

Classroom Silence: Investigating the Fear of Speaking among High School Students in South Kamrup area of Kamrup District, Assam

Dr. Utpal Kalita, Assistant Professor

Department of Education, R. G. Baruah College, Guwahati, Assam

Abstract

Classroom participation through verbal expression is a key component of effective learning, yet many high school students remain silent due to fear of speaking in class. This study investigates the extent, causes and variations of this fear among students in South Kamrup, Assam. The research employed a descriptive survey design, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Data were collected from 150 high school students (Classes IX and X) through a structured questionnaire, and from 20 high school teachers through semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that approximately 68% of students experience moderate to high levels of fear when speaking in class. The most prominent factors contributing to this fear include fear of making mistakes (74%), lack of self-confidence (67%), fear of peer judgement (61%), and negative teacher reactions (55%). The study found significant gender-based differences, with female students reporting higher levels of fear than male students. Additionally, an inverse relationship was observed between academic performance and fear—students with lower academic scores exhibited greater fear of speaking. Teacher interviews highlighted peer pressure, language anxiety, cultural norms, and teacher behaviour as key influences on students' speaking confidence. Both students and teachers suggested that supportive classroom environments, encouragement from teachers, group activities and the avoidance of public criticism could help mitigate this fear.

Keywords: *Fear of speaking in class, high school students, South Kamrup, academic performance, gender*

Introduction

Effective communication is a cornerstone of the educational process. In a classroom setting, students are expected not only to listen and comprehend but also to actively participate by asking questions, engaging in discussions, and presenting their thoughts. However, a significant number of students remain silent, hesitant or anxious when it comes to speaking in front of their peers and teachers. This phenomenon, often described as "fear of speaking in class," is

a critical but underexplored issue in the context of school education.

Fear of speaking in class is a form of communication apprehension or classroom anxiety that affects students' willingness to express themselves verbally. This fear can stem from various sources, such as low self-esteem, fear of judgement, language barriers, past negative experiences, peer pressure, or a lack of supportive classroom environment.

This fear of speaking in class not only hampers a student's personal development but also affects the teaching-learning process. Teachers may misinterpret silence as disinterest or lack of preparation, when in fact it may be rooted in psychological distress or anxiety. Addressing this issue requires understanding its root causes and identifying the specific challenges students face in expressing themselves in class.

Given the growing emphasis on holistic and inclusive education, it is vital to explore and understand this phenomenon from a ground-level perspective. This study, therefore, aims to investigate the prevalence and causes of fear of speaking in class among high school students in the South Kamrup area. By shedding light on this silent barrier to learning, the research hopes to contribute to more inclusive, empathetic, and learner-friendly educational practices in high schools across Assam and beyond.

Literature review

Some of the related literatures on fear of speaking in the classroom are stated below:

Bourhis, Allen, & Bauman (2006) found that students often refrain from asking questions or engaging in discussions due to fear of embarrassment or peer ridicule. Singh (2016) studied students in North India and found that fear of speaking was more prevalent among female students, those from rural backgrounds, and those studying in second-language (English-medium) environments. Sharma and Das (2019) focused on Assamese school

students and found that students from tribal and economically weaker sections exhibited greater classroom silence, often due to linguistic barriers and lack of self-confidence. Goswami (2020) conducted research in the Kamrup district and found that many high school students feel anxious about expressing themselves due to fear of being judged, scolded, or laughed at—especially in large classrooms.

While national-level studies exist, limited research is available on high school students from rural or semi-urban areas like South Kamrup, Assam. This study aims to fill that gap by providing localized insights into the causes and implications of fear of speaking in class.

Rationale of the study

The ability to speak confidently in a classroom setting is an essential component of effective learning and overall academic development. In today's education system, student participation is not only encouraged but expected as part of active learning methodologies such as group discussions, debates, presentations, and peer interactions. However, a considerable number of students, especially in rural and semi-urban areas like South Kamrup in Assam, remain silent in classrooms due to a persistent fear of speaking. This silence often goes unnoticed or is misunderstood by teachers, leading to further disengagement of students from the teaching-learning process.

