

Language anxiety, speaking proficiency, and language learning beliefs among English major students: a mediation analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between English language anxiety and speaking proficiency among Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSEd) major in English students at a Philippine state university in Libungan, Cotabato, Philippines, with language learning beliefs as a mediating variable. Many tertiary learners experience anxiety in speaking English, yet the mechanisms through which this affects oral performance remain unclear. Using a quantitative descriptive–correlational design, data were collected from 150 students through standardized questionnaires and a speaking proficiency assessment. Descriptive statistics, regression analysis, and mediation analysis were employed to analyze the data. Results showed that students experienced English language anxiety at an “agree” level, with fear of negative evaluation as the most prominent factor. Their speaking proficiency was generally at a modest level, while language learning beliefs were positive, particularly in terms of motivation and expectations. Regression results indicated that language anxiety did not directly predict speaking proficiency. However, mediation analysis revealed that language learning beliefs significantly mediated the relationship between anxiety and speaking performance. The findings suggest that anxiety influences speaking proficiency primarily through learners’ beliefs about language learning. Addressing both emotional and cognitive factors is therefore essential in improving students’ oral communication skills.

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1. INTRODUCTION

English speaking proficiency plays a vital role in second language learning, as it enables learners to actively participate in classroom discussions, express ideas, and engage meaningfully with teachers and peers [1]. In the context of second language acquisition, speaking is not only a communicative skill but also a key contributor to academic achievement and cognitive development [2], [3]. However, many learners experience difficulties in developing oral communication skills due to psychological and affective factors, particularly language anxiety.

Language anxiety has been widely recognized as a common phenomenon among second language learners and is characterized by fear, tension, and negative emotional responses during language use [2], [4]. Studies in various contexts have shown that learners often experience anxiety when speaking in front of peers and teachers, fearing negative evaluation and making mistakes [5]–[7]. These emotional barriers may limit students’ willingness to communicate and negatively affect their speaking performance. In addition to anxiety, learners’ beliefs about language learning have been found to influence how they approach language acquisition.

Language learning beliefs refer to learners' personal perceptions and assumptions about language learning, difficulty, aptitude, and effective learning strategies [8], [9]. Research suggests that these beliefs shape learners' motivation, confidence, and learning behaviors, thereby affecting language achievement [10], [11]. Positive beliefs may encourage persistence and engagement, while negative beliefs may intensify anxiety and hinder performance.

Recent studies have also emphasized the interrelationship among language anxiety, speaking proficiency, and language learning beliefs. Learners with high anxiety tend to demonstrate weaker oral performance, while those with positive beliefs exhibit greater confidence and communicative competence [12], [13]. These findings indicate that language learning is a complex process influenced by both emotional and cognitive factors.

Although numerous studies have examined language anxiety and speaking proficiency, most have focused on these variables independently. Only a limited number of studies have explored how language learning beliefs mediate the relationship between anxiety and speaking performance, particularly in the Philippine context [12], [13]. Existing research has mainly concentrated on urban universities and general student populations, leaving rural and developing academic settings underrepresented.

In North Cotabato, specifically at the University of Southern Mindanao (USM)–Libungan Campus, little empirical evidence is available regarding the combined effects of language anxiety, speaking proficiency, and language learning beliefs among Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSEd) major in English students. Without sufficient local data, the faculty may find it difficult to design appropriate instructional interventions that address students' emotional and cognitive challenges in learning English and English-related subjects. Furthermore, the absence of mediation-based studies limits the understanding of how tertiary students' beliefs may either weaken or strengthen the effect of anxiety on speaking proficiency. This gap restricts the development of evidence-based strategies for improving oral communication skills among future English teachers.

The novelty of this study lies in testing a mediation model in which language learning beliefs explain how English language anxiety relates to speaking proficiency among pre-service English teachers in a rural Philippine university context. Unlike previous studies that primarily examined these variables independently or through bivariate relationships, this study explicitly models the mechanism linking them. This is important because understanding the mechanism through which anxiety relates to speaking proficiency provides a clearer basis for designing targeted instructional interventions. By identifying language learning beliefs as a key pathway, the study contributes to the limited literature on how anxiety and speaking proficiency are linked in rural Philippine higher education contexts.

