

Does Competency-based Learning Reduce Speaking Anxiety? Evidence from NCF 2023-Aligned Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

The present-day education system is challenged by an ever-increasing number of secondary students experiencing English language speaking anxiety due to their concerns about being able to speak in English fluently, fears of performing poorly and their fear of being judged negatively. However, the National Curriculum Framework's (NCF 2023) emphasis on Competency-Based Learning (CBL) presents a new way of teaching English which is based on experiential learning, formative assessment and student-centred learning. Of the four language skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (LSRW)) that are taught in English Language classrooms, Speaking Anxiety is the most common and severe. Using a qualitative thematic analysis approach following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, this research explored the lived experiences, perceptions and emotional responses of secondary school students in CBL English Language classrooms. Semi-structured individual interviews (n=18, 15-20 minutes each) and focus group discussions (n=6 participants in each group) with secondary school students (Classes IX-X) at PM SHRI Kendriya Vidyalaya Kokrajhar provided data for this study. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework yielded four major themes: (1) The Manifestations and Triggers of Speaking Anxiety in CBL Classrooms; (2) Student Perception of CBL Environment and Speaking Anxiety; (3) Perceived Effectiveness of CBL Pedagogical Strategies; and (4) Student Coping Strategies and Resilience Development. These findings indicate that CBL practices, particularly formative feedback, scaffolded speaking tasks, collaborative structures, and multimodal expression, moderated speaking anxiety by creating conditions of psychological safety and authentic communication, whereas individual variation in proficiency level and ambiguity tolerance mediated the effectiveness of CBL strategies. The study contributes to the empirical understanding of CBL's affective dimensions in Indian ELT contexts and offers pedagogical implications for teachers, curriculum designers, and teacher education programmes aligned with NCF 2023.

Keywords: English Speaking Anxiety; Competency-Based Learning; NCF 2023; Thematic Analysis; Secondary School Students

INTRODUCTION

Anxiety associated with English as a Foreign Language speaking is one of the major obstacles to effective communication and language learning among students at secondary schools worldwide (Sukarno et al., 2025). It is a general tendency that implies fear, anxiety, and nervousness during English communication and has a significant impact on the confidence and readiness of students to engage in oral activities (Eddraoui and Wirza, 2020; Syanrillah et al., 2022). The fear of negative evaluation, communication anxiety, and anxiety about tests can often make students unwilling to

participate in the required verbal interactions (Ekalestari et al., 2023; Sadaf and Nurhayati, 2023). The underlying causes are complex, and they involve language challenges: low levels of vocabulary, grammatical errors, pronunciation, personal insecurity and teaching methods, which may increase anxiety (Khoudri, 2024; Sadaf and Nurhayati, 2023). Most of the students cannot be fluent, especially in a public event, which is a constant cycle of avoidance, thus hindering the development of language (Latifah et al., 2025; Zulkflee et al., 2023). This multi-layered mental condition, which is also referred to as Foreign

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Language Speaking Anxiety, is an emergency issue that needs an innovative teaching methodology (Aguila and Harjanto, 2016; Khoudri, 2024).

In India, the new paradigm of the National Curriculum Framework 2023 is a shift to the end of rote learning and towards a more flexible, holistic and multidisciplinary educational system (Rani and Gautam, 2025). One of the core principles of the NCF 2023 is that it pays significant attention to Competency-Based Learning, where the effectiveness of practical skills, conceptual clarity, and the application of knowledge are paramount over the coverage of the content (Gupta et al., 2024; Rani and Gautam, 2025). This paradigm promotes experiential learning, formative assessment and student-centred approaches that have been empirically demonstrated to lead to deeper learning and potentially reduce anxiety (Alt et al., 2023; Rani and Gautam, 2025). CBL posits that students make learning choices, get support that is customised to their needs, and are assessed by evidence of mastery, which in turn facilitates active learning by taking different paths and at different speeds (Alt et al., 2023; Gupta et al., 2024). This is done to develop critical thinking skills, creativity and problem-solving, which are vital in personal development and contribution to society (Rani and Gautam, 2025). It is precisely within this policy-mandated pedagogical shift that the question of English-speaking anxiety becomes both urgent and researchable: if NCF 2023's CBL orientation structurally dismantles the conditions most associated with speaking anxiety, do students in these classrooms actually experience reduced anxiety, and if so, how? Despite this policy impetus, there is limited qualitative evidence examining how students experience CBL-oriented English classrooms at the secondary level, and specifically how such environments shape the nature and intensity of their speaking anxiety. This research article addresses this gap by exploring students' lived experiences, perceptions and emotional responses in an NCF 2023-aligned CBL classroom, offering contextualised, ground-level insight into an issue of considerable pedagogical and policy significance.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Pervasiveness and Cause of English-Speaking Anxiety

