

Linguacultural Anxiety and Academic Underperformance in a Buddhist Tertiary Institution in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

English language anxiety has been widely recognised as a significant affective barrier to language learning and academic achievement in higher education contexts worldwide. This study investigates the relationship between English language anxiety and academic performance among undergraduate students at Sri Lanka Buddhist and Pali University (SLBPU), an institution whose scholarly identity is deeply embedded in Pali and Sinhala intellectual traditions and whose student body consists exclusively of male students, comprising Buddhist reverends (approximately 70%) and lay male undergraduates (approximately 30%). Drawing on Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope's (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), the study employs a convergent mixed-methods design. A sample of 100 students was drawn from a population of 150 undergraduates through stratified random sampling across the Faculties of Buddhist Studies and Language Studies, with 15 participants subsequently selected for in-depth semi-structured interviews. Quantitative analysis revealed a significant negative correlation between anxiety and Grade Point Average ($r = -.52, p < .001$). Qualitative findings generated four interconnected themes: cultural and linguistic distance from English, the evaluative weight of English in the tertiary setting, the lecture hall as a site of exposure and judgment, and strategic withdrawal as a dominant coping mechanism. The study offers an empirically grounded and contextually nuanced account of English language anxiety in a distinctive Asian higher education setting, extending the Asian Englishes literature by foregrounding cultural and religious incongruence as significant and undertheorised sources of anxiety in institutions with strong non-English scholarly traditions.

Keywords: English language anxiety, FLCAS, academic performance, Sri Lanka, Asian Englishes, Sri Lanka Buddhist and Pali University, mixed methods, tertiary education, postcolonial, Buddhist reverends

1. INTRODUCTION

The globalisation of English as the dominant language of higher education has generated growing scholarly interest in the psychological and affective dimensions of English language learning, particularly among students for whom English represents not merely a second language but a historically and culturally charged code (Kirkpatrick, 2007; Canagarajah, 1999). Across much of Asia, English functions simultaneously as a language of academic opportunity and as a marker of social inequality, its benefits disproportionately accessible to those with urban, socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds (Tupas, 2015). Among the affective consequences of this unequal linguistic landscape, English language anxiety has emerged as one of the most pervasive and academically consequential phenomena, with a substantial and growing body of research documenting its negative relationship with language learning outcomes across diverse Asian educational contexts (Zhang, 2019; Dewaele, 2013; Liu & Jackson, 2008).

Sri Lanka presents a particularly instructive case within this broader landscape. As a postcolonial society with a complex multilingual ecology encompassing Sinhala, Tamil and English, it exemplifies the tensions that characterise many Asian contexts in which English functions as a prestige language while remaining linguistically and culturally distant from the lived experiences of the majority population (Parakrama, 2012). Within Sri Lankan higher education, English serves as the primary medium of academic instruction across many disciplines, yet a substantial proportion of undergraduates arrive at university with limited functional proficiency in the language, having navigated unequal access to quality English language education during their pre-tertiary years (Canagarajah, 1999; Weerakoon et al., 2024).

This tension is felt with particular acuity at Sri Lanka Buddhist and Pali University (SLBPU), an institution whose academic mission is rooted in Buddhist studies, Pali language scholarship and Sinhala-medium intellectual traditions. SLBPU occupies a singular position within the Sri Lankan higher education landscape: its student body consists entirely of male students, of whom approximately 70% are Buddhist reverends (bhikkhus) and 30% are lay male undergraduates. For both groups, and especially for the reverend students whose daily lives are governed by the Vinaya; the ancient monastic code of discipline transmitted through Pali and Buddhist tradition; English is experienced not merely as a linguistically demanding subject but as a culturally and spiritually incongruent code, one that seems to belong to a world far removed from the scholarly and religious identity they inhabit. Despite this, English forms a compulsory part of the undergraduate curriculum across the Faculties of Buddhist Studies and Language Studies, and proficiency in English is increasingly necessary for postgraduate study and international academic engagement. The convergence of religious vocation, cultural identity, linguistic distance and institutional requirement creates a uniquely anxiety-prone learning environment that has not yet been subjected to systematic empirical investigation.