To address these gaps, this study investigates the relationship between English language anxiety and speaking proficiency among BSEd major in English students at the USM–Libungan Campus, with language learning beliefs serving as a mediating variable. Specifically, this research aims to: determine the language anxiety, speaking proficiency, and language learning beliefs, and analyze the mediating effect of language learning beliefs on this relationship. By employing standardized instruments and mediation analysis, this study provides empirical evidence on how emotional and cognitive factors interact in second language learning.

The findings are expected to contribute to the existing literature by offering localized insights and highlighting the crucial role of learners' beliefs in shaping speaking performance. Moreover, the results may provide guidance to the teachers, administrators, and policymakers in directing their actions in developing learner-centered pedagogical practices that respond to students' language anxiety, strengthen positive beliefs, and hone speaking proficiency. Ultimately, this study generally seeks to support the personal and professional preparation of future English educators by promoting a more supportive and psychologically responsive learning environment.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research design

This study used a quantitative descriptive–correlational design and employed mediation analysis to examine whether language learning beliefs explain the relationship between English language anxiety and speaking proficiency among students in Southern Philippines. Quantitative research involves the systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of numerical data, commonly obtained through surveys or standardized instruments [14]. This approach allows researchers to examine relationships among variables without manipulating the independent variables, which is a defining feature of non-experimental research designs.

2.2. Respondents

The respondents of the study were 150 pre-service English teachers enrolled in the BSEd major in English at the USM–Libungan Campus during the first semester of the school year 2024–2025. They were selected because their classroom experiences could provide relevant data on English language anxiety,

speaking proficiency, and language learning beliefs. The study employed complete enumeration (census sampling), in which all BSEd–English students enrolled during the study period were included as respondents. This approach was selected because the population size was manageable, making it feasible to gather data from the entire group and to describe the characteristics of the population more accurately. Complete enumeration (census) involves collecting data from all units in the population, thereby covering the entire population rather than a subset [15].

2.3. Research instruments

This study used three standardized instruments to measure English language anxiety, speaking proficiency, and language learning beliefs. English language anxiety was assessed using the foreign language classroom anxiety scale (FLCAS) by Horwitz *et al.* [16] consisting of 33 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale (4=strongly agree to 1=strongly disagree) and covering communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Speaking proficiency was measured through the public version of the international English language testing system (IELTS) speaking test descriptors, administered in three parts lasting approximately 11–15 minutes, and rated using the 9-band scale across fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation. Language learning beliefs were measured using the beliefs about language learning inventory (BALLI) by Horwitz [17], with 34 items across five domains (language aptitude, difficulty of language learning, nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivation and expectations) rated on the same 4-point Likert scale. All instruments were adapted to the study context and underwent expert validation and pilot testing to establish content validity and reliability prior to the main data collection [18]. Pilot-test results indicated acceptable internal consistency of the adapted scales. For language anxiety, Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from 0.718 to 0.849 across its four dimensions, while for language learning beliefs, alpha values ranged from 0.728 to 0.881 across the five domains.

2.4. Data analysis procedure

The gathered data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Means were computed to describe English language anxiety, speaking proficiency, and language learning beliefs of the respondents. Normality of data was examined using the Shapiro–Wilk test, while homogeneity of variance was assessed to determine whether the variability of the responses across groups was approximately equal. Hypothesis testing was performed using Pearson's *r* correlation to determine the relationships among English language anxiety, speaking proficiency, and language learning beliefs. To examine whether language learning beliefs significantly mediate the relationship between language anxiety and speaking proficiency, mediation analysis using bootstrapping was conducted to estimate the indirect effect and its confidence interval. Bootstrapping was applied because it does not require the indirect effect to follow a normal sampling distribution [19]. An illustration of the proposed mediation model is shown in Figure 1, where English language anxiety influences speaking proficiency both directly and indirectly through language learning beliefs.

