

## Foreign Language Anxiety Among ESL Undergraduate Learners In Traditional Versus Virtual Classrooms During Covid-19: A Case Study Of District Haripur

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**Abstract:** *The COVID-19, pandemic caused the sudden global pause of academics, switching from traditional classes to virtual learning. This study analyzed the concerns of undergraduate students learning English as a second language in virtual versus regular classrooms in Haripur, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Using structured questionnaires, data was collected from 299 ESL students. The findings revealed that students felt more comfortable in conventional classrooms than in virtual ones, with issues like internet accessibility, technical skills, and instructor coordination hindering virtual participation. The lack of intrinsic motivation among students for online learning further compounded their anxiety. The study highlights the need for educational reforms in Pakistan to support innovation and institutional growth.*

**Keywords:** Pakistan, COVID-19, ESL, UNESCO

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Foreign Language Learning

As globalization spreads, foreign language proficiency has become essential for global citizenship in the 21st century (Duncan, 2010). Developing these skills is crucial for addressing a country's economic, political, and security needs, as well as fostering cultural awareness. To overcome linguistic barriers in a connected world, it's important to examine factors that affect foreign language proficiency. Duncan (2010) emphasizes that while fluency is key for international education, national communication constraints make it challenging. Academic success in foreign languages is influenced by factors like teacher expectations, student attitudes, creativity, collaboration, and anxiety (Pishghadam et al., 2011).

#### 1.2 Foreign Language Learning Anxiety

Anxiety is a mental health condition characterized by physiological reactions, tension, and concerns about the future (Nevid et al., 2000). It can lead to odd and anxious behaviors (Wu & McGoogan, 2020) and is an organic human feedback to alarming situations (Ng & Peggy, 2020). Trauma and medical crackdowns can also shuffle functioning of heart and soul. (Li et al., 2020). Learners experiencing anxiety require extraordinary assistance from instructors and parents to overcome learning obstacles. In the context of pandemic COVID-19, virtual education reduces opportunities for mutual interaction, exacerbating anxiety.

Anxiety can negatively impact students' performance in foreign language courses, with fear of making

mistakes being a significant obstacle (Xiao & Wong, 2014). Language weaknesses are prevalent in traditional schools, and virtual language learners' anxiety remains an underexplored area (Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012).

Investigating anxiety's role in virtual learning environments could lead to better course design and delivery for ESL students. Technological advancements enable innovative approaches to knowledge delivery, and addressing anxiety could enhance the success of online learning, particularly for second language classes that involve oral interactions (Pichette, 2009).

### **1.3 Foreign Language Learning Context during COVID-19**

The global COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted various sectors, including education (Stambough et al., 2020). In Pakistan, the virus's spread necessitated strict measures such as social distancing, physical distancing, and remote work, including in education. WHO recommendations included hygiene practices and protective measures to curb the virus's spread (Sawitri, 2020). The shift from classroom instruction to digital platforms has had profound implications for the educational system, requiring a reevaluation of traditional teaching methods.

The pandemic has caused widespread educational disruptions, affecting 60% of the global student population, according to UNESCO (2020). UNESCO's Director-General, Audrey Azoulay, emphasized the unprecedented scale of this disruption (Demuyakor, 2020). In Pakistan, the first two COVID-19 cases were reported in February 2020, and by January 2022, the country recorded 1.37 million cases (NCOC Pakistan, 2020). This led to the suspension of all educational programs, necessitating a shift to online learning.

The transition to online education required adjustments to traditional teaching methods. Tools such as Google Classroom, WhatsApp Groups, Moodle Platforms, and Zoom became essential for maintaining continuity in education (Wu & McGoogan, 2020). Pakistan's universities adopted virtual courses as a precautionary measure, and online platforms gained immense popularity during this period (Li & Lalani, 2020).

This article examines the impact of the pandemic on the anxiety levels of English as a Second Language (ESL) students in Haripur, focusing on their heavy reliance on online resources for education. It investigates how the shift to virtual learning during the pandemic has influenced their mental well-being and overall learning experiences.