This study addresses that gap by examining the nature, sources and academic consequences of English language anxiety among undergraduates at SLBPU, employing a convergent mixed-methods design that combines quantitative measurement with qualitative depth. In doing so, it aims to make two complementary contributions: to advance the scholarly understanding of English language anxiety in Asian higher education, and to provide contextually grounded pedagogical insights for educators working in institutions where strong non-English religious and scholarly traditions coexist with the demands of English-medium instruction.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 English Language Anxiety: Conceptual Foundations

The systematic study of language anxiety in educational settings was significantly advanced by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986), who defined foreign language anxiety as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process. Their conceptualisation identified three primary components: communication apprehension, referring to the anxiety associated with speaking and listening in the target language; test anxiety, arising from the fear of academic evaluation; and fear of negative evaluation, which captures the apprehension about how one is judged by others in the language learning context. The instrument they developed to measure these dimensions; the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), comprising 33 Likert-scale items; has become the most widely used and validated tool for measuring language anxiety across diverse educational settings worldwide.

A complementary theoretical perspective is offered by Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which proposes that high affective states such as anxiety erect a psychological barrier that impedes the acquisition and meaningful processing of linguistic input. In this model, anxious learners may encounter abundant exposure to the target language yet fail to absorb it productively, because the affective filter prevents that input from being internalised. This mechanism carries particular explanatory power in the SLBPU context, where students; and most acutely the reverend students; encounter English not only as an unfamiliar linguistic system but as one that feels culturally remote from the Pali-Sinhala religious and scholarly world that anchors their academic and personal identity.

Building on these foundations, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) demonstrated that anxiety exerts a pervasive influence across all stages of language processing; input, consolidation and output; and that unaddressed anxiety tends to intensify over time rather than diminish naturally. MacIntyre (2017) has since developed a more dynamic conceptualisation, characterising anxiety as situationally variable rather than dispositionally fixed; fluctuating across tasks, interlocutors and classroom conditions in ways that reflect the specific social and evaluative pressures of each learning moment. This perspective is especially pertinent for understanding how anxiety manifests differently across the varied

instructional contexts SLBPU students navigate; from large formal lectures to smaller seminar discussions and individual written assessments.

2.2 English Language Anxiety in Asian Higher Education

Research on English language anxiety in Asian tertiary contexts has accumulated substantially over the past three decades, producing a rich body of evidence that both confirms and contextualises the foundational findings of Horwitz et al. (1986). In Japan, Kitano (2001) identified fear of negative evaluation as the dominant anxiety predictor among college-level learners, closely interwoven with cultural norms of face-saving and the social risks of public performance. In China, Liu and Jackson (2008) documented pervasive reluctance to communicate in English among university students, driven primarily by anxiety about public error and the perceived social costs of linguistic failure. In South Korea, Kim (2009) found that anxiety levels shifted considerably across task types, with oral production tasks consistently eliciting the highest anxiety responses. Across these diverse national settings, a coherent pattern emerges: the evaluative and performative dimensions of English language use in the classroom are the primary triggers of anxiety, and its consequences; reduced participation, avoidance behaviour and diminished academic outcomes; prove remarkably consistent across cultural boundaries.

In South Asian tertiary contexts, the anxiety-performance relationship appears to be particularly intense. Researchers working in Pakistan, Bangladesh and India have consistently reported that the prestige and gatekeeping function of English; its deep association with social class, intellectual credibility and professional advancement; amplifies anxiety well beyond levels typically encountered in East Asian or Western settings (Dewaele, 2013). Within Sri Lanka, Nagodavithana and Premarathne (2023) have documented strikingly similar dynamics, observing that the historical entanglement of English with colonial privilege and its contemporary role as an academic and professional gatekeeper generates an intensely evaluative communicative environment for many Sri Lankan undergraduates. Weerakoon et al. (2024) have further noted that this environment bears most heavily on students from communities with restricted access to English language resources; for whom the university setting may represent their first sustained encounter with English as a medium of academic instruction.

