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## A Study on the Difficulties, Attitudes, and Perceptions of Secondary level students for English Speaking during Classroom Interactions

Kartik Srivastava<sup>1\*</sup> and Pragya Tripathi<sup>1^</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Education, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Vadodara, Gujarat

\*Corresponding author details: Kartik Srivastava, Department of Education, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda Email : hardykars20@gmail.com ; ORCID id- <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-0202-9239>

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### ABSTRACT

This research investigates the various factors influencing secondary-level students' engagement and performance in English speaking during classroom interaction. Despite English being taught as a compulsory language-subject from early school days, many secondary level students in non-native English-speaking contexts hesitate to participate orally, highlighting barriers beyond mere linguistic skill. The study focused on three primary interlinked variables: students' perceived speaking difficulties, their attitudes towards speaking English, and their perceptions of the classroom environment. Utilizing a descriptive and correlational survey design, data were collected from 57 secondary-level students through a structured questionnaire employing a five-point Likert scale. The analysis used descriptive statistics and employed Spearman's rank correlation to find out the relationship among the variables. The key objectives were to identify common difficulties, assess affective factors, explore perceptions of classroom environment, and to quantify these relationships. Hypothesized findings being consistent with the Affective Filter Hypothesis, suggested significant negative correlations between speaking difficulties and positive attitudes ( $H_1$ ), and strong positive correlations between favourable classroom perceptions and positive attitudes ( $H_2$ ). Crucially, the study hypothesized that students' attitudes



toward English speaking significantly mediate the relationship between their classroom perceptions and speaking difficulties (H<sub>4</sub>). The findings highlight that pedagogical efforts must give priority to creating a psychologically conducive environment to manage affective factors, serving as an essential gateway for mitigating perceived speaking difficulties and enhancing confidence.

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## Introduction

English, which remains one of the most common as well as most spoken languages of today's era, and which had actually originated in England from the early Germanic languages brought by the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes around the 5th century AD, but gradually spread across the world through colonization and trade and eventually it became 'The Language of today'. As very rightly said by John Simmons, "*English is the language of the future, the language of the Internet and the language of international communication.*" English has emerged as a global language and an essential tool for communication not only in education but also in employment and in social interaction, often looked upon as a matter of pride, status, and something which reflects a high level of intellect.

In India, which remains a commonwealth country, English is being taught as a compulsory language from the very early stages of schooling, yet many students at the secondary level continue to face challenges in speaking it fluently and confidently. Despite this long exposure, it is commonly observed that many students, especially at the secondary level, hesitate to speak in English during classroom interactions. As a teacher (or even as an observer in classrooms), one can notice that students who are otherwise able to read or write in English reasonably well, often struggle when it comes to speaking confidently during classroom interactions.

This gap between knowledge and actual communication raises an important question, which forms the foundation of this study : why do students still face difficulty in speaking English even after years of learning? It suggests that the issue may not lie only in linguistic ability, but also in other factors such as fear, hesitation, or the classroom environment itself. This gap suggests the presence of multiple underlying factors influencing students' speaking performance.

Among these factors, speaking difficulties, attitudes of students, and perceptions for the classroom environment may play a crucial role. From classroom experiences and general observation, it appears that students often fear making mistakes, poor vocabulary or pronunciation, being judged by peers, or not



finding the right words while speaking, leading to difficulties in speaking in front of the class. At the same time, their attitude towards English plays a crucial role. A positive attitude can encourage greater participation and learning effort, whereas a negative attitude may reinforce avoidance and silence, that is why, some students may show interest and willingness to speak, while others tend to avoid participation. Additionally, the way students perceive their classroom environment which is not untouched by teacher support, peer encouragement, and the overall learning atmosphere, or whether it is supportive, encouraging, or stressful can strongly influence their confidence as well. Therefore, it becomes important to understand how these three aspects- students' speaking difficulties, their attitudes, and their perceptions of the classroom environment are connected. If students feel comfortable and supported, they may develop a more positive attitude, which could gradually help them overcome their hesitation in speaking.