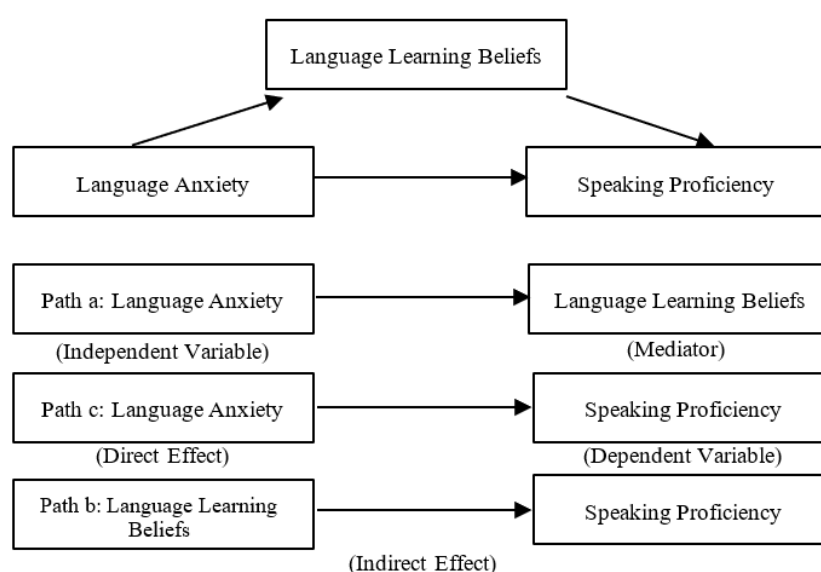


Figure 1. Mediation analysis of language learning beliefs in the relationship between English language anxiety and speaking proficiency

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the results of the study on English language anxiety, speaking proficiency, and language learning beliefs among BSEd English students, including the mediating role of language learning beliefs in the relationship between anxiety and speaking proficiency.

3.1. English language anxiety of the respondents

Table 1 presents the overall mean scores for English language anxiety among BSEd–English students at USM–Libungan. Based on the legend, mean scores ranging from 2.50 to 3.24 are interpreted as “agree.” The overall mean of $M=2.77$ falls within this range, indicating that the respondents generally acknowledge experiencing English language anxiety. Among the four factors, fear of negative evaluation obtained the highest mean ($M=3.04$), which is within the “agree” category, suggesting that students are most anxious when they perceive that they are being judged by others. Fear of tests ($M=2.73$) and anxiety in English classes ($M=2.71$) also fall within the same range, indicating that assessment situations and classroom interactions contribute to students’ anxiety. Communication apprehension recorded the lowest mean ($M=2.58$), but it remains within the “agree” category, showing that students still experience hesitation when speaking English. The prominence of fear of negative evaluation is consistent with the findings of Gatcho and Hajan [20], who reported that students’ anxiety is strongly influenced by concerns about peer and teacher judgment. Similarly, Putri *et al.* [5] found that fear of making mistakes and speaking in front of others intensifies learners’ anxiety. These findings indicate that students’ anxiety may be linked to their sensitivity to criticism and comparison in classroom settings. Compared with previous studies involving broader student populations, the present findings reflect a similar pattern among pre-service English teachers in a rural campus setting. While other studies [5], [20] reported high levels of anxiety related to evaluation, the mean scores in this study suggest that such anxiety remains evident among students at USM–Libungan. This may suggest that language anxiety is shaped by the specific learning conditions experienced by students in this context.

The moderate levels of fear of tests and classroom anxiety may be explained by students’ anticipation of correction and evaluation during academic activities. When learners expect their performance to be judged, they may become more cautious and self-conscious, which can limit spontaneous language use. Jugo [6] observed that Filipino learners tend to feel anxious during speaking tasks, particularly when they expect negative feedback. This may account for the respondents’ continued discomfort in English classes, as evaluative situations can heighten self-monitoring and reduce willingness to communicate, a pattern also noted in recent language anxiety research [21].

Although communication apprehension obtained the lowest mean, its classification within the “agree” range suggests that students remain cautious when using English orally. This supports MacIntyre [2] view that anxiety can reduce learners’ willingness to communicate, which may limit opportunities for language practice. Overall, the findings indicate that BSEd–English students at USM–Libungan experience English language anxiety at an “agree” level across all dimensions, with fear of negative evaluation as the most influential factor. This highlights the importance of creating supportive classroom environments that minimize fear of judgment and encourage confident language use.

