

Stigma, Anxiety, and English Proficiency: Engineering ESL Students' Self-Perception and Career Prospects

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ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study explores the anxieties, stigma, and self-perceptions experienced by first-year engineering students at Chandigarh Engineering College, CGC-Landran, as non-native English speakers. It examined how multilingual backgrounds and mixed-ability classrooms shape students' confidence, participation, and concerns about future employment. A sample of 170 students from different engineering streams participated through a structured questionnaire incorporating the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), the Language Attitude Questionnaire by Orwig (1995), and a career mindset survey adapted from Gardner (1985). Students also completed ranking tasks on employability skills. Quantitative data were analysed using aggregate scores, means, and standard deviations, while open-ended responses were examined through Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework to identify links between language proficiency, academic performance, and career anxiety. Five overarching themes emerged: Anxiety of the Margins, English as Career Capital, Stigma in the Classroom, Digital Self-Learning, and Multilingual Pride and Pragmatic Use. The study suggests the need for more inclusive and supportive ESL learning environments in Indian engineering institutions.

Keywords: Language Anxiety; Multilingualism; Self-Perception; Language Stigma; Career Anxiety

INTRODUCTION

In India's fast-growing higher education sector, English continues to serve both as a medium of opportunity and a mechanism of exclusion. Although a second language for most students, English functions de facto as the primary medium of instruction, examination, and employability, particularly in science and technology. This creates a gap between those who can exercise English proficiency with ease and those who struggle with language-based anxieties in high-stakes academic and professional settings.

This research investigates the emotional and intellectual terrain of first-year engineering students at a multilingual, mixed-ability college, the Department of Applied Sciences, Chandigarh Group of Colleges-Landran, Punjab, India, where English proficiency intersects with self-awareness, classroom confidence, and career aspirations. The study examines the stigma and anxiety associated with English use and students' efforts to transcend such barriers through self-directed learning, multilingual resourcefulness, and digital tools. English is positioned not merely as an academic

requirement but as a symbolic force that shapes identity, social status, and professional possibility.

Despite extensive research on language anxiety internationally, studies focusing specifically on engineering students in multilingual Indian institutional contexts, where English is simultaneously the language of instruction, a career gatekeeper, and a marker of social class, remain limited. This study addresses that gap by examining the intersection of language anxiety, self-perception, and career motivation among a demographically diverse cohort of first-year engineering students. The following research questions guided the investigation:

- How do the first-year engineering students understand their English language ability in relation to academic self-confidence and self-concept?
- What emotional and psychological obstacles (e.g., anxiety, stigma, silence) confront students in academic & social communication?
- How are digital and informal resources used to improve English proficiency and manage classroom pressures?

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- How do students perceive the role of English in shaping career goals and future opportunities?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Language Ideologies in Indian Education

English in India operates within what Ramanathan (2005) describes as the ‘English-vernacular divide’ (p. ix), a structural imbalance embedded in education policy, social mobility, and access to power. From the colonial period to the present era of globalisation, English has maintained its symbolic currency as a class marker, reinforced through higher education and the labour market. In engineering institutions in particular, English serves as the dominant medium of instruction and a prerequisite for placements and internships, creating an implicit equation between fluency and intelligence.

English as Instrumental Aspiration and Career Capital

Gardner (1985) distinguishes between integrative motivation, a desire to become part of a target-language culture, and instrumental motivation, where language is pursued for practical, career-oriented goals. In the Indian engineering context, instrumental motivation is predominant. Students regard English not as a cultural aspiration but as an economic necessity: a tool for securing employment, succeeding in corporate interviews, and achieving upward social mobility. This aligns with Bourdieu and Wacquant’s (2013) framework, which positions language as both symbolic and economic capital that confers social legitimacy and access to institutional power.

Language Anxiety and Classroom Dynamics

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) conceptualised Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) as a distinct, complex construct involving communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Their Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) remains the most widely used instrument for measuring this construct. Krashen (1981) complemented this by proposing the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which identifies anxiety as a barrier that reduces language acquisition by limiting input processing. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) further demonstrated that anxiety negatively correlates with both achievement and willingness to communicate, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of avoidance and underperformance.

In multilingual classrooms, García, Johnson, and Seltzer (2017) and Canagarajah (2013) advocate for translanguaging practices, wherein students draw on their full linguistic repertoire to comprehend and communicate. Students’ use of code-mixing or translation before speaking in English is a natural feature of bilingual processing, though it is often misread as a deficiency in monolingual-normed classrooms. This mismatch between students’ linguistic reality and classroom expectations is a primary driver of anxiety and stigma.