Research has consistently shown high levels of English-Speaking Anxiety (ESA) among secondary and high school students in the form of serious

barriers to effective oral communication (Latifah et al., 2025; Sukarno et al., 2025; Zulkflee et al., 2023). This anxiety is characterised by feelings of apprehension, tension, and nervousness that arise during communication in English (Eddraoui & Wirza, 2020). Studies identify several contributing factors:

- **Fear of Negative Evaluation and Communication Apprehension:** a major contributor of anxiety is where students have concern about being judged by the teacher or peers and show reluctance to participate (Khoudri, 2024; Sadaf, & Nurhayati, 2023; Sukarno et al., 2025; Tapado, 2025). The perceived criticism and the potential feedback of undesirable responses are quite influential for student anxiety and often lead to withdrawal from speaking activities (Sadaf & Nurhayati, 2023).
- **Linguistic Difficulties:** Linguistic difficulties, such as vocabulary, grammar, fluency and pronunciation, are often reported as sources of anxiety (Khoudri, 2024; Syanrillah et al., 2022). Students having problems with these aspects can be incompetent and lack confidence, which makes expressing oneself difficult (Zulkflee et al., 2023).
- **Inadequate Preparation and Performance Pressure:** Inadequate time to prepare for speaking tasks and the pressure to perform well can increase anxiety levels (Aguila & Harjanto, 2016).
- **Teacher-Related Factor:** The quality of teacher feedback, classroom activities, and the general atmosphere of the classroom play an important role (Khoudri, 2024). A stringent or formal learning environment may increase the discomfort (Gordani et al., 2021). The perceived importance of accuracy in writing at the expense of fluency can also cause anxiety about making errors (Nhi et al., 2022).

These factors would constitute a complex psychological phenomenon (Khoudri, 2024) that may end up in a lack of confidence, hesitation, and eventually hinder proficiency in speaking (Aguila & Harjanto, 2016; Sadaf & Nurhayati, 2023).

Taken together, these studies converge on the centrality of social-evaluative threat in triggering and sustaining speaking anxiety. Critically, however, most investigations have been conducted in traditional teacher-fronted classrooms; how evaluative threat is reconfigured within

collaborative, competency-based settings, where peer interaction is foregrounded, remains an understudied dimension that the present study specifically addresses

Competency-Based Learning as an Intervention for ESA

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2023 promotes the competency-based approach, which is a shift from rote memorisation of facts to experiential learning, formative assessment, and student-centred methodologies (Rani & Gautam, 2025). This paradigm is consistent with pedagogical strategies that have been empirically found to be effective in reducing ESA:

■ **Student-Centred Learning:** SCL approaches are generally perceived as more efficacious than traditional teacher-centred approaches (Budiman et al., 2018). SCL develops student autonomy, engagement, and self-efficacy, which directly addresses affective variables related to anxiety (Jin et al., 2020; Kassem, 2018).

■ **Experiential and Task-Targeted Learning:** These learner-centred approaches prioritise the development of competencies through active engagement over the mere coverage of content (Eddraoui & Wirza, 2020). They activate active engagement and confidence in oral communication as they make the learning experience personally relevant (Khoudri, 2024). Project-based learning, as an activity, while sometimes the cause of initial anxiety, can, if structured well, bring forth meaningful communicative experiences (Latifah et al., 2025).

■ **Cooperative Learning:** CL involves the development of a more supportive and less threatening atmosphere for learning through group work and collaborative activities (Gordani et al., 2021). Studies show that integrating CL principles has a significant effect on reducing communication apprehension and improving self-confidence of EFL learners (Gordani et al., 2021; Nhi et al., 2022).

