

The Relationship between English Language Anxiety and Perceived Academic Performance among Non-Language Undergraduates at a Sri Lankan State University

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between English language anxiety and perceived academic performance among second-year undergraduates enrolled in a non-language discipline at a Sri Lankan state university. Communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation were assessed through a 33-item questionnaire adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale framework. The cross-sectional survey attempted a census of the accessible cohort, obtaining 208 valid responses from 210 eligible students (99.0%). Internal-consistency estimates were acceptable for communication apprehension ($\alpha = .737$), test anxiety ($\alpha = .704$), fear of negative evaluation ($\alpha = .771$), and perceived academic performance ($\alpha = .777$). Perceived performance was negatively correlated with communication apprehension ($r = -.644$, $p < .001$), test anxiety ($r = -.739$, $p < .001$), and fear of negative evaluation ($r = -.607$, $p < .001$). The regression model was significant, $F(3, 204) = 85.392$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .557$, adjusted $R^2 = .550$. Communication apprehension and test anxiety had significant negative unique associations, whereas fear of negative evaluation did not make a statistically significant unique contribution ($p = .078$). The findings concern students' perceptions rather than independently verified grades and should be interpreted in light of the shared self-report method. They provide a contextual basis for evidence-informed consideration of low-pressure speaking opportunities, constructive feedback, diversified assessment, and integrated language support.

Keywords: English language anxiety; communication apprehension; test anxiety; fear of negative evaluation; perceived academic performance; English-medium instruction

INTRODUCTION

Foreign-language classroom anxiety is a situation-specific constellation of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours associated with learning or using another language in an educational setting (Horwitz et al., 1986). It is distinct from general anxiety because it emerges around language-mediated communication and evaluation. The cognitive-processing account proposes that anxiety can divert attention toward worry and self-monitoring, thereby interfering with input, processing, and output (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis likewise positions anxiety as a condition that may restrict access to language input.

The issue extends beyond formal language courses. English-medium instruction (EMI) uses English to teach academic subjects other than English in settings where English is not the first language of most of the population (Rose et al., 2023). Students in non-language disciplines must use English to interpret disciplinary texts, follow lectures, complete examinations, write assignments, and speak in presentations. Recent EMI scholarship therefore treats language-related difficulty and emotion as central to equitable participation rather than as peripheral language problems (Soruç et al., 2021; Tsui & Cheng, 2022).

Research consistently reports a negative association between foreign-language classroom anxiety and language achievement (Saito & Samimy, 1996). A meta-analysis of 99 effect sizes found a moderate negative association across achievement outcomes (Botes et al., 2020). Longitudinal evidence also indicates that anxiety and performance may influence one another differently across time, gender, and discipline, which cautions against causal interpretations from a single cross-sectional survey (Liu, 2022). Recent higher-education research further

shows that classroom climate and emotional resources can condition associations between language anxiety and academic success (Han et al., 2022).

In Sri Lankan higher education, students enter university with uneven histories of exposure to English, while English is closely connected with academic mobility and employment. A local study identified second-language anxiety among Sri Lankan undergraduates (Amunugama & Wickramasinghe, 2021), and a recent systematic review led by Sri Lankan scholars grouped sources of English-language anxiety into learner-specific, in-class, and out-of-class domains (Weerakoon et al., 2023). Nevertheless, comparatively little empirical work has examined how established anxiety dimensions relate to perceived academic functioning among non-language undergraduates in a Sri Lankan EMI context. The present study addresses that bounded gap; it does not claim to measure objective academic achievement.

The study focuses on communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. The outcome is perceived academic performance: six self-report items concerning whether English-related anxiety was perceived to affect classroom performance, confidence, examinations, presentations, participation, and overall academic functioning. This operational definition is used consistently throughout the manuscript.

Research Objectives

- To examine the bivariate relationships between communication apprehension, test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and perceived academic performance.
- To determine the collective and unique statistical contributions of the three anxiety dimensions to perceived academic performance.

Pedagogical implications are developed from the observed associations and relevant literature; they are not treated as an empirically tested research objective.

Research Questions

RQ1. What relationships exist between communication apprehension, test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and perceived academic performance?

RQ2. To what extent do communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation uniquely and collectively predict perceived academic performance?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Foreign-Language Anxiety and Its Measurement

Horwitz et al. (1986) identified communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation as central conceptual sources of foreign-language classroom anxiety. Communication apprehension concerns discomfort in speaking and interaction; test anxiety concerns worry under evaluative conditions; fear of negative evaluation concerns anticipated judgement by lecturers or peers. Subsequent models have also emphasised contextual and dynamic features of anxiety (Alrabai, 2014; de Bot et al., 2007; Gregersen et al., 2014). These experiences can co-occur, but their empirical dimensionality is not fixed across settings.