Table 1. English language anxiety of the respondents

English language anxiety	Mean	Description
Fear of negative evaluation	3.04	Agree
Fear of tests	2.73	Agree
Anxiety in English classes	2.71	Agree
Communication apprehension	2.58	Agree
Total mean	2.77	Agree

Note: 1.00–1.74=strongly disagree, 1.75–2.49=disagree, 2.50–3.24=agree, 3.25–4.00=strongly agree

3.2. Speaking proficiency of the respondents

As shown in Table 2, the speaking proficiency scores of 150 BSEd–English students ranged from Band 4 to Band 8, with a mean score of 5, indicating a modest level of speaking proficiency based on IELTS band descriptors. This suggests that respondents are generally able to communicate basic ideas in English but experience difficulties in accuracy, fluency, and complexity. Similar patterns have been reported in other tertiary English as a second language/English as a foreign language (ESL/EFL) context. For instance, studies conducted among university students in Vietnam and the Philippines found that many English majors demonstrate moderate speaking proficiency due to limited exposure to authentic communication and insufficient opportunities for oral practice [22], [23]. This observation is further supported by recent findings indicating that learners commonly encounter difficulty achieving fluent and confident speech in English [24]. Compared with these previous studies, the findings show a similar pattern of modest speaking proficiency

among BSEd–English students. This may suggest that contextual conditions, including opportunities for communicative practice and language exposure, could shape students’ oral language development.

Comparable findings have also been observed in teacher education programs, where pre-service English teachers exhibit varying levels of oral proficiency, with many remaining at intermediate stages. Bayog *et al.* [23] reported that although some students achieved high speaking competence, a substantial number continued to experience difficulties in pronunciation, fluency, and grammatical accuracy. Similarly, Hanh [22] found that undergraduate students’ speaking performance was constrained by limited classroom interaction and low confidence in oral communication.

These patterns may be interpreted using Horwitz *et al.* [16] foreign language anxiety theory, which proposes that anxiety in language learning interferes with learners’ ability to perform effectively, particularly in speaking tasks that require spontaneous language processing. According to this theory, anxious learners may experience cognitive overload, self-doubt, and excessive self-monitoring, which can reduce fluency and accuracy. This theoretical perspective helps explain why many respondents in the present study remained at a modest proficiency level despite being enrolled in an English major program.

Thus, the findings indicate that the modest speaking proficiency of BSEd–English students at USM–Libungan reflects a common pattern in tertiary ESL and EFL contexts. Psychological factors, as explained by Horwitz’s theory, together with instructional and environmental conditions, may limit students’ progress toward higher levels of oral proficiency. This may indicate the need for more opportunities for guided speaking practice in supportive classroom settings.

Table 2. Speaking proficiency of the respondents

Variable	N	Descriptive statistics			Interpretation
		Minimum	Maximum	Mean	
Speaking proficiency	150	4	8	5	Modest

3.3. Language learning beliefs of the respondents

As shown in Table 3, the BSEd–English students at USM–Libungan reported an overall mean of $M=2.87$, interpreted as “agree,” indicating generally positive language learning beliefs. Among the five belief domains, motivations and expectations obtained the highest mean ($M=3.31$; strongly agree), suggesting that students place particularly strong importance on motivation and clear goals in the language learning process. The other domains, namely, nature of language learning ($M=2.96$), learning and communication strategies ($M=2.87$), language aptitude ($M=2.77$), and difficulty of language learning ($M=2.63$), also fell within the “agree” range, reflecting generally favorable views toward the different aspects of language learning.

Table 3. Language learning beliefs of the respondents

Language learning beliefs	Mean	Description
Motivations and expectations	3.31	Strongly agree
Nature of language learning	2.96	Agree
Learning and communicating strategies	2.87	Agree
Language aptitude	2.77	Agree
Difficulty of language learning	2.63	Agree
Total mean	2.87	Agree

Note: 1.00–1.74=strongly disagree, 1.75–2.49=disagree, 2.50–3.24=agree, 3.25–4.00=strongly agree

These findings align with studies conducted in the Philippine context that also reported moderate levels of belief about language learning among tertiary students. For instance, research on teacher education students in Davao City found that college of teacher education (CTE) students displayed a moderate level of belief about language learning, emphasizing experiences, confidence, strategies, and the nature of language learning as important components of their belief systems [25]. This suggests that positive learner beliefs about language processes are common among education students in Philippine universities where English serves as a primary medium of instruction. Compared with studies conducted in larger and more urban universities [23], [25], the present findings show a similar pattern of generally positive language learning beliefs; however, the slightly lower mean scores in some domains suggest that students at USM–Libungan may face contextual constraints that influence their perceptions of language learning. Factors such as limited exposure to English outside the classroom and fewer opportunities for meaningful communicative interaction may affect how students develop and sustain their learning beliefs.

