

## Impact of Psychological Barriers and learned Helplessness on Language Proficiency

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### ABSTRACT

*Learning of English language in government institutions where Urdu is the primary medium of instruction is a perpetual challenge for students. This linguistic barrier drastically impacts student's communication and comprehension skills, and hampers their academic performance and confidence. To better understand these challenges, the current study examines how psychological barriers and learned helplessness impact English language proficiency among 100 randomly selected female students, enrolled in semester II of Govt. Girls Degree College Sarai Salah, Haripur. Data were collected by using Psychological Barrier Questionnaire, Learned Helplessness Scale, and Interagency Language Round table Scale. The findings demonstrated weak, negative correlation between Psychological Barriers, Learned Helplessness and English proficiency, while a weak positive relationship emerged between learned helplessness and psychological barriers. Although none of these correlations reached statistical significance, they suggest meaningful directional trends. The regression analysis shows a statistically significant negative impact of Learned Helplessness on Language proficiency, indicating that greater helplessness correlates with lower proficiency. These results accentuate dire need to address the psychological and contextual factors to maximize student's language proficiency.*

**Keywords:** *Learned Helplessness, Psychological Barriers, Language Proficiency, Undergraduate students*

### INTRODUCTION

Proficiency in a language is particularly important for personal, academic, and professional development since it allows access to various channels of information and communication in today's interconnected society. Attaining proficiency in English, particularly as a second language, poses significant challenges and difficulties in the context where English is not the medium of instruction, as is the case in Pakistan. Pakistani learners encounter major challenges with English language, because of it being taught as a second language and struggling with psychological barriers hindering learning ability of students.

Psychological Barriers (PB), particularly stress, anxiety, fear of failure, and low self-esteem, have been recognized as critical hindrance to language learning. These elements can

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greatly hamper students' motivation, increase avoidance behaviors, and hinder active participation in language acquisition processes (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Empirical studies have shown the pervasive impact of these barriers on students' English language proficiency. For example, research by Qureshi et al. (2023) demonstrate the significant role of self-esteem, motivation, and test anxiety in the mass failure of students in English language exams in secondary schools across Pakistan. Moreover, Memon et al. (2025) observed that students in the English Department at Shaikh Ayaz University experience challenges such as nervousness, fear of making grammatical and pronunciation mistakes, and a lack of adequate vocabulary, all of which restrict their speaking proficiency.

In addition to this, learned helplessness (LH), a psychological condition in which learners consider their actions as ineffective, aggravate these challenges. LH can lead to decreased motivation, withdrawal from academic tasks, and a belief that success is unachievable (Seligman, 1975). In the context of English language learning, LH manifests when students repeatedly encounter hurdles and perceive their efforts as ineffectual, leading to disengagement and stagnation in the development of language proficiency.

The interaction between PB and LH produces a hazardous cycle that significantly influences English language ability. Those students who perceive very high levels of anxiety and fear of failure will develop helplessness, which further reduces their motivation and engagement with the language. This cycle can be seen most prominently among government institutions, where English is taught as a subject instead of a medium of instruction, tending to expose them to less practice and exposure opportunities.

In Pakistan students in government institutions also encounter the added challenge of English being a subject taught in a school setting where the medium of instruction is Urdu. Such students have to contend not just with language skills but also emotional and motivational obstacles that undermine their achievement. And notwithstanding the importance placed on proficiency in English for academic and career advancement, psychological hindrances and helplessness still shortchange students' progress.

Since these are the obstacles, the current research endeavor seeks to explore the correlation of psychological barriers, learned helplessness, and English proficiency skills among undergraduate students in a government institution. Through exploring these interconnected factors, the current study aims to determine root causes inhibiting language acquisition and to develop specific interventions to improve English language learning performance.

### **Rationale of the study**

This study is set against the backdrop of English Language learning as second language in Pakistan, a country influenced by its colonial past and subsequent socio-cultural context. English language declared as the language of governance and education during British Raj has led to its association with power, prestige and elitism fostering a sense of anxiety, fear and ambivalence among Pakistani ESL learners. Limited access to quality English teaching, lesser

exposure, cultural differences have further contributed to psychological barriers such as stress, fear of failure, family pressure, inferiority complex and ego impacting the English language proficiency

Unlike previous research examining the individual roles of psychological barriers and learned helplessness in relation to English language proficiency, this study aims to fill the gap by investigating the combined effect of psychological barriers and learned helplessness on English language proficiency which is still unexplored.

### **Statement of the problem**

Psychological barriers and learned helplessness affect English language proficiency among female undergraduate students.

