. People feel shy while giving presentations in English. There is a fear in their minds that if they pronounce anything wrong, it will become a source of amusement for others'*. Another participant supported, *'sometimes I (and other students, in my opinion) feel discomfort while giving presentations in English. It is just because English is not our native language, and our schooling was also in Urdu. Another participant also affirmed, 'I am very frightened of making mistakes, thinking that people will note and keep them attached to my personality'*. Another participant stated that students get anxious because they *'might have glossophobia or they just underestimate their speaking ability'*. Insufficient linguistic input and motivation have also been identified as major issues. One of the participants remarked, *'teachers themselves speak Urdu but they expect us to speak English'*.

### ***Audience and Appraisal***

Audience or lack of appraisal by the audience has been pointed out as the second major cause of anxiety. The participants suggested that large audience, mocking attitude of the audience or fear of being mocked by the audience, fear of not being able to do well in front of the audience, questioning by the audience, female audience, judgmental looks, serious faces, staring, fear of getting judged for English and ideas, and maintaining eye contact with the audience trigger anxiety. A participant stated, *'everyone looking at me'* causes anxiety. Another participant stated that *I cannot face public*. Another emphasized, *'the audience makes fun of you if you do some mistakes'*. Another participant put forward the *'pressure of teachers when they sometimes ask difficult questions'* as a cause.

### ***Lack of Confidence***

*Lack of confidence* has been identified as another major cause of anxiety. *Stage fright, introversion, lack of exposure, the fear of self, poor English, bad past experiences and rural background* have been identified as the main causes of lacking in confidence. A respondent also stated, *'I stammer. People laugh'*. Opposite gender has also been identified as a factor. Various male respondents have expressed *'no*



*interaction with girls or presence of girls in the audience' as a stimulus of anxiety.*

### ***Poor Preparation and Lack of Exposure***

Poor preparation is the fourth main cause of anxiety. Various participants also considered thinking repeatedly over lack of preparation as a source of anxiety. Besides, lack of exposure is a major issue because it may be students' first experience of doing communication skills and presentation skills, they may not have exposure to the dynamics of university life and related challenges due to their rural background, or they may never have spoken English. *Fewer interactive sessions, lower frequency of such courses or presentations in other subjects as well, no exposure to presentation skills at school or college, first experience of making a presentation* have also been pinpointed as the causes of anxiety. A participant expressed, *'I am new to presenting in front of the people'*. Another expounded, *'less practice' leads to anxiety because 'we only get a chance of making presentation once a year or semester and that's the final presentation. Practice presentation sessions should be conducted for practice'*. Another emphasized, *'in our school and college, we cram the subject of English throughout and do not learn vocabulary. So, I think the basic problem is vocabulary of English which a student doesn't have built mostly and some of the students also make a presentation fluently due to a lot of practice or in other words, they cram the whole presentation'*. A participant stated, *'Lack of practice and confidence are the reasons. Although the subject Communication Skills gave me a lot of confidence, but I think there should be more opportunities available to enhance the communication skills'*. Many participants think that poor grooming causes anxiety because schools and colleges mostly rely on rote learning. One of the participants mentioned, *'I think my schooling was not good. They just focused on academic activities'*. Another participant expressed, *'at school I didn't get a chance to talk in English; we only focused on reading or cramming our subjects. We can't cope up with our nervousness until or unless we focus more on speaking skills'*. Another deemed *'not going beyond the course outline'* as a cause of the lack of exposure. The findings suggest that learners are not given opportunities to express themselves, communicate in English, or make presentations. In case of students from underdeveloped areas, situation further aggravates.

### ***Various Psychological Pressures***

The respondents indicated that they get anxious or nervous due to a variety of psychological pressures, for instance, *„of failure’, ‘time management’, ‘shyness’, ‘criticism’, ‘rejection’, ‘not being good enough’, ‘forgetting’, ‘getting teased or distracted by other students’, ‘getting insulted by the teacher in front of the audience’, or ‘making errors in English’*. Regarding time, for instance, a participant stated the following: *‘teachers usually give us very short time to cover a very vast concept so there is anxiety, like “I can't make it in time’*.