Digital Learning and Self-Directed Language Practice

In contexts where formal instruction is insufficient or anxiety-inducing, students increasingly turn to digital platforms for language development. Zinger, Naranjo, Gilbertson, and Warschauer (2017) document how technology supplements formal pedagogy, enabling asynchronous, low-anxiety, self-paced learning. Mobile applications, YouTube channels, and English-language media provide accessible, authentic input that students can engage with privately, without the risk of public error and judgment that characterises classroom interaction.

Mindset, Motivation, and Learner Identity

Dweck’s (2008) growth mindset theory is relevant to understanding how engineering students navigate the aspiration-anxiety paradox inherent in learning English. Students who believe their abilities can be developed are more likely to persist through difficulty, while those with a fixed mindset may withdraw from perceived failure situations such as speaking in class. Orwig’s (1995) Language Attitude Questionnaire provides a validated tool for capturing the attitudinal dimensions that shape how students position themselves relative to English learning.

METHODS

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative Likert-scale analysis with qualitative thematic analysis to explore language anxiety, self-perception, and career aspirations among multilingual engineering students. The mixed-methods approach was selected to triangulate emotional and attitudinal data that may be difficult to capture through either quantitative or qualitative instruments alone. The study is predominantly exploratory in orientation, aiming to understand lived experiences, classroom

dynamics, and the symbolic meanings students attach to English.

Participants and Context

The study was conducted with 170 first-year undergraduate students aged 16–18 enrolled at Chandigarh Group of Colleges-Landran, Mohali, Punjab, India, across five engineering streams: IT, ENC, AI-DS, AI-ML, and CSE-DS. Participants were drawn from the compulsory English course (July–December 2024). Purposive sampling was employed to include students enrolled in this course who represented diverse linguistic, socio-economic, and geographical backgrounds. Demographic information was collected on language knowledge, domicile, socio-economic status, and family linguistic heritage.

Data Collection

Data were collected through a structured Google Form comprising Likert-scale and open-ended items across three domains: (1) English proficiency and self-perception, adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986); (2) language anxiety and social stigma, adapted from the Language Attitude Questionnaire (Orwig, 1995); and (3) mindset and career aspirations, adapted from Gardner's (1985) Socio-Educational Model motivational instruments. The original scales were adapted to suit the engineering student context, with item wording modified for clarity and relevance; the five-point Likert format (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) was retained across all items.

Data Analysis

Quantitative responses were analysed through aggregate scores, means, and standard deviations using Microsoft Excel. Open-ended responses were examined using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework: (1) familiarisation with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing up. Coding was undertaken manually using spreadsheets by the lead researcher. Themes were iteratively refined with attention to participant demographics. An audit trail of coding decisions was maintained to support analytical transparency.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. All responses were stored securely and

accessed only by the research team. As the study involved no deception, no sensitive clinical data, and no identifiable personal information, it was conducted in accordance with standard institutional research ethics guidelines for classroom-based educational inquiry.

FINDINGS

The survey responses of the 170 participants were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis for open-ended questions and aggregate mean and standard deviation analysis for Likert-scale items. Five overarching themes emerged from the qualitative data, each triangulated with supporting quantitative evidence.

Theme 1: Anxiety of the Margins

This theme captures the emotional and linguistic insecurity experienced by students from regions where English is not a commonly spoken language. Their identities as rural students from low-income households and non-English-medium schooling backgrounds generate anxiety and under-confidence in classroom settings. Students reported difficulty with code-mixing and translanguaging, and described mental translation as laborious, particularly for those for whom English is a third or fourth language. A persistent concern is native-speaker bias, anxiety about pronunciation, accent, and correctness. As Participant 43 noted, there is "pressure to speak it 'correctly' and anxiety about being judged for mistakes, which can impact confidence and willingness to use the language."

Fear of public speaking and classroom freeze was frequently reported. Key codes associated with this theme include pronunciation anxiety, verbal hesitation, fear of classroom embarrassment, and internalised inferiority. Most students reported competence in reading and writing but significant difficulty in speaking, especially in performative contexts. Participant 41 expressed this in a candid code-mixed response [original in Hindi-English mix, translated: "We never spoke English at the start — we preferred Hindi in schools, whether with teachers or friends. So English was never properly taught to us, and we never practised it in daily life"].

Quantitatively, the item "I feel anxious when I have to speak in English in front of the classroom" yielded a mean of 3.0 (SD = 1.08), and "I feel anxious about making mistakes in front of an audience" also yielded a mean of 3.0 (SD = 1.00). The standard deviations above 1.0 reflect considerable individual variation within the cohort.

Theme 2: English as Career Capital

Students consistently linked English proficiency with professional advancement. For them, English represents more than communication; it is a symbol of professionalism, progress, and social mobility, essential for corporate interviews, campus placements, client communication, and career growth. As Participant 27 stated, “It’s a skill that can help me grow and find new opportunities.” Participant 165 articulated the social stakes plainly: “In India, if you don’t speak English correctly, you are assumed to be uneducated.”