### **Objectives of the study**

Objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the relationship between Psychological Barriers (PB), Learned Helplessness (LH) and English language Proficiency (ELP) among female undergraduate students.
2. To examine the predictive role of PB and LH in EP among the female undergraduate students.

### **Research Hypothesis**

The following hypotheses were developed for the current study:

1. There will be an inverse relationship between PB, LH and ELP among undergraduate students.
2. PB and LH will have a negative impact on ELP among undergraduate Students

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Psychological Barriers to English Language Fluency**

The research has persistently showed that psychological fences drastically impede English language fluency among students. For instance, Jullanda and Dauba (2025) identified key psychological obstacles such as lack of confidence, linguistic anxiety, fear of receiving poor grades, and motivational issues among students in higher education institutions of private sector. Similarly, Soomro et al. (2023) emphasized that students with rural backgrounds often experience peer pressure, lack of confidence, hesitation, and speech anxiety—all of which add to difficulties in spoken English.

Reinforcing these findings further, Gul and Mohammad (2022) examined the psychological and communicative challenges faced by secondary school students in Toba Tek

Singh, Pakistan. Their research showed a general deficiency in speaking skills among not only students but also tutors, underscoring the need for better instructional approaches in language education. Brown (2001), as cited in Jin (2023), referred to the anxiety experienced in second-language classrooms as “nerve-wracking,” a condition that disrupts communication and may lead to shyness and a reluctance to participate (Liu, 2006).

The negative impact of emotional discomfort on speaking performance has been reported by empirical researches in Pakistan. Ahsan et al. (2020) observed a negative relationship between lack of confidence, shyness and speaking achievement among EFL learners in South Punjab. Similarly, Ullah et al. (2022) observed that restricted vocabulary, fear of speaking, nervousness, and repeated failures can greatly lower down learners’ self-esteem and motivation, further reinforcing psychological barriers.

Supporting this view, Gobena (2024) reported that 75% of students at the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in Eastern Ethiopia associated their difficulty with English speaking to psychological barriers such as stage anxiety, fear of making mistakes, lack of motivation, and low self-confidence. These factors were considered to be more impactful than linguistic barriers like grammar.

Likewise, Qureshi et al. (2020) examined postgraduate students in TESOL and ELT programs in Pakistani public universities and found out that psychological barriers —specifically low self-esteem, anxiety, shyness, and fear of making errors and a general lack of enthusiasm significantly hampered learners’ English-speaking proficiency.

### **Challenges in Learning English**

Psychological barriers are further compounded by academic and structural issues in English language instruction. Pakistani undergraduate students frequently struggle with essay writing, particularly in the correct use of punctuation and tense (Nazim, Iftikhar, & Madad, 2024). Additionally, difficulties in comprehending and applying general vocabulary across contexts, expressing complex ideas, and engaging in conversations remain prevalent (Kumar et al., 2023).

Several studies have pointed to inadequate teacher proficiency, ineffective teaching methodologies, poor classroom strategies, and limited resources as contributing factors to these challenges (Shan & Abdul Aziz, 2022; Hussain et al., 2022; Shah et al., 2021). These pedagogical shortcomings, when combined with psychological obstacles, severely impair students' ability to attain English fluency.

### **Learned Helplessness in Language Learning**

Among the most crucial psychological barriers to language learning is learned helplessness (LH)—a state where learners believe they are incapable of success due to repeated failures or lack of motivation and encouragement. Tu et al. (2014) found that LH often results in

reduced struggle and effort in studies, academic withdrawal, and the internalization of negative beliefs about learning, self-worth and self-belief.

According to Dauba and Jullanda (2024), students having lack of interest in achieving English language proficiency often exhibit fear of failure, avoidance of responsibility, and escapist behavior when encountering with academic tasks. Al Maraziq et al. (2024) further observed that LH contributes to academic procrastination and a decline in self-motivation.

The role of teacher assistance is pivotal in this context. Hua He (2021) emphasized that caring and supportive educators can minimize the effects of LH, helping students re-engage with academic learning. Raufelder et al. (2013) in the same way observed that learners who feel emotionally connected to their teachers are far less likely to experience learned helplessness. On the contrary, psychological control exerted by teachers can increase LH and negatively impact academic outcomes (Filippello et al., 2014).