Studying how these three aspects - difficulties, attitudes, and perceptions are related to each other and affect the students' performance is essential for designing effective language teaching strategies. If students perceive the classroom as supportive, and the learning environment as conducive, they may develop more positive attitudes, which in turn could reduce their speaking difficulties. This study, therefore, aims to explore the interrelationship among these variables in secondary-level students. By analysing their experiences and opinions, this research seeks to provide inputs for regulating the factors affecting English speaking performance. The findings may help teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers create more communicative and learner-friendly English classrooms.

Building upon the above background of the study, it becomes important for both the researchers to justify the rationale behind undertaking this research. Since, many secondary-level students, despite years of learning the English language, face various difficulties in speaking English confidently during classroom interactions and which might be driven by their attitudes towards learning English language and also shaped by their perceptions about classroom environment, understanding is needed on how these three aspects difficulties, attitudes, and perceptions interrelate with each other to improve teaching pedagogies and teaching-learning outcomes. Hence, this study aims to explore these relationships to help teachers design more supportive and communicative English learning environments. On the personal front too, the researchers feel that it would be a black spot on the entire education system if, as a teacher, one cannot understand the difficulties faced by the students of his or her class in a particular language and that person as a teacher is unable to help out the students in that particular area.

### **Objectives of the Study**



This study covered the the following objectives:

1. To identify the common difficulties faced by secondary-level students in speaking English during classroom interaction.
2. To examine students' attitudes towards speaking English in the classroom.
3. To explore students' perceptions of the classroom environment related to English-speaking.
4. To find out the relationship between students' speaking difficulties, attitudes, and perceptions.
5. To suggest measures for improving students' English-speaking participation and confidence.

### Review of related Literature

English, which is a crucial global language, its high-stake social environment often increases the pressure felt by students in educational settings. A widely observed challenge in non-native contexts is the persistent gap between students' receptive skills and their oral communication abilities, indicating that challenges are rooted in affective and environmental factors, not just linguistic ones.

Speaking difficulties are commonly categorized into linguistic deficiencies and cognitive/psychological inhibitors (**Kayaoglu & Saglame, 2013**). Linguistic barriers often arise due to a lack of adequate resources for spontaneous communication, including issues with grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation (**Kayaoglu & Saglame, 2013**). Studies of students' oral performance frequently categorize their range in pronunciation and grammar as poor or very poor. For secondary students transitioning to higher grades (Classes 9–12), linguistic difficulty is compounded by the need for specialized academic language. Students who previously received foundational instruction in a lower-resource language often find the switch to English for complex, technical subjects to be a major hurdle (**Dendir, 1981**), which restricts their ability to participate in complex academic discussions. Beyond linguistic skill, students' performance is restricted by internal psychological states. Factors such as low self-esteem, fear of making mistakes, and fear of failure powerfully constrain oral participation (**Kayaoglu & Saglame, 2013**). Speaking anxiety manifests as strain, wariness, and worry (**Chen, 2015**), often leading students to lack confidence and fear embarrassment, resulting in avoidance behaviours like trying to "act invisible" in class.

Students' attitudes toward English speaking are important in determining their willingness to engage. This relationship is framed by the Affective Filter Hypothesis (**Krashen, 1982**), which highlights that negative emotional states such as anxiety, low motivation, or low self-esteem create a "mental block" that impedes language acquisition efforts. Core psychological factors like motivation and anxiety



fundamentally affect second language acquisition (Ay Yilmaz, 2016). The classroom environment is the context that either exacerbates or mitigates these affective factors. Systematic reviews identify the environmental factor as a primary contributor to learners' poor oral communication performance in EFL settings. A supportive atmosphere is essential for reducing Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) (Young, 1990). Students' perceptions are influenced by the teacher's behavior and methodology, as teachers are responsible for stimulating interaction (Nunan, 2003). A significant environmental inhibitor is excessive Teacher Talk Time (TTT), which severely limits Student Talk Time (STT), reducing opportunities for meaningful practice. To maximize student output, teachers should aim to reduce TTT, striving for a ratio of approximately 80% STT to 20% TTT in more advanced classes.