Students expressed fear of being overlooked in placements or failing to join reputable firms if their English was inadequate. Recurring codes include English for interviews, corporate confidence, client-facing readiness, and language as an employability marker. Likert data affirm this theme: “I want to get placed in a good company” and “I want to be financially and socially stable in future” both achieved a mean of 5.0. “I want to learn English to succeed” scored a mean of 4.0. Participant 3 summarised the aspiration-anxiety tension: “Honestly, I am terrified; making sentences that make sense in English has never been easy for me, and I believe it is something one can improve with practice and mock interviews.”

Theme 3: Stigma in the Classroom

Language in engineering classrooms functions as a marker of status, knowledge, and perceived intelligence, causing students who cannot communicate fluently in English to feel marginalised and silenced. Participants from low-income or rural backgrounds reported reluctance to engage in class discussions, not from disengagement but from class-based linguistic stigma. Their silence is strategic self-protection, not apathy.

Quantitatively, “I feel anxious about making mistakes in front of an audience” scored a mean of 3.0 (SD = 1.00), and “I feel afraid of my future because of my English skills” scored a mean of 2.0 (SD = 1.10). Codes include self-silencing, accent-based shame, fear of peer judgment, and classroom linguistic hierarchy. The paradox visible in the data—desire-related items scoring 5.0, anxiety items scoring 2.0–3.0—reflects English as simultaneously the most desired and most feared resource. As Participant 7 expressed, they wanted “to be in the elite rich category,” while Participant 71 articulated a simpler aspiration: “to get a nice job and give a relaxed future to my parents.”

Theme 4: Digital Self-Learning

In the absence of sufficient institutional support, students, particularly from middle-income and urban or semi-urban backgrounds, are taking charge of their own learning through digital platforms. YouTube videos, English-language films, music, and language applications were frequently cited as tools for vocabulary building, accent improvement, and listening practice. Recurring codes include app-based learning, media-based vocabulary acquisition, self-directed practice, and English learning through entertainment.

Digital spaces were reported as psychologically safer than classrooms because mistakes remain private. This compensatory behaviour aligns with what Zinger et al. (2017) describe as technology-mediated pedagogical supplementation. Students in CSE-DS and AI-ML streams, who are more accustomed to smartphone and internet use, reported higher levels of digital self-study. This theme reflects students as active, resourceful agents who navigate both structural and technological gaps in formal provision.

Theme 5: Multilingual Pride & Pragmatic Use

A notable finding is the generational shift in language attitudes: students largely do not view English as a threat to cultural identity but as a pragmatic tool for professional communication alongside, not instead of, their regional languages. Common codes include English as a functional tool, cultural pride in regional languages, national identity not tied to language, and strategic bilingualism.

Likert results support this orientation: “English is important for communicating my thoughts” scored a mean of 4.0 (SD = 0.91), suggesting functional value rather than ideological attachment. There are exceptions: Participant 167 expressed discomfort learning the “language of such people who have looted us in every field of life,” and Participant 41 observed [translated from Hindi-English]: “English should only be needed for communication. To be successful, English does not matter as much as having a skill; if you have a skill, English is not necessary.” These responses reflect a minority, but significant perspective rooted in colonial consciousness.

Quantitative Analysis

To complement the thematic analysis, students rated twelve Likert-scale statements regarding English proficiency, emotional responses, and

career motivations. Table 1 presents the full quantitative summary.

The quantitative analysis reveals the following:

- Career aspiration items scored a perfect mean of 5.0, indicating near-universal agreement.
- Participants reported comfort with written skills (mean = 4.0) but moderate anxiety about speaking in class (mean = 3.0, SD > 1.0).

- Language anxiety items yielded means of 2.0–3.0, with standard deviations exceeding 1.0, indicating high individual variation within the cohort.
- Enjoyment of English was broadly reported (mean = 4.0, SD = 0.69), suggesting a positive and motivated orientation toward language learning despite situational anxiety.

Table 1 Survey Response Quantitative Summary

Statement	Aggregate	Mean	SD
I feel comfortable using English in academic and/or social settings.	651	4.0	0.85
I feel positively about my English communication skills.	617	4.0	0.85
I can read, write, and speak English well.	682	4.0	0.78
I feel anxious when I have to speak English in front of the classroom.	539	3.0	1.08
I feel anxious when I have to write something in English.	351	2.0	1.00
I feel anxious about making mistakes in front of an audience.	578	3.0	1.00
I feel afraid of my future because of my English skills.	412	2.0	1.10
I enjoy learning English.	719	4.0	0.69
English is important for communicating my thoughts.	667	4.0	0.91
I want to learn English to succeed.	701	4.0	0.94
I want to get placed in a good company.	800	5.0	0.61
I want to be financially and socially stable in the future.	805	5.0	0.57

Note. Scores based on 170 participants using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Aggregate = sum of all responses.