That measurement qualification is important. The original 33-item FLCAS was designed primarily as a broad classroom-anxiety measure, and factor-analytic studies have produced different solutions in different populations (Toyama & Yamazaki, 2018). More recent validation work on a short-form FLCAS used exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, convergent and discriminant validity evidence, and invariance testing—not alpha alone—to support score interpretation (Botes et al., 2022). Accordingly, the present study treats Cronbach's alpha only as evidence of internal consistency. Because the adapted four-scale structure was not factor-analysed in this sample, its construct validity remains unconfirmed.

Communication Apprehension

Speaking in a second language can be especially threatening because linguistic limitations are publicly observable. Students may hesitate, forget familiar vocabulary, or avoid participation when they anticipate difficulty or embarrassment. Liu and Jackson (2008) found that anxiety and unwillingness to communicate were closely related among Chinese non-English majors, while Young (1991) identified classroom conditions relevant to lowering anxiety. Reduced participation can restrict practice and feedback, although cross-sectional evidence cannot establish whether anxiety causes avoidance, limited practice increases anxiety, or both processes operate together.

Test Anxiety

Test anxiety involves worry and tension under evaluative pressure. In an EMI programme, an examination may simultaneously require disciplinary knowledge, rapid comprehension of English, and written production in English. Anxiety can consume working-memory resources needed to interpret questions, organise ideas, and retrieve information; learning difficulty and anxiety may also reinforce one another (Chen & Chang, 2004). Recent cross-lagged evidence links foreign-language classroom anxiety with English test performance while also demonstrating that temporal and disciplinary patterns are complex (Liu, 2022).

Fear of Negative Evaluation

Fear of negative evaluation concerns anticipated criticism, unfavourable comparison, or loss of face. It can arise during presentations, lecturer questioning, peer discussion, or correction (Aydin, 2008; Shabani, 2012). Perfectionistic reactions to mistakes may intensify this concern (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). A systematic review of recent English-language-anxiety studies also highlights classroom climate, peer response, and wider sociocultural conditions as relevant sources (Weerakoon et al., 2023).

English-Medium Higher Education and the Research Gap

EMI research distinguishes language development from disciplinary learning but shows that they remain intertwined in practice. Students' academic language challenges vary with proficiency and may persist even where institutional policy assumes readiness for English-medium study (Soruç et al., 2021). Tsui and Cheng (2022) similarly argue that foreign-language anxiety deserves direct attention in EMI classrooms. Yet much anxiety research still focuses on students enrolled in language courses or on objective language-test outcomes, while many EMI studies foreground broad implementation challenges rather than distinct anxiety dimensions among non-language majors.

This study contributes a tightly delimited Sri Lankan case: an attempted census of one second-year non-language cohort, three theory-derived anxiety dimensions, and a self-reported outcome concerning perceived academic functioning. The study's contribution is therefore contextual and associational. It does not estimate national prevalence, demonstrate causal influence, or establish relationships with GPA or institutional grades.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was used to examine associations among communication apprehension, test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and perceived academic performance at one point in time. Pearson correlations addressed bivariate relationships, and multiple linear regression assessed collective and unique statistical contributions. The design supports association and statistical prediction within the sampled cohort, not causal inference.

Participants and Sampling

The accessible population comprised all 210 second-year undergraduates in one non-language academic discipline at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura. Every member of the cohort was invited during the data-

collection period, and 208 valid questionnaires were obtained, a 99.0% response rate. The procedure is therefore described as an attempted census of the accessible cohort rather than conventional convenience sampling. Participation remained voluntary, and the single-department, single-institution frame limits generalisability beyond this cohort. The sample included 99 men (47.5%) and 109 women (52.5%).

Questionnaire and Operationalisation

The administered questionnaire contained 33 English-language statements rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The item wording was adapted and contextualised from the FLCAS framework to refer to English use in university lectures, group discussions, presentations, lecturer and peer evaluation, and examinations. Items 1–9 were assigned to communication apprehension, items 10–18 to test anxiety, and items 19–27 to fear of negative evaluation. Items 28–33 formed an author-developed perceived-performance scale. Because these six items describe anxiety adversely affecting or hindering performance-related experiences, they were reverse-scored so that higher scale scores represented better perceived academic functioning. The complete wording and item assignments are reproduced in Appendix A.