### **1.4 Virtual Learning Challenges**

The effectiveness of online courses has been hampered by insufficient internet infrastructure and a lack of proficiency among teachers and students (Li et al., 2020). University professors and students faced challenges using online tools for collaborative projects and lectures. E-learning students encountered numerous technological obstacles, with reliable internet access being critical. People in remote areas often lacked access, and the costs of internet and online courses were significant. These technological difficulties negatively impacted students' mental health, which, in turn, could harm their physical well-being (Wajdi et al., 2020).

Working remotely has become a common strategy to prevent COVID-19 transmission, significantly impacting society, particularly education (Li et al., 2020). The pandemic necessitated the use of online platforms for educational programs, transforming learning environments (Setianingsih et al., 2019). This study explores the effects of COVID-19 and isolation strategies on students' learning in higher education.

## **2. Problem Statement**

In the light of the previous plethora of research works that were done in the past, the researcher found a research gap here that is urged to be analyzed. It is observed since score that EFL learners were

exposed to learn their particular languages in traditional classroom settings. But during COVID-19 the whole scenario is being changed from classroom to virtual learning. This drastic change has made learners restless. The researcher herself have gone through anxiety during virtual EFL learning. Now keeping in view the changing screens, the researcher is committed to highlight the problem of language learning anxiety in EFL. Moreover, it's a dire need to offer learners a charge sheet that may decide their choice of learning in future.

### **3. Research Questions**

The researcher navigated the questions:

1. How do ESL undergraduate learners perceive foreign language anxiety in traditional versus virtual classroom settings?
2. Which learning environment—traditional or virtual—induces higher levels of English second language anxiety among undergraduates?
3. What are the potential causes of anxiety experienced by ESL learners in both traditional and virtual classrooms?

### **4. Research Objectives**

The following objectives were set before the researcher:

1. Analysis of the perceptions of ESL undergraduates about language anxiety in traditional versus online settings.
2. To explore the learning environment with highest language anxiety.
3. To find out the potential causes of language anxiety of ESL undergraduate s.

### **5. Significance of the Study**

The study investigates English as a second language anxiety in face to face and virtual learning environments during pandemic COVID-19, addressing a gap in research on differences between these settings. It highlights the innovative nature of virtual foreign language classes (Hurd, 2007) and their rapid expansion during the pandemic. The study explores learners' anxiety perceptions in both settings, aiming to provide insights into how anxiety affects English language learning. The findings are expected to inform stake holders, policymakers, and syllabus designers in improving English language teaching and learning practices.

### **6. Delimitation of the Study**

The paper examines second language learning anxiety among undergraduates in Haripur District, KPK, focusing on both face to face and digital learning settings. It is conducted at the Govt. Postgraduate College for Women Haripur. The research involves 299 ESL undergraduates from thirteen departments who experienced online education during the COVID-19. The study adopts a Blended Learning framework, combining traditional and virtual learning to enhance students' learning experiences.

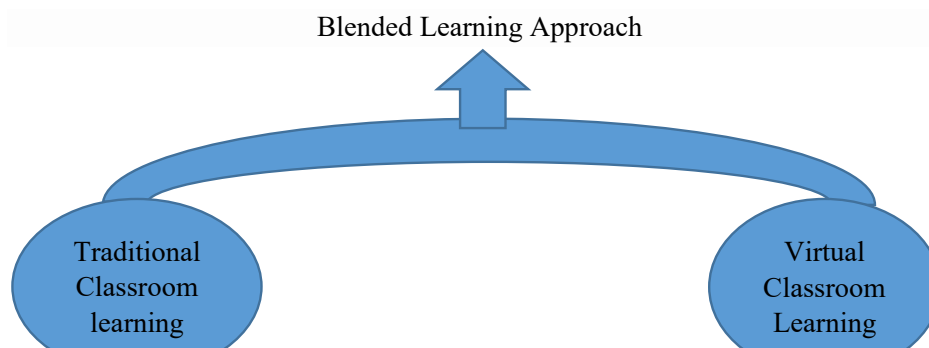
### **7. Methodology**

#### **7.1 Research Framework**

This study adopts a "blended approach" to enhance students' learning experiences by combining traditional classroom activities with virtual learning components. The term "blended" refers to the thoughtful integration of various learning contexts in a cohesive and effective manner, emphasizing *learning* over instruction. This approach supports learning both in the classroom with guidance and encouragement from instructors and in virtual environments, where students may study independently or collaboratively with peer support (Oliver & Trigwell, 2005).