To summarize, psychological barriers such as fear of failure, anxiety, under confidence and learned helplessness greatly impact English language proficiency among students. Certain systemic issues, including inadequate teaching methods and limitations of resources also compound these challenges. In the contexts where English serves as either a second or foreign language addressing both emotional and structural impediments through teacher training, supportive learning environments, and targeted psychological interventions stand crucial for fostering English proficiency among students

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The major objective of the present study is to evaluate the relationship between psychological barriers, learned helplessness and English language proficiency. It further examines the impact of psychological barriers and learned helplessness on language proficiency, among undergraduate students.

The following are the conceptual and operational definitions of these variables.

### **Psychological Barriers**

Psychological Barriers act as roadblocks in exchanging ideas making it harder for individuals to comprehend others as well as express themselves. These barriers can negatively influence decision-making process, thereby reducing the effectiveness of communication. Stress, fear of failure, parental pressure, socioeconomic status, Ego, anger, or low self-esteem can give rise to these emotional barriers (Mohammad, 2025). PB is operationally defined as the students' responses on Psychological Barriers Questionnaire.

## **Learned Helplessness**

Learned helplessness develops when an individual repeatedly experiences uncontrollable aversive stimuli and learns to believe that their actions do not impact the outcome, leading to a state of passivity and resignation (Leonard, 2024). LH is operationally defined as scores of students on form B of Learned Helplessness Scale.

## **Language Proficiency**

Language Proficiency is “the degree of fluency in speaking a particular language. It is the skill of using a language both orally as well as in writing with linguistic and communicative competence, and the ability to apply knowledge in real-world situations” (Bedore et al., 2012). LP is operationally defined as the teachers’ rating of their students’ proficiency in English language on first two levels of Interagency Language Roundtable Scale. The teachers’ rating was used here to ensure objective and realistic analysis of the students English language proficiency owing to the teachers’ professional expertise.

## **Research Design**

The present study employed correlational research design to examine the relationship among PB, LH and LP. Survey method was used to collect data from the undergraduate students.

## **Sample**

The population of the present study consisted of 165 students enrolled in the second semester across 5 Bs departments at GGDC, Sarai Saleh, Haripur. A sample of 100 undergraduate students was randomly selected from this population calculated through a sample size formula for a finite population, with the assistance of Google based tools. The computed sample size ensured a 95% confidence interval and 5% margin of error.

## **Inclusion Criteria**

The study included undergraduate students enrolled in the 2nd semester across five BS departments at G.G.D.C Sarai Salah, Haripur, who were actively learning English language as a subject.

## **Exclusion criteria**

This study excluded the students if they were not learning English language as a subject; were enrolled in semesters other than the second; or were not enrolled in undergraduate program.

## Variables

Psychological Barriers (stress, fear of failure, family pressure, inferiority complex and Ego) and Learned Helplessness were the independent variables whereas English language proficiency was dependent variable in current research study.

## Research Instruments

The present study employed three standardized questionnaires and a demographic information sheet to gather relevant data. A brief description of each instrument is provided below.

### The Psychological Barriers Questionnaire

The Psychological Barriers Questionnaire in Learning English was developed by Preety (2022,) was utilized in the current study to assess psychological obstacles faced by the students in language learning. The PBQ is a semi-structured, self-reported questionnaire which assesses five psychological barriers on 14 items scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

It evaluates five key psychological barriers

**Stress:** Refers to mental and emotional pressure students experience due to academic expectations, deadlines, competition, and performance anxiety. (5 items)

**Fear of Failure:** A strong emotional response where students worry about making mistakes when speaking or writing in English. (2 items)

**Family Pressure:** It involves the expectations and demands placed on students by parents or relatives to excel in academics, often with a strong emphasis on English proficiency as a mark of success and social status (3 items)

**Inferiority Complex:** An inferiority complex in this context is a deep rooted feeling among the students that they are less competent than others in English, especially when compared to peers from English-medium or urban backgrounds. (2 items)

**Ego:** Represents internal resistance or pride that prevents students from seeking help or acknowledging their difficulties in learning English. (2 items)

The original scale reported a Cronbach's alpha reliability of 0.90. In the current study, the reliability coefficient was 0.69, which may be attributed to factors such as small sample size, cultural or contextual and the demographic variation in the original validating sample and the present sample.