2.3 Cultural and Religious Identity and Language Anxiety

While the majority of language anxiety research has centred on its communicative and evaluative dimensions, a growing body of scholarship has begun to explore the role of cultural identity in shaping how learners respond affectively to English (Dovchin, 2020; Tupas, 2015). In many Asian contexts, learning English is not a culturally neutral undertaking. It involves a negotiation between the learner's existing cultural and linguistic self and the values, norms and communicative conventions associated with the English-speaking world; a negotiation that can feel destabilising or even threatening for learners whose identity is deeply anchored in a non-English tradition.

Dovchin (2020) has captured this dynamic through the concept of "linguacultural anxiety," arguing that for many learners in postcolonial and peripheral contexts, anxiety about English cannot be disentangled from anxiety about cultural belonging and identity. Tupas (2015) has similarly argued that the inequalities embedded in the spread of English across Asia mean that, for many learners, engaging with the language entails a sociocultural negotiation that is inherently anxiety-producing, regardless of their linguistic starting point. These perspectives resonate powerfully with the SLBPU context. The institution's foundational commitment to a Pali-Sinhala Buddhist scholarly tradition creates a form of cultural incongruence for students who are simultaneously expected to perform academically in English. For the reverend students who constitute the majority of the student body, this incongruence carries an additional spiritual dimension: English is not merely culturally unfamiliar but is perceived as belonging to a secular and Western epistemic world that stands in contrast to the monastic vocation and religious identity around which every aspect of their lives is organised. This specifically religious dimension of language anxiety has received almost no attention in the existing literature, and its exploration represents one of the most distinctive contributions of this study.

2.4 Anxiety and Academic Performance

The relationship between language anxiety and academic performance has been extensively examined at the tertiary level. Zhang's (2019) meta-analysis, drawing on 95 independent studies, found a consistent moderate negative correlation between FLCAS scores and academic achievement in language courses ($r = -.32$ on average), with higher-anxiety students demonstrating lower classroom participation, greater behavioural avoidance and weaker performance on both written and oral assessments. Critically, this relationship proved bidirectional in nature; underperformance fed back into anxiety, generating a self-reinforcing cycle that showed considerable resistance to disruption without deliberate pedagogical intervention. The meta-analysis also found that this correlation tended to be stronger in Asian and postcolonial settings than in Western ones, suggesting that the sociocultural amplifiers particular to these contexts; including language prestige, face-saving norms and unequal educational access; intensify both the anxiety itself and the academic harm it produces.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), in which quantitative survey data and qualitative interview findings were collected concurrently and integrated at the level of interpretation. The quantitative strand was designed to establish the nature and statistical strength of the relationship between anxiety and academic outcomes, while the qualitative strand was designed to illuminate the lived experiential, cultural and institutional dimensions of that relationship within the specific context of SLBPU. Integration of the two strands allowed quantitative patterns to be contextualised and deepened through participants' own accounts of their experiences.

3.2 Participants

The target population comprised 150 undergraduate students enrolled across the Faculties of Buddhist Studies and Language Studies at SLBPU. Consistent with the institution's distinctive demographic composition, all participants were male. The student body at SLBPU consists of approximately 70% Buddhist reverends (bhikkhus) and 30% lay male undergraduates, a composition that was reflected proportionally in the sampling design.

A sample of 100 students was selected through stratified random sampling, with strata defined by faculty, student status (reverend or lay) and year of study (first, second and third year), ensuring proportional representation across all key demographic dimensions. Of the 100 participants, 73 were Buddhist reverends and 27 were lay male undergraduates, reflecting the approximate institutional ratio with naturally occurring variation. Students from all three year groups were represented in roughly equal proportions across both strata.