### ***Miscellaneous Causes of Anxiety***

Overthinking, cramming or memorization of content, fear of grades, uninteresting topic, poor command on the topic or content, lack of clarity, and lack of knowledge of strategies for making presentation or handling the audience are a few other causes of anxiety suggested by the participants. A participant informed, anxiety is experienced *„because I think I give presentation not like a presentation but like a burden’*. High personal goals or expectations from oneself, such as dreaming to become an *‘international level speaker’* is also a cause of anxiety. Various participants also identified non-verbal communication, such as *eye contact with the audience, poor tonal variation, pace, and others’ facial expressions*, as a cause of an increase in the levels of anxiety. *„Eye contact and volume are major issues in making a presentation’*.

## **Discussion**

The existing studies carried out by Khan (2015), and Ahmed et al. (2017) in Pakistani context and Stapa et al. (2014) in Malaysian context also found similar causes with proficiency in English being the major cause of anxiety; however, unlike Khan (2015), findings of the present study do not suggest pedagogical factors or stressful class environment as a major cause though the fear of criticism by the teachers in front of other students, as well as lesser opportunities given to the students to speak English have been identified as causes. The present study also supports results of the existing studies in that a lack of exposure and personal attributes or fears also cause anxiety over making presentations. Just like the experiences of a Chinese participant shared by He et al. (2021), the participants of the present study also described that apprehending mockery of their mistakes by the audience, they felt anxious. Stress, large class size, poor school conditions, and rural versus urban background in terms of the teachers’ qualification and classroom practices are negatively

correlated to the students' achievements (Nomaan et al., 2016). Moreover, as secondary schools set the foundation for future success (Nomaan et al., 2016), understanding their role in not giving exposure through interactive spoken English activities is important. According to the participants, their previous experiences at their schools and colleges had a serious effect on experiencing anxiety. Kiran et al. (2020) note that anxiety among university students may be caused by self-generated thoughts. The findings reinforce that overthinking is one of the causes of anxiety. A changed environment and poor adaptability may also cause anxiety which, if not controlled, may lead to further psychological disorders (Thahir et al., 2021). Based on the participants' views, the present study also suggests that though speaking English is the main cause of anxiety, yet it is exacerbated due to a lack of exposure at school and college levels and the past experiences of the participants. In addition, poor preparation and practice have also been identified as two major issues causing anxiety among the participants of the present study. Liu and Wu (2021) also identified concerns about speaking English, fear of negative outcomes, and confidence in one's communicative competence as the triggers of anxiety among the Chinese teachers of English, while İpek (2016) pinpointed poor preparation as a cause of anxiety among the Turkish teachers of English as a foreign language. It suggests that language anxiety is experienced by teachers and students alike in different contexts.

### **Limitations and Suggestions**

The present study does not involve teachers or school and college administrators, therefore, understanding the challenges faced by teachers in dealing with students' anxiety levels through further research would be helpful. Furthermore, research can also be carried out on the role of Pakistani colleges and schools in causing anxiety over making presentations in English. In addition, variables, such as overthinking, geographical background, and mocking attitude of the audience can also be investigated further in relation to language anxiety experienced by Pakistani English learners.

### **Implications**

Findings of the present study would bear pragmatic applications for academic instructors, specifically those who are involved in teaching English as a foreign language at the rudimentary level to foster the scholastic skills of students regarding English language. In addition, findings of the study would provide a foundation to

academics in planning the curriculum for a basic course to enhance the students' technical writing expressions and skills. Finally, psycholinguists can also focus on understanding the fundamental cognitive and affective similarities and differences in acquiring competencies of English as second language among Pakistani students.

### Conclusion

The present study concludes that poor proficiency in English, fear and lack of encouragement by the audience, lack of confidence, poor preparation, fewer opportunities to make presentations at the university, regional background, lack of knowledge, psychological pressure, and overthinking are identified as main causes of anxiety among undergraduate engineering students.

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