The concept of blended learning in academic contexts can be traced back to the Sloan Consortium's quality framework (Norberg et al., 2011). The Sloan Consortium, a nonprofit organization, aims to integrate virtual learning into mainstream higher education (Sloan-C website). Blended learning encompasses a range of technological applications in education, spanning from fully online programs at one end to traditional in-person classrooms at the other. In this model, students engage in learning activities off-site, such as at home, and interact with both the educational materials and their instructors through online platforms (Beaver, Hallar, & Westmaas, 2014).

*Figure 1. Two Spectra of Blended Learning*

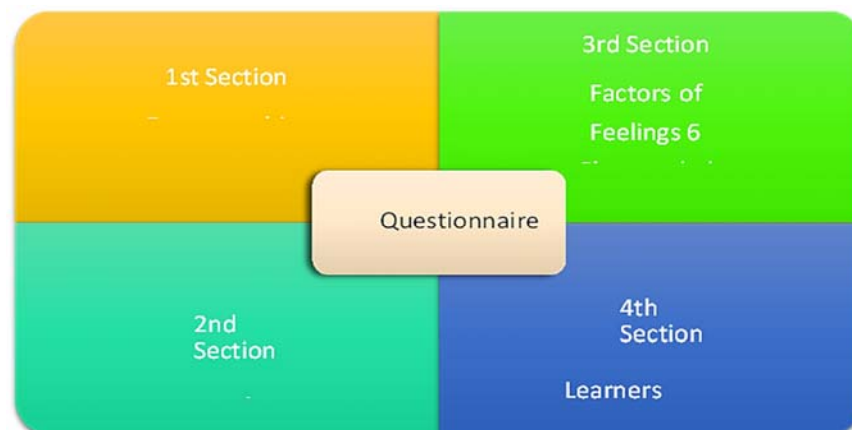


## 7.2 Research Instrument

The paper utilized a questionnaire for survey as the primary data collection tool, designed in English with the option for subjective answers in Urdu to ensure participant comprehension. Questionnaires, a reliable method widely used in prior research, included closed-ended questions to maintain focus and relevance. A Likert scale (1-5) was used to gauge participants' agreement or disagreement with statements.

The survey questionnaire was based on the Classroom Anxiety Scale of Foreign Language (Horwitz et al., 1986), revised for clarity and alignment with the study's objectives. It consisted of 26 closed-ended questions with Likert-scale responses ("Always" to "Never") and 4 open-ended questions to gather qualitative data. Additionally, 5 questions from the Virtual Classroom Anxiety Scale (Valizadeh, 2021) were incorporated. The modified questionnaire covered four categories, providing both quantitative and qualitative insights.

*Figure 2. Graphical Division of Questionnaire*



## 7.3 Research Design

The study utilizes a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data to find the research questions. The qualitative approach focuses on gathering high-quality textual data for in-depth

analysis, while the quantitative method incorporates logical analysis into the study's findings. This approach compares EFL undergraduate learners' perceptions of language learning in two contexts: face-to-face conventional settings and online learning. Data will be collected through a questionnaire survey and analyzed both statistically and descriptively.