**Learned Helplessness Scale (LHS), Form B**

The Learned Helplessness Scale (LHS) Form B, developed by Quinless and Nelson (1988), was used to assess students' perceptions of helplessness in academic situations. It contains 20 items scored on a four-point Likert scale:

The items 1, 4, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 18 are scored as Strongly Agree = 4, Agree = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1; whereas the items 2, 3, 5, 6, 10, 12, 14, 16, 19, 20 are reverse-scored, i.e. Strongly Agree = 1, Agree = 2, Disagree = 3, Strongly Disagree = 4

The total score ranges from 20 to 80, with higher scores indicating greater levels of learned helplessness. The original reliability was reported at  $\alpha = 0.85$ , while the current study found a reliability coefficient of  $\alpha = 0.69$

**Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) Scale**

The Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) Scale was developed by the U.S. government in the 1950s. This scale measures proficiency across five levels:

1. Elementary Proficiency – Basic communication for routine tasks
2. Limited Working Proficiency – Routine work and social interactions
3. Professional Working Proficiency – Fluency in most social and workplace settings.
4. Full Professional Proficiency – Accurate and fluent communication in all professional contexts
5. Native or Bilingual Proficiency – Comparable to an educated native speaker

In the present study, only the first two levels—Elementary Proficiency and Limited Working Proficiency—were used to evaluate the language skills of undergraduate students. Each level includes five descriptive statements to guide faculty assessment. The Cronbach's alpha for this scale in the current research was 0.77.

**Procedure**

After the preliminary preparations the administration of GGDC, Sari Saleh was requested for approval of the said research. Upon their approval, the heads of 5 departments were approached and requested to randomly select 20 students from their respective departments resulting in a total sample of 100 participants.

Keeping in view the research ethical standards, the sample was provided with informed consent form. They were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, their



right to voluntary participation and to withdraw from the research at any stage. These measures helped in developing rapport and trust between the researcher and the sample.

Data collection process was started after a good rapport was developed between the researcher and the sample by using English language Proficiency Scale, Learned helplessness Scale (LHS) form B and Psychological barriers Questionnaire. The English language proficiency scale was administered to English language teaching faculty while LHS form and Psychological barriers in learning English language questionnaire were completed by the students themselves.

Participants were given clearly instructions for completing all questionnaires honestly. There were no time restrictions for completing the scale ensuring that all participants could complete the instruments at their own space in a stress-free environment. At the end, they were thanked for their participation in the study.

## RESULTS

**Table 1**

*Psychometric Properties of Interagency Language Roundtable Scale, Learned Helplessness Scale, and the Psychological Barriers in Learning English Language Questionnaire (N = 100)*

Scales	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	Cronbach's $\alpha$
ILRS	1.59	.698	14-56	0.69
LHS	1.08	.307	20-80	0.69
PBQ	1.50	.503	10-60	0.77

*Note.* ILRS = Interagency Language Roundtable Scale; LHS = Learned Helplessness Scale; PBQ = The Psychological Barriers Questionnaire; *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation.

The reliability of alpha coefficients for the Interagency Language Roundtable Scale, Learned Helplessness Scale and The Psychological Barriers Questionnaire are .69, .69 and .77, respectively, as shown in Table 1. These findings showed that all scales are trustworthy and exhibit a high degree of internal consistency.

**Table 2**

*Correlation among Interagency Language Roundtable Scale, Learned Helplessness Scale, and the Psychological Barriers in Learning English Language Questionnaire (N = 100)*

Variables	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
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1	ILRS	100	1.59	.698	-	-.081	-.0187
2	LHS	100	1.08	.307	-	-	.065
3	PBQ	100	1.50	.503	-	-	-

Note. *M* = mean, *SD* = standard deviation.

In Table 2 the correlation analysis shows that PB and LH are inversely related with the ELP. However, the relationship is weak and statistically insignificant (-0.081) between English Language Proficiency and Learned Helplessness, and Psychological Barriers (-0.187). The positive relationship (.065) between Learned Helplessness and Psychological Barriers is also not statistically significant. The results though non-significant statistically, the direction of the relationship support the hypothesized trends. The non-significant relationship can be attributed to the small sample size.

**Table 3**

***Regression Analysis Predicting Impact of Psychological Barriers and Learned Helplessness on English Language Proficiency (N = 100)***

Variables	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$	<i>P-Value</i>
Constant	35.500	4.601				
LHS	-.236	.102	-.228	.052	.042	0.022
Constant	34.284	7.086				
PBQ	-.237	.179	-.133	.018	.008	0.188

Note. ELPS = Interagency Language Roundtable Scale; LHS = Learned Helplessness Scale; PBQ = The Psychological Barriers Questionnaire; *B* = unstandardized beta;  $\beta$  = standardized beta;  $R^2$  = R square;  $\Delta R^2$  = R square change.