■ **Formative and Continuous Assessment:** The NCF 2023's focus on continuous, formative and competency-based assessments fosters a learning environment where assessment is incorporated into the learning process, instead of being limited to summative assessments (Rani & Gautam, 2025). Formative practices, such as video-based self- and peer-

assessment, have been found to reduce performance anxiety in public speaking and to enhance performance (Zheng et al., 2021).

■ **Teacher Strategies and the Classroom Environment:**

Teachers play a key role in relieving ESA under a competency-based learning (CBL) paradigm. There are recommended strategies such as positive feedback, praise, and collaborative task integration (Khoudri, 2024). Creating an informal, relaxed, and communicative classroom environment helps to reduce fear and brings comfort in classroom engagement (Sadaf & Nurhayati, 2023). Training of English language teachers in understanding and managing language anxiety is important to implement effective strategies (Sadaf & Nurhayati, 2023).

While the anxiety-reducing potential of cooperative learning structures is supported across multiple contexts (Gordani et al., 2021; Nhi et al., 2022), several studies note that group composition, task structure, and perceived competence differentials within groups can inadvertently introduce new forms of anxiety, particularly for lower-proficiency learners. This nuance, largely absent from advocacy-oriented CBL literature, is a central concern of the present inquiry.

Curriculum Frameworks & Policy Alignment

National curriculum frameworks, like NCF 2023, have an important role to play in how educational practices respond to abate ESA. The focus on holistic development, integration of technology, multilingualism and competency-based education in the NCF 2023 provides a strong foundation for the promotion of anxiety-reducing pedagogies (Rani & Gautam, 2025). Analogous to Indonesia's ELT curriculum, which has developed to include higher-order skills and go beyond grammar-centred teaching, the NCF 2023 promotes a paradigm shift in language learning to focus on meaningful communication (Lian et al., 2024). Nevertheless, for such ambitious frameworks to be successfully implemented, systemic reforms in teacher training, curriculum delivery, and infrastructure development are necessary (Rani & Gautam, 2025).

Despite consensus on formative assessment's theoretical promise for reducing performance anxiety, empirical evidence from secondary EFL contexts in India remains sparse. Alt et al. (2023) demonstrate CBL-formative feedback linkages in

higher education; Zheng et al. (2021) show gains in video-based peer/self-assessment contexts, but classroom-level evidence from NCF 2023-aligned secondary schools does not yet exist. The present study contributes precisely this level of contextualised, student-voiced evidence.

Research Gap & Statement of the Problem

While existing research has established the prevalence and multi-causal nature of English-speaking anxiety (Khoudri, 2024; Sadaf & Nurhayati, 2023; Sukarno et al., 2025), and a growing body of literature supports the anxiety-moderating potential of student-centred, competency-based approaches (Alt et al., 2023; Gordani et al., 2021), two gaps remain underexplored. First, most studies have examined these constructs in separate strands: research on CBL effectiveness rarely focuses on affective dimensions such as anxiety, while anxiety research rarely situates itself within a national curriculum framework like NCF 2023. Second, and more specifically, the qualitative dimension of how students in Indian secondary school's experience speaking anxiety within CBL-oriented English classrooms aligned to NCF 2023 has not been systematically investigated.

This study 'The Impact of Competency-Based Learning on English Speaking Anxiety among Secondary School Students in NCF 2023-Aligned Classrooms' thus contributes to pedagogy by providing empirical, student-centred evidence on the intersection of CBL practice and speaking anxiety in an Indian secondary school context.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Site, Participant Selection & Data Collection

It was qualitative research that used thematic analysis to investigate how Competency Based Learning (CBL) classroom settings and English-speaking anxiety relate to secondary students at PM SHRI Kendriya Vidyalaya Kokrajhar, chosen as one of the first schools to adopt NCF 2023. Data were collected using purposive sampling of a sample of 18 secondary school students (Classes IX-X) through semi-structured interviews (n=18 15-20 minutes each) as well as through a focus group discussion (n=6 participants in each group). Interviews were recorded in detailed handwritten notes, and the responses, key phrases and non-verbal behaviour of the participants were noted down, and detailed summaries were made at the end of the interview to ensure accuracy. Interviews and Focus Group Discussions were conducted in

English with code-switching to Hindi permitted to maximise participant expressivity; responses were subsequently documented in English.