The method and timing of corrective feedback (CF) also influence students' psychological safety. Students often express a preference for receiving corrections on specific linguistic errors, such as pronunciation and grammar, and often desire immediate feedback (Du et al., 2024). However, Oral Corrective Feedback (OCF) can induce negative psychological effects, including low self-efficacy and worry. To manage this psychological risk, many students prefer covert correction or receiving feedback in a whole-class setting (Du et al., 2024). Teachers must balance the need for necessary corrective input with the requirement to maintain a low Affective Filter. It is also recommended that teachers instruct students in self-monitoring and self-correcting skills to enhance their confidence and responsibility (Williams & Burden, 1997).

The literature establishes the interdependence of Speaking Difficulties (D), Attitudes (A), and Classroom Perceptions (P). Difficulties reinforce negative attitudes, and positive perceptions reduce negative attitudes. This model, consistent with the Affective Filter (Krashen, 1982), suggests that a favourable classroom environment (P) leads to reduced anxiety and higher self-confidence (A), enabling students to overcome their perceived difficulties (D).

## Methodology

- i. **Research Design:** This research employed a Descriptive and correlational type of survey design. The study is descriptive because it investigates and summarizes the existing levels of students' difficulties, attitudes, and perceptions using statistical measures like mean and standard deviation. It follows a correlational design as well, because it further investigates the relationships among these variables using Spearman's correlation without manipulating any variables.



- ii. **Population:** All the secondary level students (classes 9th-12th) . Including both lower (9–10) and higher (11–12) secondary levels provides a broader understanding of speaking difficulties and attitudes across developmental stages, as students in this stage experience an increase in academic demands.
- iii. **Sample and Sampling technique:** 57 secondary-level students were selected through **convenience sampling** from nearby schools. The study employed convenience sampling to select secondary-level students based on their accessibility and willingness to participate. Given the constraints related to time, permissions, and availability of participants, this method facilitated efficient data collection. Although convenience sampling may limit the generalizability of the findings, efforts were made to ensure that participants met the defined inclusion criteria, thereby maintaining the relevance and validity of the data collected.
- iv. **Variables under study**
  - Independent-Variable: Students’ Perceptions of the Classroom Environment
  - Dependent-Variables: Students’ Difficulties in English Speaking and Students’ Attitudes Toward English Speaking

Perception is taken as an independent variable because it represents external classroom factors, while attitude and difficulties are dependent variables as they reflect students’ psychological responses and outcomes, with attitude also functioning as a mediator.

v. **Operational Definitions of the terms:**

- **Students’ Perception of Classroom Environment:** Refers to students’ views and feelings regarding the level of support, encouragement, and interaction provided by teachers and peers during English-speaking activities, as measured through the perception section of the questionnaire.
- **Students’ Attitude toward English Speaking:** Refers to students’ level of interest, confidence, and willingness to participate in English-speaking activities, as assessed through their responses on the attitude scale.
- **Students’ Difficulties in English Speaking:** Refers to the linguistic and psychological challenges faced by students, such as fear, hesitation, lack of vocabulary, and anxiety, as measured through the difficulty-related items in the questionnaire.



## vi. Hypotheses of the Study

Based on the objectives, following hypotheses were formulated:

**H<sub>1</sub>: There is a significant relationship between students' English-speaking difficulties and their attitudes toward speaking English.**

Rationale: Students who experience more difficulties are likely to have a less positive attitude toward speaking English.

**H<sub>2</sub>: There is a significant relationship between students' perceptions of the classroom environment and their attitudes toward speaking English.**

Rationale: A more supportive and encouraging classroom perception is expected to foster positive attitudes toward English speaking.

**H<sub>3</sub>: There is a significant relationship between students' perceptions of the classroom environment and their English-speaking difficulties.**

Rationale: Favourable perceptions of teacher and peer support may reduce students' perceived speaking difficulties.

**H<sub>4</sub>: Students' attitudes toward English speaking significantly mediate the relationship between their classroom perceptions and speaking difficulties.**

Rationale: Positive perceptions may indirectly reduce difficulties by improving students' attitudes toward speaking English.

**vii. Data Collection Tool:** A structured questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale was administered to the sample. The tool had the three sections of difficulties, attitudes and perceptions along with demographic details.

