

The Anxiety-Motivation Relationship in Oral English Communication among Assamese-medium Higher Secondary Students

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Abstract

Learners of English in multilingual contexts, particularly in regional-medium institutions, commonly experience anxiety while using English for oral communications. On the other hand, English has remained an aspirational language for many of them. The current study examines the association between two variables, anxiety and motivation, among Assamese-medium higher secondary students. This study uses a descriptive-correlational mixed-method design to find out how the two affective variables interact. Data were collected from 78 students through a 15-item Likert-scale questionnaire and an open-ended prompt. The findings presented a significant positive correlation, indicating that learners with strong motivation also experienced greater anxiety while speaking English, reflecting a possible tension between aspiration and performance. The study highlights the need for using multilingual and pedagogically responsive classroom practices that normalise oral English use, reduce affective barriers, and support learners' motivation in Assamese-medium settings.

Keywords: Foreign language anxiety; motivation; Assamese-medium learners; oral English communication

INTRODUCTION

In India, learners often struggle to develop basic communication skills because classroom communications largely happen in home or state language, and students have few opportunities for practising their interpersonal skills in English (Jayendran, Ramanathan & Nagpal, 2022). In regional-medium schools, including those in Assam, many learners face challenges while trying to use English orally in spite of English being introduced from the early years of schooling, though they aspire to learn communicative skills in English. In such schools, instructional practices are primarily focused on reading and writing activities. Awareness about the importance of oral skills is, of course, on the rise; however, that awareness does not translate into real classroom actions during English classes (Borg, Padwad, & Kalita Nath, 2022). Learners get limited opportunity to use oral communications in English as classroom interactions mostly happen in Assamese, and tasks often focus on reading and writing more than on oral skills. Thus, English is often reduced to a subject with a focus primarily on testing reading/writing performance and grammatical accuracy rather than

being considered as a language that is needed for oral communicative functions.

In higher grades, when learners are required to speak English for academic tasks, the gap between the expectations and exposure/experience might increase the role of affective factors in shaping their performance. One well-established concept relatable to such a situation is foreign language anxiety (FLA), an affective block in second language acquisition, particularly in oral communication tasks (Horwitz et al., 1986). Due to such anxiety, learners experience worry, nervousness, fear of negative feedback, and cognitive blocks that impede their ability to recall or articulate their thoughts. In higher grades in multilingual contexts, when learners increasingly realise the value attached to the English language, they are likely to feel anxious about performing well while speaking English. Learners commonly recognise the importance of English for higher education, employment, and wider communication. In spite of this positive orientation, learners often fail to exhibit communicative confidence, probably because of the way they experienced learning English over the

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past years. Therefore, it is important to understand how anxiety and motivation coexist or sometimes conflict so that learners' emotional well-being and language proficiency development can be supported through informed classroom practices.

This study examines anxiety and motivation of Assamese-medium higher secondary students in terms of oral English communication. By investigating their levels of anxiety and motivation, and exploring how these variables relate to one another, the study seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions in Indian ELT about multilingual learning, affective factors, and the need for pedagogical approaches that acknowledge learners' linguistic and emotional realities.

The study attempts to examine:

- the overall levels and patterns of anxiety among Assamese-medium higher secondary students in relation to oral English communication;
- learners' motivation toward learning and using English; and
- how learners' motivation and their anxiety are related.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies indicate that Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is considered an important factor that affects learners' performance, more so in terms of oral communication. FLA has gained importance as an area for investigation for many decades now. However, it is, surprisingly, still relevant in many educational contexts.

For example, while investigating language anxiety among Saudi EFL learners, Hakim (2019) finds that learners, even those who are good at written tasks, often feel anxious and stressed when asked to speak in English. Drawing upon Horwitz et al. (1986), the study explains that anxiety creates an internal pressure that adversely affects learners' communicative skills, especially in speaking and listening. This situation is further worsened by the fear of making mistakes or being judged negatively. It compels learners to resort to memorisation or rote learning, as observed in Tanveer (2007, as cited in Hakim, 2019). In an attempt to avoid negative feedback, learners focus more on memorising texts for oral presentations rather than focusing on developing real communication skills.