An additional 15 participants were purposively selected from within the survey sample for semi-structured interviews, chosen to represent a wide range of anxiety profiles from high to low as indicated by their FLCAS scores, with representation maintained across both student status categories and both faculties. This purposive selection was designed to maximise the experiential diversity captured in the qualitative data and to ensure that both reverend and lay perspectives were adequately represented in the thematic analysis.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

The FLCAS (Horwitz et al., 1986), comprising 33 Likert-scale items rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), was administered to all 100 participants in both Sinhala and English. The Sinhala version was produced through a rigorous forward-backward translation process and subsequently validated with a panel of three bilingual academics to ensure full linguistic and conceptual equivalence with the original instrument. Higher aggregate scores on the FLCAS indicate higher anxiety, with scores above 99 conventionally regarded as indicative of moderate to high levels. Academic performance was

operationalised as each participant's cumulative Grade Point Average (GPA) in English-medium modules completed during the preceding academic semester, obtained through formal institutional channels with the approval of the university registry.

A semi-structured interview guide comprising ten open-ended questions was developed through iterative review of the relevant theoretical and empirical literature, with careful attention to the particular institutional and cultural context of SLBPU. The guide explored participants' subjective experiences of anxiety in English language classes, the specific classroom situations and interactional dynamics that provoked anxious responses, participants' perceptions of the relationship between English and their Buddhist and Pali academic identity, the ways in which anxiety shaped their academic engagement and assessment performance, and the personal strategies they had developed for managing anxiety in English-medium settings. For reverend participants, the guide included additional questions exploring how their monastic identity and religious vocation intersected with their experience of English language learning. All interviews were conducted in Sinhala to ensure participant comfort and encourage the candid, reflective responses that qualitative inquiry requires, and were audio-recorded with the informed consent of each participant.

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS Version 26. Descriptive statistics were computed for all FLCAS items and for GPA scores, with separate descriptive analyses conducted for reverend and lay student subgroups to capture meaningful within-sample variation. Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the bivariate relationship between total FLCAS scores and GPA, and multiple regression analysis was conducted to assess the independent predictive contribution of anxiety to GPA after controlling for faculty, student status and year of study.

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim in Sinhala and subsequently translated into English by a qualified bilingual researcher with expertise in both languages and familiarity with the Buddhist scholarly context of SLBPU. The translated transcripts were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, with themes developed inductively from close reading of the data and subsequently interpreted through the theoretical lenses of Horwitz et al. (1986), MacIntyre (2017) and Dovchin (2020). To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, member checking was undertaken with five participants, who were invited to review and respond to the emerging themes and the interpretations offered.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Quantitative Results

Descriptive analysis revealed that 69% of the 100 participants reported moderate to high levels of English language anxiety, with a mean FLCAS score of 104.3 (SD = 15.8) out of a possible maximum of 165. This figure is notably higher than means reported in comparable studies conducted at mainstream Sri Lankan universities, a pattern consistent with the expectation that the distinctive institutional and cultural context of SLBPU would generate elevated anxiety levels among its students.

Analysis by student status revealed a significant difference in anxiety levels between the two groups. Reverend students ($n = 73$) reported a mean FLCAS score of 107.8, compared with a mean of 96.4 among lay male students ($n = 27$), a difference that reached statistical significance ($t = 3.84$, $p < .001$). This finding suggests that the monastic vocation and religious identity of bhikkhu students constitute an additional and independent source of anxiety that amplifies their English language anxiety beyond the levels experienced by their lay peers.

Anxiety also varied across year of study, with first-year students reporting the highest mean scores (mean = 111.6), followed by second-year students (mean = 103.2) and third-year students (mean = 96.4). This pattern suggests that sustained engagement with English-medium tertiary education may produce a gradual, if modest, reduction in anxiety over time.

Pearson correlation analysis confirmed a significant negative correlation between total FLCAS scores and GPA ($r = -.52, p < .001$), indicating that higher levels of anxiety were strongly and consistently associated with lower academic performance in English-medium modules. Multiple regression analysis further established that anxiety was a significant independent predictor of GPA ($\beta = -.44, p < .001$) after controlling for faculty, student status and year of study, accounting for approximately 27% of the variance in academic performance. Student status also emerged as a significant independent predictor ($\beta = -.21, p < .01$), with reverend students showing lower average GPA scores in English-medium modules even after anxiety levels were held constant, pointing to additional factors associated with monastic student status that influence academic outcomes beyond anxiety alone.