Table 1. Operationalisation of the four scales

Construct	Items	Source/adaptation	Example item	Scoring
Communication apprehension	1–9 (9)	Contextualised from the FLCAS framework	I feel anxious when I am asked to speak in English during lectures.	Mean of items; 1–5; higher = more apprehension
Test anxiety	10–18 (9)	Contextualised from the FLCAS framework	I feel nervous before an English exam or quiz.	Mean of items; 1–5; higher = more anxiety
Fear of negative evaluation	19–27 (9)	Contextualised from the FLCAS framework	I fear that my classmates will judge me negatively if I make a mistake in English.	Mean of items; 1–5; higher = greater fear
Perceived academic performance	28–33 (6)	Author-developed statements about perceived anxiety-related impairment	English anxiety does lower my academic performance.	Reverse-scored mean; 1–5; higher = better perceived functioning

The six outcome items do not measure GPA, course grades, or examination records. They ask respondents whether English-related anxiety was perceived to affect performance-related experiences. Consequently, the outcome is best described as perceived anxiety-related academic functioning or, more concisely, perceived academic performance.

Adaptation, Language, and Measurement Validity

The adaptation replaced general foreign-language-class wording with context-specific references to English use in the participants' university setting. The administered form was in English; no translated version was required. The study records do not indicate a separate cognitive interview, pilot sample, or formal expert-panel validation of the adapted wording. Exploratory or confirmatory factor analysis was not part of the original analysis. Accordingly, the alpha coefficients are interpreted only as internal-consistency evidence, while the proposed scale structure is grounded in the theoretical and item-content mapping shown in Table 1 and Appendix A.

The outcome items directly connect anxiety or English-language pressure with performance, confidence, examinations, presentations, or participation. This content overlap, together with contemporaneous self-report measurement, may strengthen the observed associations. The study therefore interprets the outcome specifically as students' perceived anxiety-related academic functioning rather than objective academic achievement.

Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was administered during regular lecture hours after participants received information about the study. Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained. Responses were collected without names or direct identifiers, entered into SPSS, cleaned, and prepared for analysis.

Data Analysis

Cronbach's alpha assessed internal consistency for each assigned scale. Frequencies described gender. Pearson correlations examined bivariate associations, and multiple linear regression estimated the collective and unique statistical associations of the three anxiety scores with perceived academic performance. Two-tailed significance was evaluated at $\alpha = .05$. Ninety-five percent confidence intervals for the unstandardized regression coefficients were calculated from the B and SE values using $df = 204$.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant research review committee before data collection. Informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, the right to withdraw, and protection from harm were prioritised. The collected data were retained without personal identifiers.

RESULTS

Internal Consistency

Cronbach's alpha exceeded .70 for all four assigned scales. These coefficients indicate acceptable internal consistency for exploratory research; they do not, by themselves, establish the proposed four-factor structure or construct validity.

Table 2. Internal-consistency estimates

Scale	Items	Cronbach's α	Interpretation
Communication apprehension	9	.737	Acceptable
Test anxiety	9	.704	Acceptable
Fear of negative evaluation	9	.771	Acceptable
Perceived academic performance	6	.777	Acceptable

Participant Characteristics

The final sample was relatively balanced by gender. Gender was used only to describe the cohort and was not included as a predictor.

Table 3. Gender distribution

Gender	n	%
Male	99	47.5
Female	109	52.5
Total	208	100.0

Correlation Analysis

Perceived academic performance was negatively correlated with communication apprehension ($r = -.644$, $p < .001$), test anxiety ($r = -.739$, $p < .001$), and fear of negative evaluation ($r = -.607$, $p < .001$), $N = 208$. Test anxiety had the largest bivariate association. These estimates relate two self-report measures collected in the same questionnaire and should be interpreted in light of the common-method and content-overlap limitations.

Table 4. Pearson correlations with perceived academic performance

Anxiety dimension	r	p
Communication apprehension	-.644	< .001
Test anxiety	-.739	< .001
Fear of negative evaluation	-.607	< .001

Note. $N = 208$. Two-tailed tests.

Multiple Regression

The regression model was statistically significant, $F(3, 204) = 85.392$, $p < .001$, and explained 55.7% of the variance in perceived academic performance ($R^2 = .557$; adjusted $R^2 = .550$). Communication apprehension had a significant negative unique association, $B = -.383$, $SE = .093$, $t = -4.118$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-.566, -.200]$. Test anxiety also had a significant negative unique association, $B = -.278$, $SE = .096$, $t = -2.896$, $p = .004$, 95% CI $[-.467, -.089]$. Fear of negative evaluation was negative but not statistically significant after adjustment for the other predictors, $B = -.174$, $SE = .098$, $t = -1.773$, $p = .078$, 95% CI $[-.367, .019]$.