In an earlier study examining affective and cognitive factors in learning a second language, Chastain (1975) found motivation and oral competence to be

among the strongest predictors of success. Reviewing Pimsleur's earlier work, he added that both learners' motivation and personality traits like shyness may co-exist, making learners experience a paradoxical situation where they want to perform well while speaking English, but cannot bring themselves to speak with ease. Although this is rarely discussed explicitly, such tensions are seen in Indian classrooms as well. Moreover, such findings highlight the importance of interplay among affective variables in shaping learners' experiences in second-language contexts.

In a relatively recent study on anxiety among Saudi undergraduates, Sadiq (2017) noticed behavioural symptoms like trembling when asked to speak in English, panicking when required to speak without preparation. The level of anxiety was moderate, yet found to have a significant negative influence on learners' performance. The results highlighted how diverse factors, including affective ones, play roles in shaping learners' performance in English-speaking tasks.

Rumiyati and Seftika (2018), in a small-scale study in Indonesia, highlighted a diverse range of emotions connected to speaking English and reported that EFL students commonly experienced speaking anxiety. This anxiety was possibly caused by shyness, embarrassment, feelings of inferiority, etc., and they significantly hindered their performance. Students often went blank or became confused about what to say. This demonstrated anxiety's interference with fluency and clarity.

In another research from Qatar, Sabbah (2018) reported how fear of failure and negative feedback caused high levels of anxiety among tertiary-level ESL learners, particularly in test situations. The role of fear of negative feedback, as highlighted in the study, seems to resonate with Assamese-medium contexts where learners often describe speaking English in front of peers as intimidating. The transition from school to college and the differences in teaching techniques in each seem to have contributed to learners' discomfort.

Rahmat et al. (2021) also observed that even university students experienced anxiety while using English orally. Such anxiety led to nervousness while responding to a question, fear of failure and insecurity in terms of peer performance. Their findings indicated the importance of confidence as a factor as important as linguistic competence. Their findings highlighted the continuing relevance

of affective support in second-language classrooms.

The studies discussed above indicate that numerous factors contribute significantly to speaking anxiety among learners – fear of mistakes, negative feedback, and limited exposure to English. Interestingly, some of the findings suggest a paradoxical pattern in which motivation coexists with anxiety. This is particularly relevant in multilingual contexts such as Assam, where English is considered an aspirational language but hardly used in day-to-day communication.

In the Indian context, Minderman et al (2024), in a study among 202 students from grades 7 to 12 in a private institution, reported that foreign language anxiety levels among Indian ESL students are considerably lower than those in other Asian nations, and identified fear of making mistakes as the most common cause for anxiety. In another study among secondary school students, Kumar and Suresh (2021) report that most of the students experienced moderate anxiety while learning English, adding a gender analysis pointing towards boys experiencing higher levels of anxiety when compared to girls in English language learning. However, hardly any studies could be found in Indian contexts where anxiety among higher-grade learners was examined in relation to their motivation levels. The present study aims to fill this gap by examining Assamese-medium students' motivation and anxiety in terms of oral English communication.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopts a descriptive–correlational mixed-method approach. The quantitative data allowed us to see the statistical patterns across the samples ($N = 78$), while the qualitative component offered complementary insights about the experiences of the learners.

Participants

The study was conducted among 78 Assamese-medium higher secondary students (37 males, 41 females) from five government institutions in Tinsukia district, Assam. All the participants studied English as a compulsory subject for more than ten years during their schooling experience. Assamese was the primary language of communication at home and during classroom interactions in schools, while English was used mainly in academic contexts.

Instrument

This study uses a self-designed 15-item Likert-scale questionnaire to gather data on learners' anxiety and motivation. The development of the questionnaire followed a standard procedure of reviewing literature and expert validation. A pool of items was first generated based on literature on the two key areas – foreign language anxiety and motivation (Horwitz et al., 1986; Gardner, 1985). The items were internally reviewed, and the content validity of the questionnaire was supported through expert review by two experienced ELT practitioners.

