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EXPLORING SOCIO-EMOTIONAL FACTORS AND THE ROLE OF EMBARRASSMENT IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN GEORGIAN UNIVERSITIES

ABSTRACT

This study explores the influence of socio-emotional factors—particularly embarrassment—on English language acquisition among university students in Georgia. Recognizing the growing importance of English proficiency for academic and professional advancement, the research investigates how emotional barriers impact learners' communicative performance, classroom participation, and motivation. Guided by the principles of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), the study employs a quantitative, descriptive methodology, surveying 124 undergraduate students from both public and private universities across Georgia. Results reveal that embarrassment, anxiety over pronunciation, and fear of negative evaluation are prevalent and significantly hinder learners' willingness to engage in oral communication. While many students report reduced confidence and participation due to these factors, others demonstrate resilience and a proactive desire to improve. The findings underscore the need for emotionally supportive pedagogical strategies, including low-stakes speaking opportunities, constructive feedback, and educator training on emotional sensitivity. This study contributes to the growing body of research on affective factors in second language acquisition and offers practical recommendations to enhance the emotional well-being and communicative competence of language learners in higher education.

Tags: English language acquisition, socio-emotional factors, embarrassment, foreign language anxiety, higher education, communicative competence, language learning barriers.

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სოციალურ-ემოციური ფაქტორები და სირცხვილის განცდის ბარიერები ინგლისური ენის დაუფლების პროცესში საქართველოს უმაღლეს სასწავლებლებში

აბსტრაქტი

წინამდებარე კვლევა ეხება სოციო-ემოციური ფაქტორების, განსაკუთრებით კი უხერხულობის განცდის გავლენას ინგლისური ენის დაუფლებაზე საქართველოს უნივერსიტეტების სტუდენტთა კვლევის აქტუალობა განპირობებულია ინგლისური ენის, როგორც გლობალური კომუნიკაციის საშუალების მზარდი მნიშვნელობით, აგრეთვე ემოციური ბარიერების მნიშვნელოვანი როლით, რომლებიც გავლენას ახდენენ სტუდენტთა კომუნიკაციურ აქტივობაზე, აკადემიურ მოტივაციაზე და ენის გამოყენების თავდაჯერებულობაზე. კვლევა ეხმიანება გაეროს მდგრადი განვითარების მეოთხე მიზანს (SDG 4 – ხარისხიანი განათლება) და ემყარება აღწერით-რიცხობრივ მეთოდს. მონაცემთა შეგროვება განხორციელდა ანონიმური გამოკითხვის საშუალებით და მასში მონაწილეობა მიიღო 124 სტუდენტმა როგორც საჯარო, ისე კერძო უნივერსიტეტებიდან. შედეგებმა აჩვენა, რომ უხერხულობის განცდა, გამოთქმის შიში და ნეგატიური შეფასების მოლოდინი ფართოდ არის გავრცელებული და მნიშვნელოვნად ამცირებს სტუდენტთა მონაწილეობას ზეპირ კომუნიკაციაში. თუმცა, ზოგიერთი სტუდენტი შეცდომებს მიიჩნევს თვითგანვითარების საშუალებად. კვლევა ხაზს უსვამს ისეთი სასწავლო მიდგომების საჭიროებას, რომლებიც ემოციური მხარდაჭერისა და ფსიქოლოგიური უსაფრთხოებისკენ არის მიმართული. სტატისტიკური ნარმოდგენილია პრაქტიკული რეკომენდაციები, რომლებიც მიზნად ისახავს სასწავლო გარემოს გაუმჯობესებას, რაც ხელს შეუწყობს როგორც ინგლისური ენის, ისე სტუდენტების ემოციური კომპეტენციების განვითარებას.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: ინგლისური ენის დაუფლება, სოცო-ემოციური ფაქტორები, უხერხულობის განცდა, უცხო ენის შფოთვა, უმაღლესი განათლება, კომუნიკაციური კომპეტენცია, ენის შესწავლის ბარიერები.

Introduction

English language acquisition within higher education environments is shaped by a range of cognitive, social, and emotional factors. While linguistic competence and formal instruction remain essential, socio-emotional experiences—particularly feelings of embarrassment—play a critical role in shaping learners' communicative performance and motivation. In Georgia, where English proficiency has become a key requirement for academic success and professional advancement, understanding these socio-emotional dimensions is both timely and necessary.

Addressing these socio-emotional challenges is closely aligned with the objectives of the **United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education)**, which calls for inclusive and equitable learning opportunities that empower all students to acquire the skills needed for full participation in society. SDG Target 4.4 specifically emphasizes the development of relevant competencies, including language proficiency, while recognizing that learning environments must support students' emotional well-being to be truly effective.

Accordingly, the present study seeks to analyze how embarrassment and related socio-emotional factors influence English language acquisition among university students in Georgia. By examining learners' perceptions and identifying contextual contributors to embarrassment, the research aims to generate practical recommendations for reducing emotional barriers and creating more supportive classroom practices. Ultimately, this analysis aspires to contribute to a more inclusive approach to language education that fosters both competence and confidence, advancing the broader goals of equitable, high-quality learning in line with SDG 4.

Literature Review

Second language acquisition (SLA) is not solely a cognitive process but also deeply intertwined with emotional and psychological factors that influence learners' performance and engagement. Among these factors, embarrassment plays a significant role—particularly in contexts where learners are highly self-aware or culturally sensitive to making public errors. This is especially true in oral tasks, where students may fear peer judgment or teacher correction, often resulting in avoidance behavior or reduced participation (Gergesen & Horwitz, 2002).