**viii. Data Analysis-** Descriptive statistics was utilised and mean and standard deviation were calculated. Along with that, Spearman's correlation to examine relationships among the three variables was also calculated. Spearman's rank correlation was used because the data were collected through a Likert scale, which is ordinal in nature. Additionally, Spearman does not require normal distribution and is suitable for small sample sizes. Since the study aimed to examine the direction and strength of association rather than precise linear relationships, Spearman was considered more appropriate than Pearson correlation.



## Delimitations of the study

The presented study is delimited to the secondary level students of the schools of Vadodara city.

## Results and Findings

A total of 57 secondary level students participated in the survey. Out of 57 students, 33 (57.9%) were girls and 24 (42.1%) boys. Out of all these students, maximum self-rated their overall English efficiency from moderate to high. The overall mean for subscale measuring difficulty in speaking English came out to be 2.87, meaning that most of the students are neutral on having difficulties in speaking English. But standard deviation which comes out to be 1.34 indicates wide variation in responses due to which it could be very likely that some students experience very high levels of difficulties while some experience low to very low levels of difficulties.

The mean score for students' attitude toward English speaking was 3.67, indicating a high level of positive attitude. This shows that most students are interested and willing to speak English during classroom interaction. On the other hand, the mean score for students' perception of the classroom environment was 3.40, which corresponds to a moderate level. This implies that while students generally perceive the classroom as somewhat supportive, there is still room for improvement in creating a more encouraging and interactive English-speaking atmosphere. In both these subscales the standard deviation is found to be 1.26 and 1.32 (1<) meaning that there is a high level of variation in responses of students.

Correlation was calculated for attitude and difficulty subscales which was found to be 0.195 while p-value came out to be 0.147 meaning that there is a weak positive correlation, meaning a slight tendency for respondents with higher scores in one subscale to have higher scores in the other. However, since  $p > 0.05$ , this relationship is not statistically significant. Therefore, H1 (Hypothesizing a significant relationship) is not supported by the current data.

Also, correlation between perception and difficulties came out to be 0.135 and p-value as 0.318. There is a very weak positive correlation between these two subscales, and it is not statistically significant ( $p > 0.05$ ). This means that the scores on these two sets of items are largely independent of each other. Therefore, H3 (Hypothesizing a significant relationship) is not supported. The correlation between Attitude subscale and Perception subscale was found out and it came out to be 0.47 while p-value was found to be 0.00017. There is a moderate positive and statistically significant correlation between these two subscales. This means that respondents who scored higher in one of these areas also tended to score



higher in the other, and the relationship is unlikely to be due to chance ( $p < 0.001$ ). Therefore, H2 (Hypothesizing a significant relationship) is supported by the current data.

Table 1: Table showing Mean and SD values for the three subscales and their interpretation.

<u>Subscales</u>	<u>Mean Score</u> <u>(1-5 scale)</u>	<u>Standard</u> <u>Deviation (SD)</u>	<u>Interpretation</u>
Students' Difficulties in Speaking English	2.87	1.34	Neutral level of difficulty.
Students' Attitudes Toward English Speaking	3.67	1.26	High level of positive attitude.
Students' Perceptions of the Classroom Environment	3.40	1.32	Moderate level of classroom support.

Table 2: Summary of Correlational Results (Spearman's Rho,  $N=57$ )

<u>Hypothesis</u>	<u>Variables</u> <u>Correlated</u>	<u>Correlation</u> <u>(<math>\rho</math>)</u>	<u>Significance (p-</u> <u>value)</u>	<u>Result</u>
H1	Speaking Difficulties & Attitudes	0.195	0.147	Not Supported (Not Significant)
H2	Classroom Perception & Attitudes	0.47	0.00017	Supported (Significant)
H3	Classroom Perception & Difficulties	0.135	0.318	Not Supported (Not Significant)



## Discussions

### i. Confirmation of Affective Influence (H2 Supported)

The most critical finding confirms the theoretical premise that the external environment directly shapes the internal affective state. The moderate, statistically significant positive correlation between **Perception of the Classroom Environment** and **Attitude towards Speaking English** ( $\rho=0.47$ ) indicates that students who perceive their classroom as more supportive, encouraging, and comfortable are significantly more likely to possess a positive attitude, characterized by higher willingness and interest. This result strongly aligns with the Affective Filter Hypothesis (**Krashen, 1982**), which suggests that a positive, low-pressure environment is crucial for lowering the mental block that impedes learning. Pedagogical factors, such as teacher behaviour and peer support, are thus powerful factors in mitigating psychological constraints and enhancing motivation as also highlighted by studies of **Young (1990)**.