Results of table 3 demonstrates LH is a statistically significant predictor of Language Proficiency ( $\beta$  = -.228,  $p$  = .022 < .05), which is in the hypothesized direction that Learned Helplessness will impact Language Proficiency. Whereas PB is not a statistically significant predictor of LP. ( $\beta$  = -.133,  $p$  = .188 > .05). This suggests that PB might influence LP, but has not appeared as a strong predictor in the current data. Moreover, the R-squared values for both the LH and PB (0.052 and 0.018) suggest that the current regression model has limited explanatory power, falling short of the general benchmark of R-squared > 0.7, which indicates a strong fit. This implies potential gaps in capturing key factors influencing the outcome variable as well as due to small sample size.

## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The present study investigated the relationship between Psychological Barriers, Learned helplessness and English language Proficiency among female undergraduate students. The impact

of Psychological Barriers and Learned helplessness on English language Proficiency among the same sample was also examined.

Table 1 shows acceptable internal consistency of the scales. The Cronbachs' alpha values of .69 of the LHS and ILRS indicates acceptable reliability. The PBS with a Cronbachs' alpha value of .77 showed stronger internal consistency suggesting it is a more stable measure. The results affirm that the scales used to measure the constructs are trustworthy.

Table II revealed weak and statistically insignificant relationship between the variables. While the negative correlations between PS, LH and ELP are not strong, they are aligned with the hypothesized directions that greater LH and PB tend to impair language performance. The lack of statistical significance may be attributed to small sample size which limits the power to detect subtle effects.

These findings are supported by earlier studies that Learned Helplessness in English classrooms significantly lowers test score for junior high school students and established a causal relationship between learned helplessness and academic performance (Leng, 2024). Additionally, Tan et al (2024) study revealed gender variations in learned helplessness of ruler junior high school students in learning English, with boys experiencing higher level of learned helplessness than girls.

Similarly, the findings for PB and ELP are in line with the existing literature reported a negative relationship between shyness, lack of confidence and speaking English achievement among EFL learners enrolled at different public sector colleges and universities (Ahsan et al, 2020). Similarly, Gobena, (2024) findings revealed that 75% of participants agreed that English language speaking skills were hindered by psychological barrier namely fear of mistakes, stage anxiety, shyness, lack of confidence, and lack of motivation.

Findings in Table II also indicated a positive but insignificant relationship (.065) between Learned Helplessness and Psychological Barriers which may be attributed to a small sample size. Nevertheless, the findings are in predicted direction and in line with the previous findings reported by Khan et al, 2020, and Naz et al (2022) that there is a significant positive correlation among learned helplessness, loneliness and depression and learned helplessness and social integration with psychological distress among medical students.

The regression analysis presented in table III show some compelling evidence in favour of LH as a significant predictor of ELP, thus supporting the hypothesis that feelings of helplessness impairs the learner's ability to perform in language tasks. This suggests that the learners who experience repeated failures are likely to perform poorly in ELP. These findings are supported by Sparks et al. (2008) who reported that students with lower self-perceptions of competence (often linked to LH) scored lower on language proficiency assessments. Wang et. al. (2021) reported that students develop destructive behavior and attitudes towards their educational goals due to LH.

While the impact of PB on ELP is not strong the negative  $\beta$  value indicates the expected directional trends which conforms to the existing literature. Oxford (1999) reported that factors like anxiety or stress are not always associated with language success, and in some cases, can be moderated through other means like language learning strategies or support systems. Similarly, Baker et. al (2003) found mixed effects of anxiety, showing that while anxiety negatively impacted performance in some contexts, it had no clear effect in others.

The model's low  $R^2$  values of 0.52 for LH and .018 for PBQ indicates the limited explanatory properties of these variables for English proficiency. To better explain the variations in ELP additional predictors, such as, motivation, cognitive ability, and the quality of instructional strategies should be investigated on a larger sample size in future studies.

## CONCLUSION

While learned helplessness emerges as a significant barrier to English language proficiency, the role of psychological barriers remain less clear and warrants further investigation. Overall, the findings point to the importance of addressing learner's psychological needs alongside language instructions to foster more effective and inclusive learning environments.

## Limitations and Future Suggestions

The small sample size is the major limitation of the study which could not fully explain the variations in ELP by LH and PB despite the findings being in the expected directions. Moreover, the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings to broader population.

- i. The female sample selected from one college further limits its generalizability to its own population.
- ii. The chances of social desirability bias emerging from self-report measures cannot be overlooked.
- iii. The potential mediating or moderating variables, such as motivation or teacher support, were not explored, which could have provided a more nuanced understanding of the relationships examined.

In future heterogeneous, larger sample should be investigated to ensure statistical power of the findings. Relevant moderating and demographic variables should be incorporated to understand the complex dynamics of psychological barriers, learned helplessness and English language proficiency.

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