The distinction between test anxiety's strongest bivariate correlation and the predictors' unique regression contributions is discussed without ranking predictor importance from unstandardized coefficients.

Table 5. Multiple regression predicting perceived academic performance

Predictor	B	SE	t	p	95% CI for B
Constant	3.672	.152	24.147	< .001	[3.372, 3.972]
Communication apprehension	-.383	.093	-4.118	< .001	[-.566, -.200]
Test anxiety	-.278	.096	-2.896	.004	[-.467, -.089]
Fear of negative evaluation	-.174	.098	-1.773	.078	[-.367, .019]

Note. $N = 208$. $R^2 = .557$; adjusted $R^2 = .550$; $F(3, 204) = 85.392$, $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

Overall Pattern

All three anxiety dimensions were negatively associated with perceived academic performance at the bivariate level. This pattern is consistent with meta-analytic evidence linking foreign-language classroom anxiety to poorer language achievement (Botes et al., 2020), but the present outcome is perceptual and is not directly comparable to examination scores or grades. The model explained substantial variance in the self-reported outcome, yet part of that association may reflect shared wording, shared response tendencies, and contemporaneous measurement.

Communication Apprehension

Communication apprehension was negatively related to perceived performance and retained a significant unique association in the regression. Students who feel anxious when speaking, answering questions, or presenting may perceive reduced confidence and poorer performance. The finding is consistent with research connecting anxiety to unwillingness to communicate (Liu & Jackson, 2008). However, the cross-sectional design cannot determine whether apprehension reduces participation, difficult speaking experiences increase apprehension, or both occur.

Test Anxiety

Test anxiety showed the strongest bivariate correlation with perceived performance and remained significant in the regression. In an EMI context, assessment can combine pressure about disciplinary knowledge with pressure about comprehension and production in English. Cognitive interference under evaluation offers one plausible explanation (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Recent longitudinal evidence also supports a relationship between classroom anxiety and test performance, while showing that direction and strength can vary across groups and time (Liu, 2022).

Fear of Negative Evaluation

Fear of negative evaluation was strongly correlated with perceived performance but did not make a statistically significant unique contribution after the other predictors were included ($p = .078$). This is not evidence that evaluative fear is irrelevant. It indicates that the study did not establish incremental prediction at $\alpha = .05$ after communication apprehension and test anxiety were controlled. Conceptual overlap among anxiety experiences offers one plausible explanation that warrants direct examination in future research.

Bivariate and Multivariable Findings

Test anxiety's largest zero-order correlation and the significant unique associations of both test anxiety and communication apprehension illustrate that bivariate strength and regression contribution answer different questions. A correlation describes the total pairwise association; a regression coefficient describes the association remaining after statistical adjustment for the other predictors. The study therefore does not infer relative predictor importance from the unstandardized B values.

Common-Method Variance and Conceptual Circularity

The predictors and outcome were collected from the same respondents, in the same questionnaire, at the same time. Items 28–33 also ask whether anxiety, nervousness, fear of mistakes, exam stress, or English-proficiency pressure affects performance-related experiences. This shared method and conceptual overlap may strengthen the observed associations. The results should therefore be understood as relationships among students' reported anxiety and perceived functioning, not as evidence concerning independently measured academic achievement.

Pedagogical Implications

The following implications are evidence-informed possibilities, not interventions tested or proven by this study. They should be adapted to local needs and evaluated prospectively.

Classroom Practice

Lecturers may consider gradual, low-pressure speaking opportunities before high-stakes presentations: pair rehearsal, small-group discussion, prepared responses, and structured turn-taking. Constructive correction that protects students from public embarrassment may be especially relevant where fear of evaluation is salient. These practices are plausible responses to the observed patterns and to broader anxiety literature, but their effectiveness in this cohort remains an empirical question.

Assessment

Programmes may consider balancing high-stakes examinations with formative feedback, low-stakes quizzes, staged assignments, and prepared oral work while maintaining disciplinary standards. Assessment instructions and rubrics can separate, where educationally appropriate, the evaluation of disciplinary knowledge from the evaluation of English form. Any changes should be piloted and evaluated rather than assumed to reduce anxiety.

Institutional and Language Support

Discipline-linked language support, presentation rehearsal, peer mentoring, and collaboration between content lecturers and language educators may help students meet the specific communicative demands of their programmes. EMI research emphasises that academic-language challenges vary with proficiency and context (Soruç et al., 2021); therefore, support should be needs-based rather than uniform.