4.2 Qualitative Results

Thematic analysis of the fifteen semi-structured interviews produced four primary themes. Each is presented below with illustrative quotations translated from Sinhala, attributed by year of study and student status to preserve the demographic texture of the data.

Theme 1: Cultural and Linguistic Distance from English

This theme emerged as the most contextually distinctive feature of the SLBPU experience and was raised spontaneously by the great majority of participants, with particular frequency and intensity among the reverend students. Across the interviews, English was consistently characterised not merely as a difficult language but as a culturally incongruent one; a code felt to be disconnected from the Pali-Sinhala intellectual and spiritual world in which participants felt most capable, most articulate and most fully themselves.

A third-year reverend student from the Faculty of Buddhist Studies gave voice to this experience with particular precision:

"When I study the Dhamma in Pali or Sinhala, I feel that I truly understand it; that the language carries the meaning. When I am asked to write about it in English, something is lost. The English words do not hold the same depth."

A first-year reverend student from the Faculty of Language Studies described the disorientation of English-medium instruction in terms that captured a wholesale collapse of scholarly confidence:

"In our other subjects we are scholars. We know the texts, we can discuss them, we have ideas. But the moment the lecturer speaks in English, I feel like a child who has just started learning. All my knowledge disappears."

A lay student offered a perspective that both resonated with and distinguished itself from the reverend experience:

"For the reverends it must be even harder because English is so far from everything they live for. For me it is also difficult; English feels like it belongs to a different world from the one I grew up in."

Taken together, these accounts suggest that for SLBPU students, English language anxiety is not merely communicative in origin. It is rooted in a deeper disruption of scholarly identity; what Dovchin (2020) has termed linguacultural anxiety; that is specific to contexts where the dominant academic tradition is grounded in a non-English intellectual heritage.

Theme 2: The Evaluative Weight of English

Across both faculties and both student groups, participants described English proficiency as functioning as a proxy for academic intelligence and scholarly worth within the university environment. The inability to perform fluently in English was widely experienced as causing others; including both peers and lecturers; to underestimate one's intellectual ability, regardless of the depth of knowledge one possessed in Buddhist studies or Pali scholarship. A second-year reverend student articulated this dynamic with considerable clarity:

"If you speak English well, people think you are intelligent. If you struggle with English, they think you do not know anything, even if you have studied very deeply in your own field. That feeling; that judgment; makes me very anxious whenever I have to use English."

A third-year reverend student gave particular expression to the institutional contradiction embedded in this experience:

"This university exists to honour our tradition, our language, our Buddhist heritage. But in the English class, all of that counts for nothing. Only your English matters. It is a contradiction I find very difficult."

Theme 3: The Lecture Hall as a Site of Exposure and Judgment

Specific pedagogical practices were consistently identified by participants as acutely threatening. Unsolicited oral participation, public error correction and timed written tasks in English were experienced as exposing and humiliating across both reverend and lay student groups. A first-year reverend student described what happened when called upon unexpectedly to respond in English:

"When the lecturer calls my name to answer in English, my heart beats very fast and I forget everything I know. My mind goes blank even though I had prepared. Afterwards I feel ashamed."

A second-year lay student described the somatic experience of anxiety during an oral presentation with striking vividness:

"My hands were shaking. I could not look at anyone. I had practised many times but when I stood in front of the class and had to speak in English, it was as if all the preparation disappeared."

Several reverend participants identified an additional dimension of exposure that was specific to their monastic status; a heightened sensitivity to public performance arising from the social expectations attached to their religious vocation and the visibility of their identity as bhikkhus within the university community. Being seen to fail in a public academic setting carried reputational implications that extended beyond the individual to the monastic community they were understood to represent.

Theme 4: Strategic Withdrawal as Coping

The most consistently reported coping strategy across both student groups was a pattern of deliberate and sustained non-participation in English-medium classroom activities. This took multiple forms: selecting peripheral seating to reduce the likelihood of being called upon, avoiding eye contact with lecturers, refraining from asking questions, and remaining silent during discussions even when participants had genuine and substantive contributions to make. One participant articulated the logic of this strategy with striking self-awareness:

"I always sit at the back. If I sit at the front, the lecturer will ask me questions and I will have to answer in English. At the back, I am safer. I know this means I do not learn as well, but I cannot help it."