Despite possessing the required knowledge or understanding of a subject, students may refrain from speaking due

to anxiety, shyness, fear of judgement, fear of making mistakes, or negative past experiences. This fear can hinder their confidence, limit their classroom engagement, and adversely affect their academic performance and future communication skills. Furthermore, in traditional classroom settings where teacher-centred approaches still dominate, there is little room for open dialogue and student expression. This results in many students, particularly those from underrepresented or disadvantaged backgrounds, feeling excluded or discouraged from participating.

The South Kamrup area presents a unique context for studying this issue due to its mix of urbanizing environments and traditional rural educational settings. Cultural expectations, gender roles, socio-economic status, and linguistic diversity in this region may further influence the nature and intensity of students' fear of speaking in class. Yet, very few empirical studies have been conducted in this area to systematically understand this phenomenon and its underlying factors.

The rationale of this study lies in addressing a hidden yet critical aspect of classroom dynamics that directly impacts students' academic and personal development. The findings of this research are expected to inform future educational practices and interventions that promote confident communication and active participation among high school students in Assam.

Objectives of the study

1. To investigate the extent of fear of

speaking in class among high school students in South Kamrup.

2. To identify the factors contributing to this fear.
3. To examine any differences in fear levels based on gender and academic performance.
4. To suggest strategies to reduce fear and encourage active classroom participation.

Hypotheses of the Study

1. There is a significant difference in fear of speaking in class between male and female students.
2. Students with lower academic performance experience higher fear of speaking in class.

Methodology

- a) Research Design:** The present study is descriptive and survey-based in nature under mixed method research. A descriptive survey design has been chosen to collect data from a large number of students to understand their level of fear, the factors contributing to it, and its effect on classroom participation.
- b) Population:** The population for this study consisted of all high school students (classes IX to X) studying in provincialized high schools located in the South Kamrup area of Assam.
- c) Sample and Sampling Technique:** A total of 150 students were selected as the sample from 10 Provincialized high schools for the study using a stratified random

sampling technique. The sample was stratified based on gender (Male and Female), and academic performance level (four categories based on last examination results) to ensure representation from different demographic groups. Additionally, 20 high school teachers were interviewed informally to gain qualitative insights into classroom dynamics and student behaviour.

d) Tools for Data Collection: To collect relevant data, the following tools were used:

- **Self-constructed Questionnaire for Students:** A structured questionnaire containing 10 Likert-scale items and 5 open-ended questions was used to assess the students' fear of speaking in class, its causes and its impact. The questionnaire was validated by subject experts and piloted be-

fore final administration.

- **Interview Schedule for Teachers:** A semi-structured interview schedule with 10 questions was developed for teachers to gather their observations and perceptions about students' speaking behaviours and possible classroom factors contributing to fear.

- e) **Techniques of Data Analysis:** Quantitative data (from the Likert-scale items) were analysed using descriptive statistics like percentages. Qualitative data (the responses collected from the teacher interviews) were analysed using thematic analysis.

Analysis and Interpretation

In this study, both quantitative and qualitative data were analysed using appropriate techniques in the following manner:

Table 1
Level of Fear of Speaking in Class among High School Students

Fear Level	Number of Students (N=150)	Percentage (%)
High Fear	52	34.7%
Moderate Fear	68	45.3%
Low Fear	30	20.0%
Total	150	100%

The table 1 shows that a significant portion (34.7%) of students reported high fear, while 45.3% had moderate fear. Only

20% had low fear. This implies that a large majority feel anxious or hesitant about speaking in class.