#### 7.4 Research Participants

The study's participants are 299 EFL undergraduate female learners, aged 18 to 24, from 13 departments of Govt. Postgraduate College for Women Haripur. The sample was selected using a random sampling technique to enhance data accuracy and generalizability. Participants were required to have experience of English as a second language through face to face and online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Table 1** Details of Responses

| Name of Departments            | Responses | Percentage |
|--------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| BS-Psychology                  | 23        | 7.7        |
| BS-Pak- Study                  | 23        | 7.7        |
| BS-Chemistry                   | 23        | 7.7        |
| BS-Mathematics                 | 23        | 7.7        |
| BS-Botany                      | 23        | 7.7        |
| BS-English                     | 24        | 8          |
| BS-Physics                     | 23        | 7.7        |
| BS-Islamic Studies             | 23        | 7.7        |
| BS-Urdu                        | 23        | 7.7        |
| BS-Zoology                     | 23        | 7.7        |
| BS-Computer Science            | 23        | 7.7        |
| BS-Statistics                  | 23        | 7.7        |
| BS-Health & Physical Education | 22        | 7.4        |
| Total                          | 299       | 100        |

### 8. Result and Discussion

#### 8.1 Descriptive Statistics

The EFL students' opinions by questionnaire have been analyzed quantitatively as well. The frequency and percentage of each statement is mentioned by undermentioned table.

| Questionnaire | N | <u>Always</u> | <u>Often</u> | <u>Sometimes</u> | <u>Rarely</u> | <u>Never</u> |
|---------------|---|---------------|--------------|------------------|---------------|--------------|
|               |   | Fre. Per      | Fre Per      | Fre Per          | Fre Per       | Fre Per      |

|                                                                                                     |     |        |          |        |        |           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|--------|----------|--------|--------|-----------|
| In online English classes, I feel so nervous that I sometimes forget things I already know.         | 299 | 39 13  | 63 21    | 124 42 | 39 13  | 34 11     |
| I feel hesitate to answer voluntarily in online second language classes.                            | 298 | 18 6   | 57 19    | 71 24  | 42 14  | 110 87    |
| I am confident when I speak second language in face to face classes.                                | 298 | 121 41 | 60 20    | 53 18  | 41 4   | 23 8      |
| I don't feel embarrassed about mistakes in second language digital class.                           | 298 | 19 5   | 57<br>19 | 73 25  | 110 87 | 39 13     |
| I feel scared when I don't understand what the teacher says during virtual second language classes. | 299 | 31 19  | 41 19    | 59 41  | 61 12  | 42 22     |
| I would love to ready well for face to face second language Classes.                                | 298 | 153 51 | 63 21    | 45 15  | 19 6   | 18 5      |
| I feel more nervous and depress in my online class than in traditional English class.               | 298 | 137 46 | 54 18    | 22 8   | 63 21  | 89 30     |
| I feel much engrossed in real English language learning in traditional class.                       | 299 | 118 40 | 88 29    | 36 12  | 20 7   | 36 12     |
| I feel loneliness because of not interacting to other people in virtual learning class.             | 299 | 71 24  | 47 16    | 72 24  | 38 13  | 71 24     |
| Because of quick negotiation in virtual English class, I worry about getting left behind.           | 299 | 93 31  | 54 18    | 88 29  | 30 10  | 34 11     |
| I skip traditional environment because I think my fellows speak better English than me.             | 299 | 33 11  | 42 14    | 81 27  | 42 14  | 102<br>34 |
| I get worry when I don't comprehend each word the English teacher speaks in                         | 299 | 54 18  | 60 20    | 99 33  | 35 12  | 51 17     |

|                                                                                                             |     |        |       |       |       |        |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|--------|-------|-------|-------|--------|
| virtual learning Environment.                                                                               |     |        |       |       |       |        |
| I am scared that my peers will laugh at me when I talk in English with background noises in virtual class.  | 299 | 172 58 | 54 18 | 81 27 | 30 10 | 18 5   |
| I would certainly feel relax and anxiety free because of absence of eye interaction in ESL online learning. | 298 | 175 59 | 53 17 | 85 27 | 32 11 | 20 5   |
| A traditional classroom setting is more appropriate for me than a virtual (online) learning class.          | 291 | 151 51 | 46 15 | 22 7  | 22 7  | 44 15  |
| A virtual (online) classroom setting is more appropriate for me than a traditional Classroom.               | 271 | 61 20  | 13 4  | 22 8  | 36 12 | 139 47 |