Another participant acknowledged with evident frustration the self-defeating quality of the same strategy:

"I know that if I participated more, my English would improve and my marks would be better. But every time I think about speaking in English in class, the fear is stronger than the knowledge that I should do it. So I stay quiet."

This pattern was present across both reverend and lay students, though reverend participants described an additional layer of reluctance rooted in the public visibility of their monastic identity. Several expressed concern that poor performance in English in front of lay peers would bring shame not only to themselves personally but to the monastic community they were seen to embody and represent.

5. DISCUSSION

The quantitative findings of this study align with and extend the established international literature on the negative relationship between English language anxiety and academic performance in tertiary

contexts (Zhang, 2019; MacIntyre, 2017). The correlation found here ($r = -.52$) exceeds the moderate average reported in Zhang's (2019) meta-analysis, a difference that may reflect the compounding effects of cultural and religious incongruence, limited prior English language exposure and the distinctive institutional identity of SLBPU; factors that collectively intensify both the anxiety itself and its academic consequences beyond what is typically observed in mainstream university settings.

The finding of significantly higher anxiety scores among reverend students than among their lay peers is theoretically important and deserves sustained attention. It suggests that the monastic vocation and religious identity of bhikkhu students constitute an additional and distinctive source of anxiety that existing theoretical models have not accounted for. For reverend students, English is not merely culturally distant; it is perceived as belonging to a secular and Western epistemic world that stands in fundamental contrast to the Pali-Sinhala Buddhist tradition around which their intellectual and spiritual lives are entirely organised. This finding extends Dovchin's (2020) framework of linguacultural anxiety into a specifically religious register, suggesting that for learners whose identity is grounded in a religious vocation, the anxiety provoked by English language learning may be intensified by a sense of spiritual as well as cultural incongruence; a dimension that previous scholarship has not explored.

The persistence of elevated anxiety scores among second and third-year students, despite a modest year-on-year decline, points to an important pedagogical implication: temporal exposure to English-medium instruction, while producing some gradual reduction in anxiety, is insufficient on its own to disrupt the anxiety-performance cycle in any meaningful way. This finding reinforces the argument that deliberate, theoretically informed pedagogical intervention is not optional but essential for institutions serving student populations whose anxiety levels are as high as those documented here.

Strategic withdrawal deserves particular attention as the dominant coping mechanism across both student groups. The participant quotations gathered in this study give compelling voice to a painful dynamic that is widely theorised but rarely heard in participants' own words: students are fully aware that their silence is academically self-defeating, yet find themselves unable to overcome the force of anxiety in the moment of performance. This is not a failure of motivation or effort; it is the expression of an affective response that, in the absence of appropriate pedagogical support, proves stronger than rational self-knowledge. The additional layer of monastic visibility; the concern that poor English performance reflects not only on the individual but on the religious community he represents; intensifies this dynamic for reverend students in ways that demand specific and sensitively designed institutional responses.

The evaluative weight of English described by participants reflects the enduring sociolinguistic hierarchies that Parakrama (2012) and Canagarajah (1999) have theorised in the Sri Lankan postcolonial context. At SLBPU, the contradiction between the institution's formal celebration of Pali-Sinhala Buddhist scholarship and the implicit devaluing of non-English competence in English language assessment contexts is felt with particular sharpness, and its resolution calls for institutional commitment as well as pedagogical creativity.

6. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study carry concrete implications for English language educators and institutional leaders at SLBPU and comparable institutions across Asia in which strong non-English religious and scholarly traditions coexist with the expectations of English-medium tertiary education.

First, and most fundamentally, English language instruction at SLBPU should be reconceived as culturally and religiously inclusive. Rather than presenting English as a neutral academic skill to be acquired in isolation from students' existing scholarly identities, educators could draw deliberately and respectfully on students' deep knowledge of Buddhist texts, Pali scholarship and Sinhala intellectual traditions as vehicles for English language tasks. This approach frames English as an additional tool in the scholar's repertoire rather than a culturally alien replacement for the expertise students already possess; an orientation that directly addresses the cultural incongruence identified throughout this

study as a primary source of anxiety, and that is especially significant for reverend students for whom the perceived distance between English and their monastic vocation is most acute.