Nine of the items aimed at collecting data on the participants' anxiety related to speaking English. These included items like 'I feel really afraid to speak English', 'I get blank when they ask me to answer something in English', etc. The other six items aimed at collecting data on participants' motivation levels. These included items like 'English speaking can help us to get employment and make us learn many new things about the world', 'I feel that we should speak English and communicate our thoughts in English', etc. On a 5-point scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* (1) to *Strongly Agree* (5), participants responded to the items. An open-ended item invited students to describe their experience and feelings about speaking English.

The questionnaire's reliability was confirmed through Cronbach's alpha. The internal consistency was found to be good to excellent. The anxiety subscale (9 items) had a value of 0.81, while the motivation subscale showed a value of 0.91.

Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire was administered via Google Form after obtaining participants' consent. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS, generating descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations. Qualitative responses were coded thematically to supplement quantitative findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Levels of Anxiety and Motivation

The mean scores of both the subscales were calculated in SPSS to measure the levels of anxiety and motivation. The mean scores of anxiety and motivation reflect a dual pattern – a moderate level of anxiety ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 0.71$, $N = 78$) and a high level of motivation ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.93$, $N = 78$) for oral English communication among Assamese-medium learners. These findings, which reflect the coexistence of moderate anxiety and high

motivation, align with those from other multilingual contexts (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989) where learners placing a high value on English often feel underprepared to use it orally.

B. Anxiety

Item-wise Areas of Anxiety

The main areas contributing to students' anxiety can be seen through the item-wise means of anxiety scores (Figure 1).

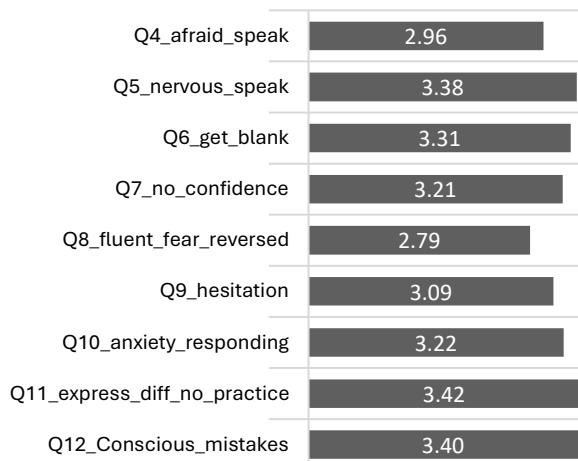


Figure 1: Item-wise means of anxiety scores

Item-wise means indicated that lack of speaking practice emerged as the most significant contributor to anxiety ($M = 3.42$), followed by fear of mistakes ($M = 3.40$). Learners frequently felt nervous during oral tasks ($M = 3.38$) and sometimes went blank when asked to respond ($M = 3.31$). Limited exposure to spoken English, both at home and in school, appears to heighten these affective challenges.

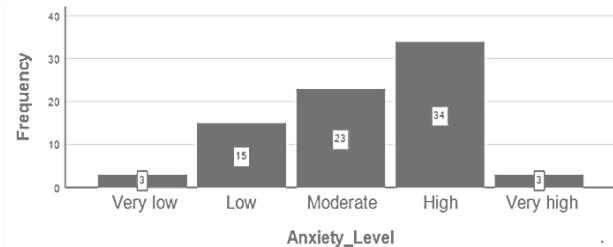
Such findings align with previous research indicating that among learners who experience a lot of anxiety while learning a language is caused by the demands of speaking performances (Hakim, 2019; Rumiyati & Seftika, 2018).

Distribution of Learners across Anxiety Levels

Most students fell within the high-anxiety category, though extreme values were rare, as shown in Figure 2. Only three participants reported very high anxiety, indicating that anxiety in speaking English is very common, though not an extreme experience for Assamese-medium higher secondary learners. The same number of participants reporting very low anxiety indicates individual variation that possibly depends on exposure to English and/or comfort with English.