## 8.2 Qualitative Analysis

In order to have qualitative analysis, the researcher had to explore EFL learners' preferences, so that the reasons behind their choices might be analysed. Based on the study respondents who preferred traditional classroom learning over online learning, the researcher explored the motivations behind their preference. Some key insights and valuable comments included:

*"I prefer traditional classes because I can gain more knowledge compared to online classes."*

*"Eye-to-eye contact in a real classroom fosters self-motivation and confidence."*

*"I like traditional classrooms because they encourage active participation."*

*"In real classrooms, it's easier to understand the teacher."*

*"Active participation helps me grasp concepts more effectively."*

*"Traditional classes provide extra knowledge, boost confidence, and offer learning beyond the topic."*

*"I prefer real classrooms because managing time in virtual classes can be challenging."*

*"Teachers use real-time examples to discuss issues in traditional classrooms."*

*"We may again ask the teacher what we couldn't understand"*

The study assessed and analyzed the preferences of the study population regarding virtual (online) classes. To achieve this, the statement "A virtual (online) classroom is more suitable for me than a traditional classroom" was examined.

Here are the rephrased comments:

*"I feel embarrassed in front of teachers and classmates, which is why I prefer online learning."*

*"In virtual classes, we often attend just for attendance rather than for understanding or learning."*

*"There is a lack of participation in virtual classes."*

*"I worry about falling behind."*

*"Internet connectivity issues are a major concern."*

*"I feel uncomfortable during online classes."*

*"I can never feel fully satisfied with online learning."*

*"Traditional classes are more suitable for us because they provide comfort, ensure proper study schedules, and help us make the best use of our time."*

*"I like online classes because they promote self-motivated learning through practical exploration on the internet."*

*"Online classes save energy as they eliminate the need to commute daily and reduce the effort required to prepare and present ourselves."*

## **9. Conclusion**

The study's main conclusion highlights the increasing significance and value of virtual foreign language learning, with English as a second language playing a crucial role in students' growth and development worldwide.

In response to Research Question 1 (RQ1) — "What are EFL undergraduate learners' perceptions about English foreign language anxiety in traditional versus virtual classrooms?" — it has been determined that EFL undergraduate students from various disciplines in District Haripur (KPK, Pakistan) experience significant anxiety when studying English as a foreign language in virtual classrooms. This anxiety is influenced by the country's linguistic diversity and the limited use of other languages, which contributes to their challenges.

The learners identified various technical issues and obstacles as the primary causes of their anxiety. The findings indicate that while learning English as a foreign language is a source of concern for students, this anxiety is more pronounced in virtual classes compared to traditional ones. The study concludes that traditional classrooms are more effective for learning English as a foreign language than virtual environments.

It is evident that students experiencing the highest levels of anxiety about their English proficiency are those enrolled in online courses. These learners have expressed deep concerns and reservations about the transition to virtual learning and have highlighted the difficulties they face in this mode of education. They also emphasized their preference for and motivation toward traditional classrooms, which they perceive as more conducive to effective learning and personal engagement.

The researcher formulated RQ2: *Which type of learning environment causes more English foreign language anxiety—traditional or virtual?* In response, students highlighted difficulties in their online courses, noting that lecturers on virtual platforms struggled to engage them in creative activities or facilitate effective communication. They expressed a strong preference and motivation for traditional classroom settings, showing a keen interest in concept-building and problem-solving approaches. Additionally, they provided valuable suggestions for enhancing the traditional classroom environment, emphasizing the importance of learner-centered education (LCE).

In response to RQ3 —*What are the possible reasons for anxiety among ESL undergraduate learners in traditional and virtual classrooms?*—students identified several factors contributing to their anxiety when studying English as a foreign language (ESL) online. These factors include a lack of resources, reduced clarity in comprehension, increased learner laziness, challenges with technical innovation, and insufficient engagement and professional practice from tutors. The learners highlighted these issues as significant barriers to their success, ultimately leading to feelings of demoralization and frustration.