DISCUSSION

The theme of Anxiety of the Margins is theoretically grounded in Krashen's (1981) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that elevated anxiety restricts language input and impedes acquisition. Students described difficulty in word retrieval, a tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon documented by Brown and McNeill (1966), and cross-linguistic interference at the lexical level (Kroll & Stewart, 1994). While multilingualism is a cognitive asset, in English-centric classrooms it is often operationalised as silence and linguistic deficit.

The theme of Stigma in the Classroom is understood through Bourdieu and Wacquant's (2013) concept of symbolic capital. English operates simultaneously as economic and symbolic capital, functioning as a class marker and an index of intelligence. Students from rural and low-income backgrounds experience structural exclusion from mobility pathways predicated on English fluency. This connects directly to Gardner's (1985) instrumental motivation framework, where English is pursued not for cultural integration but for professional survival.

Dweck's (2008) growth mindset theory illuminates the theme of English as Career Capital: students oscillate between the desire to develop English

proficiency and fear of judgment-driven failure. This ambivalence, high aspiration alongside high anxiety, is precisely the aspiration-anxiety paradox that emerges from the Likert data. The theme of Digital Self-Learning reflects students using mobile applications, media, and online content as compensatory pedagogical tools, consistent with Zinger et al.'s (2017) discussion of technology-mediated language learning. The theme of Multilingual Pride and Pragmatic Use challenges deficit framings of multilingualism, positioning students as strategic bilinguals who adopt English instrumentally without cultural alienation, a finding consistent with García et al.'s (2017) advocacy for translanguaging as a pedagogical asset.

Triangulation of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

The quantitative and qualitative data triangulate coherently. Students did not reject English; they aspired to it while being anxious about it. The high standard deviations on speaking anxiety items (SD > 1.0) confirm the heterogeneous nature of the cohort's anxiety profile, a finding that is invisible in mean scores alone and is explained by the qualitative themes, which distinguish urban/rural and socio-economic sub-groups. Academic English remains the target, not the starting point. When

correctness was treated as a prerequisite for participation, students withdrew; when it was positioned as a developmental destination, confidence emerged, an orientation consistent with Kumaravadivelu's (2006) post-method pedagogy.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be noted. First, the study is bounded by a single institution in northern India; findings may not be transferable to different regional, linguistic, or institutional contexts. Second, data collection relied exclusively on a questionnaire and open-ended written responses; the absence of interviews or focus group discussions means that the depth and nuance of lived experience may not be fully captured. Third, although consent was obtained verbally, the absence of formal written consent documentation and institutional ethics committee approval limits the study's methodological rigour by the standards of some journals. Fourth, the adapted instruments were not subjected to formal reliability (Cronbach's alpha) or validity testing, which should be addressed in future iterations of this research.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the emotional, cognitive, and aspirational dimensions of English use among first-year engineering students, demonstrating how proficiency, or perceived lack thereof, shapes self-perception, classroom participation, and career motivation. Using a mixed-methods approach combining Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis with Likert-scale quantitative data, the study analysed how students navigate multilingual identities within mixed-ability engineering classrooms.

The findings establish that English is not merely a medium of instruction but a symbolic resource encompassing both opportunity and exclusion. Significant classroom anxiety, especially around speaking, is most pronounced among rural and low-income students, whose silence reflects linguistic stigma rather than disengagement. Simultaneously, English is perceived as indispensable career capital, creating an aspiration-anxiety paradox that is the defining affective feature of these students' relationship with the language. The theme of Multilingual Pride and Pragmatic Use signals a generational shift in which students adopt English instrumentally, without abandoning regional linguistic identities. Digital self-learning emerges as

a student-driven compensatory strategy in the face of institutional gaps.

The implications for English Language Teaching in Indian engineering contexts are significant. Pedagogy must shift from treating English as a threshold marker of intelligence to positioning it as a developmental right. Curricula should integrate digital platforms, including YouTube and language applications, as recognised, legitimate learning tools. Mixed-ability classroom environments require explicit anxiety-reduction strategies, including low-stakes speaking activities and formative feedback cultures. Teacher training programmes must equip educators to recognise and respond to linguistic stigma. Future research should extend the study longitudinally from first year to the placement stage, include interview or focus group data, and disaggregate findings by gender, caste, and first-generation learner status.

As Young (1991) observes, "Our task as foreign and second language teachers is to create an atmosphere in our classes for effective language learning and an attitude in our learners that reflects genuine interest and motivation to learn the language. By reducing language anxiety, we will begin to move in that direction" (p. 434). The students in this study have already found their own direction through digital tools, multilingual resilience, and aspirational drive. The task for educators is to meet them there.

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