Data were recorded through detailed handwritten field notes capturing verbal responses, key phrases, and observable non-verbal cues, supplemented by post-session summaries written immediately after each session to maintain accuracy. While audio recording was not employed due to participant discomfort, the trustworthiness of documentation was strengthened through member checking, whereby participants reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of summarised responses.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis: (1) familiarisation with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the final report. Both inductive and deductive coding strategies were applied: inductive coding allowed emergent themes to surface from the data, while deductive coding cross-referenced findings against the theoretical constructs of CBL and foreign language anxiety.

Ethical Consideration

Informed consent of parents and assent of the students were obtained to obtain ethical approval from the school authorities. Trustworthiness was achieved through triangulation (Interviews and Focus Group Discussion), member checking, keeping detailed field notes, reflective journals, and peer debriefing with a colleague familiar with qualitative ELT research used in the research process.

OBJECTIVES

- To investigate the manifestations and triggers of English-speaking anxiety among secondary school students in NCF 2023-aligned, Competency-Based Learning classrooms.
- To explore student perceptions of the CBL classroom environment and its effects on English-speaking anxiety.
- To identify which CBL pedagogical strategies students perceive as effective in reducing speaking anxiety and increasing willingness to communicate.
- To examine the coping strategies adopted by students to manage speaking anxiety in CBL-based English language classrooms.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- **RQ1:** How exactly do English-language classroom manifestations and triggers of speaking anxiety present themselves in secondary students?
- **RQ2:** What is the perception of students regarding the Competency-Based Learning classroom environment and their speaking anxiety in English?
- **RQ3:** What CBL pedagogic practices are perceived by students to have supported or prevented their confidence in speaking English?
- **RQ4:** What are the coping strategies used by students to address speaking anxiety in the CBL model, and how effectively do they regard these strategies to be done?

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 18 senior secondary students (Classes IX-X) of PM SHRI Kendriya Vidyalaya Kokrajhar revealed that there were four broad themes and twelve sub-themes connected with the classroom experiences of English-speaking anxiety in Competency-Based Learning (CBL). The four research questions were answered through systematic coded data, identification of themes, review, definition, and analysis of data in a six-phase approach that was adopted by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The Manifestations and Triggers of Speaking Anxiety in CBL Classrooms.

1. **Physiological and Affective Symptoms:** The participants recurrently expressed that they had clear physiological symptoms whenever they had to speak English in the classroom. Such symptoms were elevated heart rate, sweating, trembling, and verbal hesitations. A student of Class IX explained, “I have a very fast heartbeat, and my hands are sweating whenever the teacher calls my name to answer. My voice is sometimes shaking as well.” One of the participants said: “I have the answer in my mind, but when I get on my feet, the words do not come out right. I begin to use the words ‘um’ and ‘uh’ numerous times.”

The affective aspect of speaking anxiety was defined by the sense of nervousness, fear of being embarrassed, and increased self-consciousness. One of the Class X students said: “I am very nervous before the speech. I continue to imagine what would happen in case

I do something wrong, and everyone makes fun of me.” This emotional reaction usually took the form of avoidance behaviour where the students would intentionally seek to avoid being called upon during oral presentations.

2. **Fear of Negative Evaluation and Peer Judgment:** The dread of being judged negatively also turned out to be a key antecedent of speaking anxiety among the participants. Students complained that they are being attributed to pronunciation, grammatical mistakes, and fluency by both teachers and their fellow students. One of the participants said the following: “I am constantly afraid that I could speak with bad pronunciation, and my colleagues would believe that I did not know how to speak English.” This issue was especially acute when it came to whole-class activities in which the answers were visible in public.