In addition, broader research supports the idea that learner beliefs about language learning influence attitudes, strategy use, and classroom engagement. For example, studies in tertiary settings have shown that positive beliefs about language learning are associated with greater use of effective learning strategies and

more active engagement in communicative activities, which in turn foster better language outcomes [26], [27]. Although previous studies have examined language learning beliefs among university students, these have largely focused on general undergraduate populations or teacher education students in broader institutional contexts, such as the study of CTE students [25]. Limited research has examined the belief systems of pre-service English teachers in rural satellite campuses. Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by providing localized evidence on how future English teachers in USM–Libungan perceive and approach language learning.

Overall, these results indicate that BSEd–English students at USM–Libungan hold generally positive and adaptive beliefs about language learning, especially regarding the value of motivation and expectations. Such beliefs are likely to support students' engagement and persistence in English language learning and align with patterns observed among other tertiary ESL students in the Philippine context. This finding reinforces the view that motivation and expectations remain salient aspects of students' language learning beliefs in this context.

3.4. Mediating effect of language learning beliefs on the relationship between English language anxiety and speaking proficiency

Table 4 presents the regression results predicting speaking proficiency from language anxiety and language learning beliefs. The constant term was statistically significant ($B=6.557$, $p<.001$), indicating a significant baseline level of speaking proficiency when the predictors are held constant. Language anxiety, measured in terms of communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety, showed a positive but non-significant effect on speaking proficiency ($B=0.408$, $SE=0.288$, $t=1.418$, $p=0.158$), suggesting that anxiety alone does not directly predict students' speaking performance. Language learning beliefs, measured in terms of motivations and expectations, nature of language learning, learning and communicating strategies, language aptitude, and difficulty of language learning, exhibited a negative and marginally non-significant effect on speaking proficiency ($B=-0.780$, $SE=0.404$, $t=-1.931$, $p=0.055$). This finding indicates that certain belief patterns may be associated with lower speaking proficiency.

Table 4. Mediating effect of language learning beliefs on the relationship between English language anxiety and speaking proficiency

Model	B	Std. error	t	p-value
Constant	6.557	0.997	6.580**	0.000
Anxiety in English	0.408	0.288	1.418 ^{ns}	0.158
English learning beliefs	-0.780	0.404	-1.931 ^{ns}	0.055

**highly significant at 1% level of significance; ns=not significant at 5% level of significance; Sobel test statistic: -1.857*; p-value=0.032

Despite the non-significant direct effects, Figure 2 shows a significant indirect effect of language anxiety on speaking proficiency through language learning beliefs. The Sobel test confirmed that language learning beliefs significantly mediate this relationship ($z=-1.857$, $p=0.032$), with an indirect effect estimate of -0.27 . This finding supports partial mediation, indicating that language anxiety influences speaking proficiency primarily through its effect on students' beliefs. Specifically, higher levels of communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety tend to influence students' beliefs related to language aptitude, perceived difficulty of learning English, and learning strategies, which in turn affect their speaking performance. The negative indirect effect suggests that anxious students may develop less favorable perceptions of their language abilities and learning processes, particularly regarding their aptitude and the difficulty of English. Although students generally reported strong motivations and expectations, some beliefs related to language aptitude and the difficulty of language learning may function as psychological barriers. Learners who believe that English is inherently difficult or that language ability is fixed may experience reduced confidence and limited willingness to communicate, which negatively affects speaking proficiency [17], [28].

These findings are consistent with scholarship suggesting that English language anxiety may operate through learners' cognitive appraisals, particularly their self-beliefs and language learning beliefs, rather than only through a direct effect on oral performance. Work on language anxiety emphasizes that anxiety can disrupt communication by shaping learners' perceptions of competence and willingness to engage in speaking tasks [16]. Evidence from tertiary learners further indicates that anxiety is closely tied to confidence-related beliefs and self-efficacy, which can influence participation and persistence in speaking activities [29]. In the Philippine tertiary context, qualitative accounts likewise show that apprehension in English is often linked to being judged, perceived standards, and self-doubt, which may influence learners' beliefs about their aptitude and learning process [7]. More broadly, research on English learning beliefs demonstrates that beliefs can show indirect effects on language outcomes through emotional variables, including anxiety, supporting the plausibility of mediation pathways involving beliefs and affective experiences [30].