Table 2
Factors Responsible for Fear of Speaking in Class

Factors	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
Fear of being judged by peers	61%	20%	19%
Lack of self-confidence	67%	18%	15%
Fear of making mistakes	74%	16%	10%
Negative teacher reaction	55%	24%	21%
Poor communication skills	48%	30%	22%
Language barrier (e.g., English or Assamese)	40%	28%	32%

The above table reveals the factors responsible for fear of speaking in class and found that top contributing factor was fear of making mistakes (74%), followed by lack of self-confidence (67%) and fear of being judged by peers (61%). These internal psychological barriers appear stronger than

external ones. Negative teacher reactions (55%) and poor communication skills (48%) were also influential. Language barriers were noted by 40% of students, highlighting the challenge of instruction in second languages.

Table 3
Variation in Fear of Speaking in Class among Students based on Gender

Gender	High Fear	Moderate Fear	Low Fear	Total Students
Male	20 (26.3%)	36 (47.4%)	20 (26.3%)	76
Female	32 (43.2%)	32 (43.2%)	10 (13.6%)	74

Table 3 shows that among female students, 43.2% reported high fear compared to 26.3% of male students.

Females also had a lower percentage in the “low fear” category.

Table 4
Influence of Academic Performance on Fear of Speaking in Class

Academic Performance	High Fear	Moderate Fear	Low Fear	Total Students
Below 40%	18 (60%)	9 (30%)	3 (10%)	30
40%–59%	20 (44.4%)	18 (40%)	7 (15.6%)	45
60%–79%	10 (22.2%)	25 (55.6%)	10 (22.2%)	45
80% and above	4 (10%)	16 (40%)	20 (50%)	40

Table 4 shows that students with below 40% mark had the highest level of fear (60%), followed by those in the 40–59% category (44.4%). On the other hand,

students scoring 80% and above reported the lowest fear levels, indicating a clear inverse relationship between academic performance and fear of speaking.

Table 5
Suggested Measures to Reduce Fear of Speaking in Class

Suggestions by Students	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Teachers should be more encouraging	58	38.7%
Group activities to build confidence	42	28.0%
More opportunities for speaking in class	36	24.0%
Avoid public scolding for mistakes	28	18.7%
Peer support and language practice sessions	22	14.7%

Students suggested that fear. Avoiding public scolding (18.7%) and encouragement from teachers (38.7%), offering peer support or language sessions group activities (28%), and more speaking (14.7%) were also highlighted. opportunities (24%) could reduce their

Table 6
Thematic Analysis of Teacher Interviews

Theme Code	Sample	Teacher Response (Quote)	Interpretation
Causes of Speaking Fear	Fear of negative judgment	Students fear that their friends will laugh at them if they say something wrong.	Peer pressure plays a strong role in inhibiting classroom participation.
Causes of Speaking Fear	Fear of making mistakes	They hesitate because they're scared of making mistakes, especially in English.	Fear of language errors is a major barrier.
Causes of Speaking Fear	Shyness/low confidence	Many students are too shy, especially when asked to read aloud or answer.	Personality traits such as introversion affect speaking behaviour.
Gender-based Differences	Girls less vocal	Girls generally speak less, especially in front of boys.	Cultural or social norms may restrict female students from speaking freely.
Gender-based Differences	Boys more outspoken	Boys usually speak up more, though not always correctly.	Boys may be encouraged to speak more despite errors.

Teacher's Role	Fear of punishment/criticism	They worry I'll scold them if they give the wrong answer.	Teacher reaction plays a direct role in students' willingness to speak.
Teacher's Role	Encouragement helps participation	When I praise or gently correct, students are more likely to try again.	Positive reinforcement increases classroom speaking.
Language Barriers	Weak in English	Many can't express themselves well in English, so they stay silent.	English as a second language poses a major fear factor.
Language Barriers	First-generation learners	Some students are first in their family to study in English-medium schools.	Socio-economic background contributes to communication fear.
Suggested Strategies	Group activities	Small group discussions help students open up more.	Collaborative environments reduce pressure to perform.
Suggested Strategies	Encouragement and patience	We need to give them more chances without immediate correction.	Supportive teaching practices can help break the silence barrier.