Interestingly, although in traditional classrooms there was fear of being criticised by the teacher, there was a subtle trend observed in the CBL environment where peer judgment gained prominence. A student in Class IX noticed: “I used to be afraid of being corrected by teachers, but this time since I am in a group, I am more worried about what my friends will say about the bad English that I speak.” This change implies that collaborative learning designs, though potentially anxiety-releasing in certain aspects, can introduce new evaluative anxiety-provoking issues.

3. **Linguistic Insecurity and Perceived Competence Gaps:** The subjects showed that linguistic insecurity was a significant factor related to their perceived incompetence in the English language. This lack of confidence was developed in different aspects: in vocabulary, in grammar, and in pronunciation anxiety. One of the Class X students said: “I sometimes have thoughts in Hindi, but I do not know the English words to say something. So, I remain silent even when I feel like being involved.”
4. **Anxiety Triggers in Specific CBL Activities:** Some of the activities as part of the CBL framework became more anxiety-provoking. Spontaneous speaking activities like impromptu presentations or unrehearsed role plays caused more anxiety than prepared presentations. One of the Class IX students said: “When the teacher gives time to prepare, I can practice and feel

confident. But when she suddenly asks to speak on a topic, I become blank.”

On the same note, the presentations in front of the whole class were more anxiety-provoking than small group discussions. Nevertheless, the participants reported that the type of anxiety was different: “In a large class presentation, I am worried about doing something wrong in front of all people. In a group, I am afraid that my group members will not like my ideas or my English”, said one of the students of Class X. This difference underscores the diversity of speaking anxiety in different pedagogical situations.

These results are consistent with previous studies on English-speaking anxiety. The physiological and affective symptom profile (increased heart rate, vocal trembling, hesitation markers, avoidance behaviour) reported by the participants is very similar to the construct of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety as theorised by Horwitz et al. (1986) and operationalised in more recent secondary-level studies (Sukarno et al., 2025; Zulkflee et al., 2023). One interesting aspect is the shift in evaluative threat within CBL settings: while fear of teacher correction dominated in traditional classroom recall, peer judgement became more salient in group-based CBL activities. This result modifies Gordani et al.’s (2021) claim that reduced communication apprehension is a result of cooperative learning. This finding instead suggests that the presence of collaborative structures which may be redistributive rather than eliminative of evaluative anxiety, an important theoretical nuance with practical implications for the design and facilitation of cooperative learning.

Student Perception of CBL Environment and Speaking Anxiety

1. **Reduced Performance Pressure and Psychological Safety:** Most of the participants found the CBL classroom atmosphere to be psychologically safer than what they had encountered in the traditional classrooms. Replacement of summative assessments by continuous formative assessment was named as the main factor in diminishing performance pressures. One student commented: “Previously we used to have unit tests and final exams only. Bad results were the outcome of just one poor performance. Now having frequent minor tests, a single error does not seem so large.” The focus on mastery as

opposed to the comparison with others led to a growth-oriented psychology. One of the Class X students replied: “Teacher informs us that all learners learn differently and have no problems taking their time to learn. This helps me to become less worried about the fact that I may be just slower than others in speaking English.” This interpretation follows the theoretical basis of CBL, where the development of individual competencies is more important than comparisons.

Nevertheless, the fact that psychological safety was not always the case is worth mentioning. A smaller group of participants, especially higher-performance-oriented ones, said that they felt uncomfortable at the beginning of the continuous assessment because of its ambiguity. As one student claimed: “I liked the fact that I know precisely the marks I have. Now with feedback rather than marks, I am at times perplexed as to whether or not I am actually improving speaking English.”

2. **Experiential Learning and Natural Communication Situations:** The respondents rated positively the inclusion of experiential learning activities which offered real-life contexts when using the language. The real-life activities, including surveying, interviewing of community members or making a video presentation, were seen to be more significant and less intimidating than the traditional oral recitation. One student of Class IX explained it as follows: “During the survey project in the market, I was forced to talk to shopkeepers in English. The first one was a scary experience, but since it was for real, it was not an exam practice, I felt safer to make mistakes.”

The authenticity of communication situations was seen to change the focus of students on the explanation rather than the form of communication, hence lessening the anxiety about accuracy. Another participant noted: “In role-play about doctor-patient conversation, I was thinking more about explaining the problem properly than about grammar rules. So, I spoke more naturally without overthinking.”