Figure 2: Distribution of learners across anxiety levels

While the average score suggests moderate anxiety, the distribution reveals clustering near the upper



boundary. This indicates widespread discomfort with oral English. This challenges the assumption that long-term exposure to English through formal schooling automatically reduces anxiety.

C. Motivation

Areas of Motivation

Figure 3 shows consistently high positive orientations toward English, with mean scores ranging from 3.55 to 3.90 on a five-point scale.

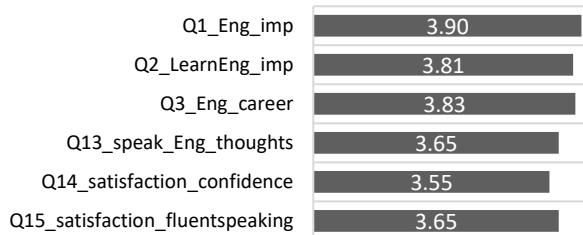


Figure 3: Item-wise mean score in motivation areas

Item-wise means suggest that learners' motivation levels were consistently high across items. They recognised English as an important language ($M = 3.90$), necessary for learning new information and achieving employment ($M = 3.83$), and essential for communication in an increasingly globalised world. Although students expressed a desire to speak fluently ($M = 3.65$), the relatively lower confidence-related score ($M = 3.55$) suggests a motivation-confidence gap.

Distribution of Learners across Motivation Levels

Figure 4 displays the distribution of students across the five motivation levels. The majority of participants exhibited a high or very high level of motivation toward English. Twenty-seven students (34.6%) fall in the *high* category, and 26 students (33.3%) in the *very high* category.

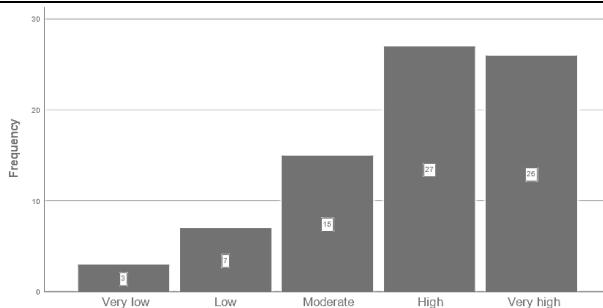


Figure 4: Distribution of students across motivation levels

Only a small proportion of students (7 students, 9.0%) showed low motivation, and an even smaller proportion showed *very low* (3 students, 3.8%) motivation. These findings confirm that learners' anxiety does not stem from a lack of interest in English but from affective barriers that limit oral performance.

D. Qualitative Insights

In response to the open-ended question, learners share their feelings and experiences about speaking English. Common words that appeared in their responses were *English, speaking, Assamese, learn, lack, and experience*. This suggests that learners perceive their dominant use of Assamese at home and school, along with their limited scope for communicative use of English in both settings, as shaping their experience of using oral English.

Their responses also indicated that they wanted more opportunities to speak English and needed strategies to deal with their fear of making mistakes. Feeling shy, nervous, and judged were some common feelings among the respondents.

About their classroom experience, some felt that the teachers should use English more often in classroom interactions, while some others felt that their schooling in lower grades did not provide enough oral practice in English.

The following key themes emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data:

- limited exposure to English
- fear of mistakes
- desire for fluency and self-confidence

These insights reflect patterns that are commonly observed as part of multilingual realities in Indian classrooms – learners do value oral skills in English but feel underprepared when it comes to oral communication. The results discussed so far indicate that Assamese-medium higher secondary students experience a moderate degree of foreign

language anxiety in situations that require spontaneous use of oral English. Several factors contribute to this anxiety: limited opportunities for authentic speaking practice, fear of being judged by peers or teachers, and the linguistic distance between Assamese and English.