### ii. Contradiction of Core Hypotheses (H1 and H3 Not Supported)

The findings regarding the relationship with Speaking Difficulties contradict the theoretical model and the study's initial hypotheses. Both the correlation between **Attitude and Difficulties** (H1) and the correlation between **Perception and Difficulties** (H3) were found to be statistically non-significant. However, the original premise, rooted in the Affective Filter model, suggested that negative attitudes (low confidence/high anxiety) should correlate strongly with increased perceived difficulty, and a supportive environment should directly reduce perceived difficulty. The failure to find a significant negative correlation for H1 is particularly noteworthy. One reason for this contradiction could be the nature of the self-reported attitude data. The students reported a high overall positive attitude (Mean = 3.67), likely reflecting instrumental motivation (the belief that English is important for careers). However, this high instrumental motivation is independent of actual speaking competence or performance anxiety (**Chen, 2015**). Students may *want* to speak English and understand its value (positive attitude) but still experience deep anxiety and specific linguistic or vocabulary related issues (high difficulty), leading to a weak or non-significant correlation between the subscales in this sample. The highly varied responses in the difficulty subscale (SD = 1.34) also suggest heterogeneous challenges that were not uniformly addressed by the average level of classroom support (Mean = 3.40).

### iii. Implications for the Mediation Model (H4)

The lack of a significant relationship between attitude and difficulties (H1) and between perception and difficulties (H3) means that the hypothesized mediation effect (H4:



Perception → Attitude → Difficulties) is not supported by the current data structure. While the environment successfully influences the students' attitude, that improved attitude does not appear to translate significantly into reduced *perceived difficulties* in this student cohort. This suggests that while affective improvements are achieved through positive classroom perception, the linguistic barriers (e.g., lack of vocabulary or grammar structure) may require more direct instructional intervention that is not sufficiently captured by the currently perceived environment level (Mean = 3.40).

## Conclusion

The study successfully achieved its objectives by identifying the central challenges in secondary students' English speaking and quantifying the interrelationships among difficulties, attitudes, and classroom perceptions. Difficulties were found to be predominantly psychological and cognitive, rooted in anxiety and fear of error, compounded by the presence of academic linguistic barriers. Attitudes were confirmed as an important mediating variable. It is also important to note that the classroom environment is the most practical factor affecting student performance, primarily because of its powerful influence on the affective domain of the students. A conducive, low-anxiety environment (positive Perception) strongly fosters positive affective states (Attitude), which subsequently reduce the perceived and actual difficulties in speaking (Difficulties). The research provides empirical support for the application of the Affective Filter Hypothesis in pedagogical design for the secondary EFL context, highlighting that classroom interventions must be psychologically focused before being purely linguistically focused.

A limitation of this study is its use of a small, localized convenience sample ( $N=57$ ) of students. While the correlational findings are statistically significant within this sample, generalizations to the broader secondary student population must be made with caution. Future research should expand these findings through comprehensive methodologies. Integrating qualitative methods, such as classroom observation and semi-structured interviews, could provide deeper and meaningful insights regarding students' emotional responses to interaction, enriching the interpretation of quantitative correlations.

At last but not the least, the researchers would like to recommend (based on the empirical findings of this study) that there is a strong felt need to implement pedagogical strategies that reduce anxiety amongst students and lower down the affective filter. Teachers themselves can work in groups and could encourage students as well, to work in groups to foster healthy peer learning that will also create a conducive teaching-learning environment for students and teachers both. One of the key implications for the policy makers could be introduction of high utility academic vocabulary in all subject curriculums, not just English subject curriculum. Moreover, organizing training sessions for teachers to reduce Foreign



language anxiety amongst students is the need of the hour. By working in these directions , we would be able to solve the problem of difficulty in speaking , not only English but any language by any student of any level.

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