3. **Dynamics of Collaborative Learning and Peer Support:** The learning patterns that were created by CBL collaborative learning elicited a

mixed perception of speaking anxiety. On the one hand, small group activities were also popular because of offering a less threatening context for oral practice. Students said that they felt more comfortable when they spoke in groups of three or four peers than when they spoke in classes. One of the participants told me: "In a small group, I can speak softly and try new words without everyone hearing. If I make a mistake, only my group knows, not the whole class."

Furthermore, peer support appeared as a significant anxiety-reducing factor. A Class X student shared: "My group members help me when I forget words in English. They don't laugh; they help me find the word or explain differently. This makes me feel brave to try speaking more." On the other hand, other respondents noted that they felt anxious when surrounded by other people because of unequal participation or peer competition. One student noticed: "Within my group, there are two students who speak good English and they take up discussion. I feel I have weak English that may not match theirs; hence, I allow them to talk, and I remain silent." This is where the need to form groups properly and have very clear norms on how to participate fairly in collaborative learning structures.

The overall sense of psychological safety in CBL classrooms aligns with the theoretical predictions of CBL advocates (Alt et al., 2023; Eddraoui & Wirza, 2020) and extends their prior empirical studies from the higher education sphere to the secondary school level. Mastery orientation (individual competency growth rather than normative comparison) seems to act as a type of anxiety-regulation mechanism, which is consistent with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and the findings of Jin et al. (2020) on autonomy-supportive environments and decreased anxiety. But the results of this study do indicate that psychological safety in CBL is not a uniform experience, with some students feeling more anxious when faced with ambiguity as a result of their participation in CBL, and that this may be influenced by individual differences in tolerance for uncertainty that should be investigated further.

Perceived Effectiveness of CBL Pedagogical Strategies

1. Formative Feedback and Error Normalisation: The participants described the

practice of formative feedback as an important part of managing speaking anxiety and characterised it as the provision of descriptive, growth-focused feedback as opposed to evaluative grades. It was also appreciated that feedback was not based on the deficiencies but on the improvement on the part of the student. One of the Class IX participants said: "Teacher does not say 'wrong' or 'incorrect' anymore. She tells her, 'Good attempt; next time, try to use past tense here'. This is what makes me feel that I am not failing, but I am learning."

The shift of errors into learning opportunities became a critical perception shift. Several interviewees indicated that they became less afraid of mistakes due to the explicit conversations around the fact that mistakes are a normal aspect of learning a language. One of the students said, "The teacher informed us that even native speakers could make mistakes as they speak. Therefore, it is good and natural to make mistakes when speaking English. Hearing this, I am not as scared to speak English now." Nonetheless, formative feedback depended upon its specificity and actionability. Certain respondents complained about vague feedback, which failed to give them specific instructions on how to make improvements. "Sometimes the teacher says 'speak more fluently' but does not tell how to speak more fluently. Then I still do not know what to do", said a student of Class X.

2. Scaffolded Speaking Tasks and Gradual Complexity: The participants appreciated the scaffold of speaking tasks, starting with easy ones and progressing to more difficult ones, which could be gradual in terms of confidence building. The CBL method of low-stakes and high-structure exercises (including repetition drills or pair conversations) followed by more complex and spontaneous speech was seen as anxiety-decreasing. One student said: "First we did simple sentences with a partner, then we did conversation, then we did presentation. Bit by bit, practice gave me a boost of confidence."

Less proficient students also valued the systematic provision of linguistic support structures, such as sentence frames, vocabulary banks, and model responses. According to one of the participants: "The

teacher provides us with helpful phrases, such as 'In my opinion' or 'I agree because'. Such prepared phrases enable me to begin talking without being confused about how to proceed."

3. **Choice and Autonomy in Learning Activities:**

In cases where the students were given agency in deciding the type, format, topic or grouping to use in speaking activities, their intrinsic motivation got higher and their performance anxiety lowered. One of the students in Class X explained: "In the case of presentation, we could select any topic of interest. I selected cricket as I know a lot about it. I was less nervous as I was talking about something I like."