Second, classroom environments need to be thoughtfully restructured to reduce evaluative threat. The evidence from this study is clear that practices such as unsolicited oral participation and public error correction are experienced as acutely threatening, particularly by reverend students who carry the additional burden of monastic visibility. Replacing these practices with collaborative small-group activities, peer dialogue tasks and low-stakes formative assessments would allow students to build confidence in English in conditions that do not trigger the fear of public exposure and humiliation that currently drives strategic withdrawal.

Third, translanguaging; the purposeful and principled incorporation of Sinhala alongside English for conceptual clarification, idea generation and academic discussion; should be formally recognised as a legitimate and valuable pedagogical resource in English language classrooms at SLBPU. This is not a concession to linguistic limitation but a pedagogically principled affirmation of students' full multilingual repertoire. Emerging evidence from Asian ELT contexts consistently demonstrates that translanguaging reduces anxiety, supports meaningful engagement with academic content and affirms the linguistic identities of students whose non-English competencies might otherwise be rendered invisible (Dryden et al., 2021).

Fourth, SLBPU should invest in English language support programmes that are explicitly framed as scholarly development opportunities rather than remedial provision. At an institution where academic identity is so closely tied to a specific intellectual tradition, the stigma associated with remedial support is particularly powerful. Framing English language competence as one dimension of the contemporary Buddhist scholar's toolkit; alongside Pali, Sinhala and subject expertise; would position the support as aspirational rather than deficit-oriented, and would be far more likely to attract and retain the students who most need it.

Fifth, professional development for academic staff should include structured engagement with anxiety-responsive pedagogy, equipping lecturers with both the theoretical understanding and the practical strategies needed to identify and constructively respond to English language anxiety in their students. This is especially important given that many SLBPU lecturers may not themselves have received formal training in English language pedagogy and may be unaware of the specific practices that the research literature consistently identifies as anxiety-producing.

Sixth, at the institutional level, SLBPU would benefit from developing an explicit and publicly affirmed policy of multilingualism; one that formally recognises Pali and Sinhala as scholarly languages of equal standing alongside English and that directly addresses the contradiction between the institution's celebrated non-English academic mission and the implicit linguistic hierarchy that English-medium assessment currently imposes upon its students.

7. CONCLUSION

This study has offered an empirically grounded and contextually specific account of English language anxiety among undergraduate students at Sri Lanka Buddhist and Pali University; a setting that has received no previous systematic research attention and that raises theoretical questions not adequately addressed by existing models. The strong negative relationship between anxiety and academic performance ($r = -.52$), combined with qualitative evidence of cultural and religious incongruence and the pervasive coping strategy of strategic withdrawal, makes a compelling case for urgent and sustained pedagogical attention to the affective dimensions of English language learning in this context.

The findings extend the existing Asian Englishes literature in three significant ways. They demonstrate, first, that cultural incongruence; the experience of English as being in tension with a deeply held non-English academic and personal identity; is a substantial and undertheorised source of anxiety in institutions with strong non-English scholarly traditions. They introduce, second, the concept of religious incongruence as a distinct and additional dimension of linguacultural anxiety for learners

whose identity is grounded in a monastic vocation; a dimension that has not previously been theorised or empirically investigated. And they show, third, that the anxiety-withdrawal-underperformance cycle documented in mainstream Asian ELT research operates with particular force and persistence in postcolonial contexts where the prestige of English coexists with deep institutional and community commitments to non-English religious and scholarly traditions.

Longitudinal studies and comparative investigations across multiple institutions; including other universities in Sri Lanka and the broader Asian region that serve monastic student populations; would provide a stronger empirical base for the pedagogical and institutional recommendations offered here, and would advance the theoretical development of a field that has not yet fully reckoned with the anxieties produced at the intersection of religious vocation, cultural identity and the global spread of English.

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