E. Relationship between Motivation and Anxiety

The results above seem to indicate that though Assamese-medium higher secondary students demonstrate high motivation to learn and use English, they experience considerable anxiety when required to speak in English. To confirm and establish the relationship between motivation and anxiety statistically, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted in SPSS. The following table presents the results.

Table 1: Pearson Correlation test showing motivation-anxiety relationship

Correlations			
	Anxiety_mean	AttiMot_mean	
Anxiety_mean	Pearson Correlation	1	.533**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	78	78
AttiMot_mean	Pearson Correlation	.533**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	78	78

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The Pearson Correlation test shows that there is a significant and positive relationship between students' motivation and their anxiety levels ($r = .53$, $p < .001$). This indicates that learners with stronger motivation and positive orientations towards English tend to experience more anxiety when asked to speak English. This might appear counterintuitive, as motivation is generally assumed to reduce affective barriers. Krashen's affective filter hypothesis also sees a high level of motivation and a low level of anxiety as necessary factors for language acquisition. However, the pattern found in this study is consistent with previous work suggesting that motivation and anxiety can co-occur, particularly when English carries strong symbolic, academic, and socioeconomic value (Chastain, 1975; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989).

English, particularly oral skills in English, is often considered a gateway to higher education and mobility in the Indian context. In the context of this study, learners, as they were in higher grades, probably increasingly realised the value of the

language for academic and career prospects. Therefore, placing a higher value on English probably led to higher expectations for one's own performance in oral English communication. This is likely to intensify the feeling of self-consciousness and fear of negative feedback, especially when classroom exposure and opportunities for oral use remain limited. Though the learners are eager to speak English, they are possibly conscious about their limited communicative experience, and this leads to increased anxiety. The more motivated and aware the learners are, the higher the expectations they set for themselves, and this leads to greater pressure and anxiety in oral communication. Thus, the positive correlation found in this study reflects a probable tension between aspiration and performance.

This interpretation is consistent with the qualitative data collected for this study, where students repeatedly mentioned fear of making mistakes, insufficient practice, and the desire to speak English fluently and confidently. These findings underline the need for pedagogical approaches that normalise spoken English in low-stakes, supportive settings so that motivation can translate into confidence rather than anxiety.

CONCLUSION & PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The study demonstrates that Assamese-medium learners have high motivation to use oral English skills, but at the same time experience moderate-to-high anxiety during oral English communication. While students recognise the importance of English for academic and professional growth, limited exposure and fear of negative feedback contribute significantly to their anxiety.

The co-existence of motivation and anxiety suggests that mere motivation might not lead to communicative confidence. It is also crucial to create a positive environment for oral English communication through effective pedagogical strategies for enabling learners to develop confidence and experience the ease of oral communication in English in a supported environment. Classroom practices need to be adopted in such a way that English becomes a natural part of daily multilingual learning rather than an isolated, high-stakes performance activity. Based on the findings of this study, several pedagogical strategies may be considered:

- **Integrate collaborative speaking tasks:** Pair work, role-play, storytelling, and small-group discussions can gradually build confidence.
- **Use translanguaging practices:** Alternating among Assamese, English and any other languages/language varieties students know can help reduce cognitive load and normalise English use.
- **Provide formative feedback:** Encouraging comments and constructive suggestions reduce fear of judgment.
- **Increase teacher talk in English:** Reasonable and supportive use of English by teachers models authentic communication.
- **Create safe classroom spaces:** Emphasising that mistakes are part of learning can reduce self-consciousness.

Although the study provides important insights into the interplay of motivation and anxiety in Assamese-medium classrooms, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the results of this study cannot be generalised to wider Assamese or Indian contexts because the sample size was relatively small and was restricted to only one district in Assam. Moreover, the study uses only self-reported data collected at one point in time, which might be influenced by the participants' interpretation of the questionnaire items at that point. Also, the study uses data from students only, and not from other stakeholders. Further studies may explore classroom-based interventions or longitudinal designs with larger samples to examine how anxiety and motivation evolve. Teacher competence, including teacher proficiency needed for using the pedagogical strategies as suggested above, also needs to be investigated through future research.

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