Nevertheless, too much selection without proper organisation caused anxiety to some students who wanted clearer guidelines. One of the students said: "Sometimes when the teacher says choose any topic, I feel confused about what to choose, and I am worried whether my choice is good or not." It implies that scaffolded choice, which is framed by a definite shape, might be more efficient than full-blown open autonomy.

4. **Multimodal Expression and Alternative Communication Pathways:**

The use of the multimodal communication devices (visual aids, digital media, physical demonstration) in oral activities was found to be an important anxiety-reducing technique. Students said that they felt more confident when they had an opportunity to support oral communication by other modalities. A Class IX participant said, "When I was able to present with pictures or slides, I was not as nervous about having to explain everything solely through words. The photos assisted me in narrating my story even in instances when I was unaware of certain words in English."

Video recordings with editing tools were also a less threatening alternative to live performances and could be used on digital platforms. According to one student: "In the case of a video project, I could take a lot of recordings and select the most suitable. This was not that frightening as compared to addressing a live audience in the classroom where I cannot retract my errors."

The perceived effectiveness of formative feedback in normalising errors is similar to the work of Alt et

al. (2023), who found that CBL-formative feedback linkages contributed to the acquisition of soft skills, and Zheng et al. (2021), who observed that formative assessment practices alleviated the performing anxiety in speaking settings. This is the importance of feedback specificity referred to by participants who said that too general feedback was unhelpful, which is in line with the widely used model of feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) that focuses on feedback at the task level, the process level and the self-regulation level. The concepts of the value of scaffolded task sequences and multimodal expression are consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development. The theoretical connections provide credibility to the qualitative results of the study and indicate that CBL's anxiety-reducing effect is not just a byproduct but a part of the pedagogical architecture.

Student Coping Strategies and Resilience Development.

1. **Cognitive Coping Mechanisms:** Students noted that they used a number of cognitive strategies to deal with anxiety when speaking. These were positive self-talk, reinterpreting mistakes as learning experiences, and not thinking of language but thinking of content. One participant of Class X explained: "I remind myself before I talk that it is okay to make a mistake as I am learning. What matters the most is having a great idea that I can share, rather than speaking impeccable English. These thoughts are the ones that make me feel better."

Another similar cognitive coping strategy was found to be preparation and rehearsal. Students who spent time preparing vocabulary, rehearsing pronunciation and rehearsing mentally reported low anxiety when performing in reality. One student clarified: "I take notes of hard words and rehearse them many times before the class. When I understand that I have prepared well, I am more confident to speak."

2. **Behavioural Coping Strategies:** Anxiety management measures involved behavioural approaches that involved gradually exposing a person to speaking situations and beginning with less challenging scenarios that increased in difficulty. One of the Class IX students noted: "Initially I was only talking in front of my best friend. Then I tried in a small group. I am now able to speak before the entire class as well. Bit by bit I am getting more confident."

Other strategies that were reported frequently included seeking peer support and collaborative preparation. Students reported the creation of study groups, in which they practised conversations, gave each other feedback, and practised presentations as a group. One of the participants commented: "My two friends and I practice speaking English together after school. We correct each other's mistakes in a friendly way and help each other improve. The practice lowers my nervousness in the classroom."

3. **Mindfulness Practice and Emotion Management:** Other methods that were used by some of the participants to regulate their emotions include deep breathing, taking pauses before speaking and recognising that they are anxious but that it is okay. One of the students of Class X explained: "When my heart beats fast before talking, I slow down my breathing with three deep breaths. This relaxes my body and my mind becomes clearer." Although the practices were not taught specifically as part of the CBL curriculum, students who practised them subjectively benefited in terms of anxiety symptoms management.

Some respondents also referred to the teacher helping in desensitising anxiety and modelling coping skills. One of the students remarked: "Our teacher once told us that she is also nervous to speak in front of big crowds, but she can cope by reminding herself that all people make mistakes. The fact that even teachers are anxious helped to make me feel that I am not alone in my anxiety."