Although several studies have investigated the relationships among language anxiety, learner beliefs, and language performance, few have empirically tested a mediation model integrating these variables in the Philippine tertiary context. Most existing studies focus on bivariate associations rather than examining underlying mechanisms. Thus, this study extends previous research by demonstrating the mediating role of language learning beliefs in explaining how anxiety influences speaking proficiency among pre-service English teachers. Thus, the results highlight language learning beliefs, particularly those related to language aptitude, difficulty of learning, and learning strategies, as the key mechanisms through which language anxiety affects speaking proficiency. These findings suggest that interventions should address not only students' anxiety but also their beliefs about learning English to promote more effective oral communication. Teacher education programs may incorporate cognitive-behavioral strategies, reflective learning activities, and explicit training on growth-oriented beliefs about language aptitude to help students reinterpret anxiety in more adaptive ways.

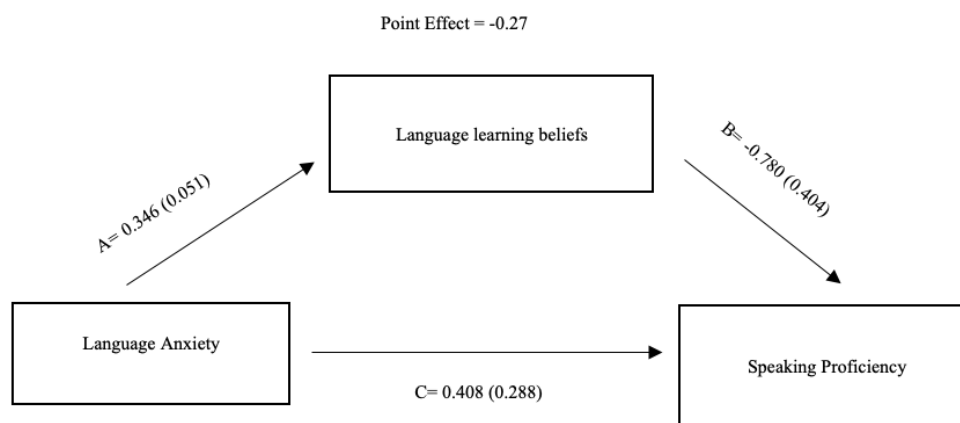


Figure 2. Mediating effect of language learning beliefs

4. CONCLUSION

This study clarifies how English language anxiety relates to speaking proficiency among tertiary English education students in a rural Philippine university context by testing language learning beliefs as a mediating variable. The results indicate that anxiety is present among the respondents, with concerns about evaluation emerging as a salient component, and that students' speaking proficiency generally falls within the modest range. More importantly, the mediation model shows that higher anxiety does not directly correspond to lower speaking proficiency in a significant way; rather, its influence appears to operate through language learning beliefs. This suggests that as anxiety increases, students' beliefs about language learning may also be shaped in ways that, in turn, affect their oral performance. This pattern supports theoretical views that emotional variables affect performance through learners' cognitive orientations toward language learning, consistent with the assumptions of Horwitz's language anxiety framework.

The findings generally align with earlier research emphasizing the role of affective and cognitive factors in second language performance, while extending the evidence base to an underrepresented setting. By demonstrating partial mediation, the study contributes to the literature by explaining how anxiety is linked to speaking proficiency, not only whether they are related. Practically, the results suggest that interventions should go beyond anxiety reduction alone and also address the specific belief domains that may constrain performance, such as perceptions of language aptitude, perceived difficulty of language learning, and learning and communicating strategies, while sustaining students' motivations and expectations.

Several limitations should be considered. The sample was limited to one campus and one program, which may restrict generalizability. In addition, the design was cross-sectional, preventing conclusions about change over time. Future research may examine the model across diverse tertiary programs and institutions, use longitudinal or mixed-methods approaches, and explore additional variables (e.g., exposure to English, classroom climate, or self-efficacy) to refine understanding of how anxiety, beliefs, and speaking proficiency interact.

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C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

R : Resources

D : Data Curation

O : Writing - Original Draft

E : Writing - Review & Editing

Vi : Visualization

Su : Supervision

P : Project administration

Fu : Funding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

We have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The research related to human use has been complied with all the relevant national regulations and institutional policies in accordance with the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

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