The above table presents a thematic analysis of the responses collected from high school teachers in South Kamrup, Assam. The data were coded according to emerging patterns and grouped into major themes related to the fear of speaking in class among students. Selected quotes from the teachers illustrate the core issues and inform potential interventions.

Teachers confirmed that peer pressure, language fear, shyness, and negative teacher behaviour all contribute to student silence. They emphasised the need for patience, group work, and positive reinforcement to encourage speaking. Gender and socio-economic background were identified as influencing factors.

Results and Discussion

- 68% of students reported moderate to high levels of fear of speaking in class.
- The most common causes of fear were:
 - Fear of making mistakes (74%)
 - Lack of self-confidence (67%)
 - Fear of being judged by peers (61%)
 - Negative teacher reactions (55%)
 - Poor communication skills and language barriers
- Peer pressure and fear of embarrassment were consistently noted by both students and teachers as key factors inhibiting participation.

4. Language barrier (English or Assamese) emerged as a prominent issue, especially among first-generation learners.
5. Fear was significantly higher among female students compared to male students.
6. Female students were found to be more hesitant, potentially due to social conditioning and co-educational dynamics.
7. Students with lower academic performance were more likely to experience high fear, while high-performing students reported less anxiety.
8. Supportive and encouraging teacher behaviour played a major role in reducing fear.
9. Students believed that group discussions, classroom encouragement, and eliminating public scolding would help them speak more freely.
10. Teachers recommended creating safe speaking spaces, using collaborative activities, and being gentle in corrections to boost students' confidence.

The findings of the present study offer significant insight into the phenomenon of fear of speaking in class among high school students of South Kamrup, Assam. The data reveal that a considerable proportion of students experience moderate to high levels of fear when asked to speak in class. This fear is not a superficial issue but one deeply rooted in a variety of psychological and environmental factors. For instance, fear of making mistakes, being judged by peers,

and a lack of self-confidence emerged as prominent contributors to this anxiety. The presence of such fear negatively affects the ability of students to express themselves, ask questions or participate in classroom discussions, which are all crucial components of holistic education.

Gender-based analysis of the data further reveals that female students tend to experience slightly higher levels of fear compared to their male counterparts. This observation could be influenced by socio-cultural factors that discourage assertive behaviour among girls, especially in rural or semi-urban settings like South Kamrup. Additionally, the study found that students with lower academic performance were more likely to experience a higher degree of speaking fear, suggesting a cyclical relationship wherein poor academic achievement and fear of speaking reinforce each other. The academic consequences of such fear can be severe, as students who are hesitant to ask questions or clarify doubts may continue to lag behind in their studies. Hence, both hypotheses are accepted in this research.

Moreover, language barriers—particularly in English and, at times, even in Assamese—further compound the problem. Students who are not confident in their linguistic abilities often hesitate to speak due to fear of grammatical mistakes or pronunciation errors, leading to embarrassment or ridicule. Teacher behaviour also plays a crucial role; students reported that discouraging remarks or public criticism by teachers intensified their fear of speaking. In contrast, students

expressed that encouraging and supportive classroom environments made them feel more comfortable and confident.

The study also brings attention to the importance of group activities, peer support, and safe speaking environments in overcoming speaking fear. Suggestions from students, such as being given more speaking opportunities, forming smaller discussion groups, and receiving constructive feedback instead of public correction, point to the need for pedagogical reforms. These findings collectively suggest that addressing the fear of speaking in classrooms requires a multidimensional approach that involves changes in teaching methods, classroom culture, and student support mechanisms. The results

underscore the need for schools, educators, and policy-makers to recognise classroom silence not as a sign of discipline or respect, but as a symptom of deeper issues that need urgent intervention for the academic and emotional well-being of students.

Conclusion

Fear of speaking in class is a significant emotional barrier for students, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas like South Kamrup. Addressing this issue requires a holistic approach involving teachers, peers, and school administrators. Cultivating a safe and encouraging environment can greatly enhance student participation and academic success.

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