The findings show that the cognitive, behavioural, and emotion-regulation coping strategies found among participants are commonly found in research on anxiety management in EFL environments (Piniel & Csizér, 2013; Bárkányi, 2021) and self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 2002). A key point to note is that students learnt to use these strategies primarily in an informal way, by trial and error or through personal experience rather than formal teaching. Pedagogically speaking, this finding has the potential to guide the further development of formal, curriculum-based training in coping strategy development, such as positive self-talk, systematic preparation routines, and

graduated exposure, to effectively complement the anxiety-reducing effects of CBL pedagogy.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the effect of Competency-Based Learning on English-speaking anxiety of secondary school students in an NCF 2023 classroom. Four themes were identified from thematic analysis of interviews of the students and focus group discussions: (1) Speaking anxiety was experienced in a multi-faceted way, including physiological, affective, and cognitive components, and the triggers of the anxiety went beyond linguistic issues to include social-evaluative threat; the source of the evaluative anxiety changed in CBL from teacher correction to peer judgement. (2) CBL environments were generally viewed as more psychologically safe than traditional classrooms, with formative assessment, mastery orientation and authentic communicative contexts being factors attributed to this. This was partially moderated by students' individual differences in proficiency and ambiguity tolerance. Specific CBL strategies were considered to be effective tools to handle anxiety when they were clearly and consistently applied: (3) specific CBL strategies: formative feedback, scaffolded task sequences, learner choice and multimodal expression. Cognitive, behavioural and emotional coping strategies were formed mainly informally, which indicates a great potential for formalising coping strategy instruction in CBL.

Limitations

There are some limitations to this study that need to be taken into account when considering the results. First, the single-site design (one KV school in Assam) means that the results may not be generalizable to the implementation of CBL in the broader Indian picture of context for the secondary school. Second, although the sample size of 18 students is adequate for depth-oriented qualitative issues, it also limits the range of perspectives that are captured. Third, the use of handwritten field notes, not audio-recorded transcripts, means that there is some risk of data loss during data capture, though this is reduced by member checking and post-session summaries. The study is also of a cross-sectional design; a longitudinal study would be required to determine the trajectory of anxiety as students continued to receive repeated exposure to CBL. Lastly, not including the teacher and parent perspectives might limit the study.

Directions for Future Research

Further studies are needed with multi-site and mixed-method designs that would compare CBL classrooms and non-CBL classrooms with different types of schools (KV, NV, state government) and highlight the role of CBL practice. Longitudinal studies that trace the development of Speaking Anxiety over academic years would help to determine if the effects of the moderators of Speaking Anxiety observed are maintained. Research examining teacher perspectives on anxiety-sensitive CBL implementation would complement the student-voice orientation of the present work. Finally, intervention research studies that explicitly test coping strategy programmes that are part of CBL frameworks represent a high priority.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

For Classroom Teachers: Teachers using CBL for English teaching in the context of NCF 2023 need to pay special attention to the anxiety situation in the Group composition, participation norms, and managing competence differentials between members. Participants need to be deliberately scaffolded so that the evaluative anxiety of peers will not replace the evaluative anxiety of teachers. Formative feedback should be specific, actionable, and growth-oriented, not generally affirming. Task sequences should be of a progressive complexity, starting with low-stakes and elevating to high-stakes oral practice and then to high-stakes performance. Oral communication is available in various ways that suit the anxiety level of the learner: through multimodal expression options (visual aids, digital presentation, pre-recorded video).

For Curriculum Designers: Language anxiety coping strategies should be explicitly taught in the English language curriculum, rather than as an add-on, in curriculum materials aligned with the National Curriculum Framework, 2023. Reflective self-assessment opportunities that allow students to identify, name and build their coping repertoire should be incorporated into competency-based unit plans. Facilitation support materials should contain information to help facilitate the identification of anxiety markers and make appropriate adjustments to task demands responsively.

For Teacher Education Programmes: Teacher education programmes should help pre-service and in-service teachers be aware of the affective aspects of the implementation of CBL and, in particular, the fact that the structure of CBL doesn't

necessarily create the psychological safety that requires intentional and sensitive facilitation. In the process of designing the course, training needs to be incorporated with anxiety-aware formative feedback, scaffolded speaking tasks, and facilitation of inclusive collaborative learning structures, both during B.Ed. and through continuous professional development for implementing the NCF 2023.

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