Limitations And Future Research

The study involved one cohort in one non-language department at one university. Although the attempted census achieved 208 valid responses from 210 eligible students, that strong coverage improves representation only of the accessible cohort; it does not provide national or cross-disciplinary generalisability.

The cross-sectional design cannot establish temporal order or causality. Anxiety may shape perceived performance, perceived difficulty may heighten anxiety, or both may be influenced by other variables. Longitudinal or cross-lagged designs, such as those used in recent anxiety-performance research (Liu, 2022), would better examine directionality.

All variables were measured by self-report at one occasion. No objective GPA, course-grade, examination-score, attendance, or behavioural participation data were analysed. The outcome items directly referred to anxiety-related effects on performance, which creates conceptual overlap and raises the risk of common-method inflation. Future work should pair anxiety measures with independently obtained outcomes and, where feasible, temporal separation, multiple informants, or behavioural indicators.

The questionnaire substantially contextualised the FLCAS framework and assigned items to four scales, but no formal expert-panel validation, pilot study, EFA, or CFA was documented in the available records. Alpha values establish internal consistency only. Future research should evaluate content validity, factor structure, convergent and discriminant validity, and measurement invariance. A validated short form may also be considered where it matches the research questions (Botes et al., 2022).

Future studies should retain comprehensive descriptive and diagnostic output and test whether low-pressure speaking, formative assessment, mentoring, or anxiety-management support changes anxiety and independently measured outcomes over time.

CONCLUSION

This study examined associations between English language anxiety and perceived academic performance among second-year non-language undergraduates at a Sri Lankan state university. Communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation each had a significant negative bivariate relationship with perceived performance; test anxiety had the strongest zero-order association. In the regression, communication apprehension and test anxiety retained significant negative unique associations, whereas fear of negative evaluation did not meet the .05 criterion after adjustment.

The findings concern perceived anxiety-related academic functioning, not objective academic achievement. Within that defined scope, the study offers a contextual basis for evaluating supportive classroom communication, constructive feedback, diversified assessment, and discipline-linked language support in future research.

Declarations

Ethical Approval and Informed Consent

All participants received information about the study, provided informed consent, and participated voluntarily. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The data are not publicly available because participant confidentiality was assured and the consent process did not include public data sharing.

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Appendix A. Administered Questionnaire Items And Scale Assignments

Response options: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree. Item numbering follows the archived thesis questionnaire.

Communication apprehension (Items 1–9)

1. I feel anxious when I am asked to speak in English during lectures.
2. I feel nervous when I need to participate in group discussions in English.
3. I often worry about making mistakes while speaking English in class.
4. I get very tense when I have to speak in front of my peers in English.
5. I find it difficult to express my ideas clearly when speaking in English.
6. I feel uncomfortable when I have to answer questions in English during lectures.
7. I am afraid of being judged negatively when I speak English.
8. I often feel like my English skills are inadequate compared to my classmates.
9. I feel anxious when I have to speak English in front of a large audience.

Test anxiety (Items 10–18)

- 10. I feel nervous before an English exam or quiz.
- 11. The pressure to perform well in English exams makes me anxious.
- 12. I get worried about not understanding all the questions in English during tests.
- 13. I feel overwhelmed by the English vocabulary and concepts tested in exams.
- 14. I feel that I perform worse on English exams compared to other subjects.
- 15. I am afraid that I will fail my English exam.
- 16. I often feel unprepared for English tests.
- 17. I feel anxious when I don't get enough time to study for English tests.
- 18. I get confused during English exams, even if I have studied the material.

Fear of negative evaluation (Items 19–27)

- 19. I fear that my classmates will judge me negatively if I make a mistake in English.
- 20. I feel embarrassed when my English mistakes are pointed out by the lecturer or peers.
- 21. I worry that my English proficiency will be evaluated negatively by my professors.
- 22. I feel uncomfortable when my English speaking abilities are tested in front of others.
- 23. I often worry that I will be criticized for speaking in English with mistakes.
- 24. I get anxious when I feel that others are comparing my English skills to theirs.
- 25. I avoid participating in English discussions because of the fear of being evaluated negatively.
- 26. I feel stressed when the lecturer focuses on correcting my English mistakes.
- 27. I fear that my peers will laugh at me if I make mistakes in English.

Perceived academic performance (Items 28–33)

- 28. My English-speaking anxiety does affect my class performance.
- 29. Fear of making mistakes does impact my confidence or participation.
- 30. English anxiety does lower my academic performance.
- 31. Exam stress does affect my English test performance.
- 32. Nervousness when speaking English does hinder my presentation skills.
- 33. English proficiency pressure does affect my overall academic performance.