The study explored the factors contributing to anxiety among ESL undergraduate students in both traditional and virtual classrooms, with a focus on foreign language acquisition, virtual courses, and the

traditional classroom environment. It examined the connection between anxiety and students' academic progression, offering insights for fostering growth and development while minimizing stress in language learning. In a developing country like Pakistan, where resources, infrastructure, and facilities are limited, this research fills a critical gap by analyzing key factors such as university and instructor support, the positive and negative aspects of online learning environments, and the influence of home study conditions, internet challenges, and resource availability on virtual education. The findings are particularly relevant for academics and future researchers interested in understanding undergraduate education in District Haripur during the COVID-19 era. This study also sheds light on how the fear of learning a new language impacts EFL students in both traditional and virtual learning contexts.

## 10. Recommendations

To gain a deeper understanding of how English is taught at institutions in District Haripur, KPK (Pakistan), a survey using structured questionnaires was conducted. Conclusions and recommendations were drawn based on undergraduate students' perspectives on foreign language learning in virtual and traditional classrooms. Key findings and recommendations include:

- Pakistan's online education system faces significant logistical issues, including unreliable electricity and internet connectivity, limited access to digital devices and technological knowledge, and inadequate cyber security expertise. Many students lack access to television, and even those who do are hindered by extensive load-shedding, especially in rural areas. To address these challenges, government intervention is necessary at all levels to establish a reliable framework for online education.
- The Higher Education Commission (HEC) serves as an advisory body, leaving the implementation of its guidelines to individual universities, which often follow inconsistent rules. This has resulted in disorganized higher education. Urgent institutional reforms are needed to foster educational progress.
- Online systems offer the potential to globalize education. Initially, universities can focus on nationalizing online education, but leading institutions like NUML, Quaid-i-Azam University, IIUI, and Punjab University can work toward internationalization. Pakistan's higher education system should be restructured to become more agile, innovative, globally connected, socially conscious, inclusive, and open to risk-taking. Novel educational models should be adopted.
- Advances in technology now enable educators to employ diverse methods for knowledge dissemination. Particularly in foreign language learning, instructors are encouraged to incorporate more conversational and interactive approaches to enhance engagement.
- The HEC established a COVID-19 Technology Support Committee to help universities develop remote learning standards (Maqsood et al., 2021). However, a comprehensive strategic plan is necessary for long-term success.
- Digital education in Pakistan is hindered by significant obstacles, particularly unequal internet access, which disproportionately affects underprivileged and rural students. Emphasis must be placed on infrastructure development and investment in research and development.
- Institutions in Pakistan commonly use tools like Google Meet, Google Classroom, LMS, Zoom, and YouTube for distance learning (Maqsood et al., 2021). However, privacy concerns, limited internet access, financial and technical constraints, lack of family support, and insufficient feedback mechanisms have hampered the effectiveness of these programs (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Bao, 2020).
- Educators face difficulties due to inadequate preparation, lack of prior experience, and dissatisfaction with online teaching methods. Challenges such as reduced face-to-face

interaction, delayed feedback, lack of conventional training, and limited internet access have negatively impacted online education. To address these issues, pedagogical strategies should be developed to support novice instructors and broaden the scope of online education beyond medical and technical fields.

- The reliance on instructors in online education can increase their psychological stress. Teaching staff and counselors play a critical role in providing emotional support to students during challenging times (James et al., 2011).
- Developing countries like Pakistan, which lack the infrastructure for online education, were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. To unlock the full potential of technology in education, efforts must focus on closing the digital divide and addressing gender disparities. Rural and economically disadvantaged populations require access to digital skills, reliable infrastructure, and internet connectivity.
- Effective coordination between the HEC, higher education institutions (HEIs), the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), and the Ministry of IT and Telecommunications is crucial. Institutions must invest in adequate infrastructure to ensure all students can complete their studies. For instance, Punjab's digital libraries, equipped with modern technology and infrastructure, provide a model for virtual courses that other provinces could replicate. Comprehensive funding and collaboration are essential to extend these benefits nationwide. HEC and HEIs should also focus on training faculty to design, implement, and evaluate online education effectively.

These recommendations aim to enhance the quality and accessibility of both traditional and virtual education, fostering a more inclusive and effective learning environment in Pakistan.

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