Embarrassment is related to learners' fear of negative evaluation, which has been extensively studied in the broader framework of foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA).

In their foundational work, Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) describe FLCA as a situation-specific anxiety arising from the unique pressures of foreign language learning, where fear of making mistakes and being ridiculed is particularly intense. Embarrassment, as a subset of this emotional experience, can hinder communicative attempts and lower learners' confidence, thereby diminishing opportunities for authentic language use.

International educational frameworks underscore the importance of supporting learners' socio-emotional well-being alongside cognitive development. According to UNESCO (2017), education systems must adopt a holistic approach that includes the development of emotional intelligence, resilience, and collaborative skills. The *Education for Sustainable Development Goals: Learning Objectives* document emphasizes that learners should develop empathy, a sense of justice, and the ability to communicate across cultures—all of which are critical in emotionally responsive language classrooms. Similarly, the OECD's *Learning Compass 2030* places well-being, emotional regulation, and student agency at the heart of future-focused education systems (OECD, 2019).

In the Georgian higher education context, there is growing scholarly attention toward aligning English language teaching with broader educational values that promote inclusive and supportive environments. It is argued for the integration of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—particularly SDG 4—into English language curricula as a means of fostering both linguistic competence and global citizenship (Tchokhonelidze & Chkhobadze, 2024). While this work primarily emphasizes social justice and environmental awareness, they highlight the pedagogical value of real-life, emotionally engaging content that promotes student-centered learning. Such an approach naturally supports learners' emotional security and reduces negative feelings such as embarrassment by encouraging participation in meaningful, relatable discussions.

Thus, the literature confirms that socio-emotional factors like embarrassment must be addressed within English language instruction. Pedagogical strategies such as formative feedback, peer collaboration, and task-based learning can help reduce fear and self-consciousness. In Georgia, where English is increasingly tied to academic and professional advancement, ensuring emotionally supportive learning environments is essential for equitable language development and aligned with international educational priorities.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative, descriptive research design to explore the socio-emotional factors—particularly embarrassment—that affect English language acquisition among university students in Georgia. The research aimed to document the prevalence and perceived impact of specific emotional experiences in the classroom environment and to identify which aspects of instruction and peer interaction most contribute to learners' sense of discomfort or inhibition.

Participants

A total of **124 undergraduate students** participated in the survey. The sample was selected through simple random sampling to ensure representation across diverse institutional contexts. Participants were drawn from both public and private universities:

- **Private Universities:**

Caucasus International University: 19 students

Central University of Europe: 18 students

Alte University: 24 students

- **Public Universities:**

Akaki Tsereteli State University: 42 students

Shota Meskhia Zugdidi State University: 21 students

The sample included students from all four years of undergraduate study:

- Year 1: 43 students
- Year 2: 41 students
- Year 3: 28 students
- Year 4: 12 students

This distribution ensured that the research captured a variety of perspectives across academic levels and institutional types.

Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected via an anonymous online questionnaire designed specifically to elicit information about socio-emotional barriers in English language learning contexts. The instrument consisted of 12 structured questions, combining closed-ended items and Likert-scale statements. The questions focused on:

- Experiences of embarrassment when speaking English in class
- Anxiety related to pronunciation mistakes
- Discomfort caused by using unfamiliar vocabulary
- Perceived criticism or negative feedback from instructors or peers
- Feelings of awkwardness during oral presentations

The questionnaire was reviewed by three language education experts to ensure clarity, face validity, and sensitivity to the emotional nature of the topics.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, and students were informed that all responses would remain confidential and used solely for research purposes. Informed consent was obtained electronically prior to survey completion.

Data Analysis

Responses were analyzed using **descriptive statistical methods**, including frequency counts and percentage distributions, to identify the most common socio-emotion-

al challenges. The analysis emphasized the **frequency and intensity of embarrassment-related experiences** and the extent to which these feelings were perceived as obstacles to developing spoken English skills.

The study was designed to demonstrate that socio-emotional barriers—including embarrassment, anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation—represent substantive impediments to communicative competence. On this basis, the research aims to provide recommendations for targeted pedagogical strategies and supportive interventions to mitigate these challenges and enhance the overall effectiveness of English language instruction in Georgian universities.

Results

The analysis of responses from 124 undergraduate students revealed a range of socio-emotional challenges experienced in English language classrooms. The findings highlight the prevalence of **embarrassment, anxiety, and discomfort**, which were reported to significantly affect students' willingness to participate in spoken communication tasks.

Frequency of Socio-Emotional Experiences

Table 1 summarizes the frequency with which participants reported experiencing various socio-emotional factors during English language learning.

Table 1. Frequency of Socio-Emotional Experiences Reported by Participants (N=124)

Socio-Emotional Factor	Never (%)	Rarely (%)	Sometimes (%)	Often (%)	Always (%)
Embarrassment when speaking in class	5	14	38	29	14
Anxiety over pronunciation mistakes	3	12	34	36	15
Discomfort when using unfamiliar vocabulary	4	20	42	23	11
Fear of negative feedback or criticism from peers	6	18	39	27	10
Feelings of awkwardness during oral presentations	2	10	32	38	18

These results confirm that **embarrassment and pronunciation anxiety** are the most commonly reported barriers. Several students described these experiences in their own words. One participant noted: *“Knowledge of English is important, and lack of it often creates many*

embarrassing situations.“ Conversely, a few students expressed a more resilient attitude: „I don't feel embarrassed when I forget a word and can't use it while speaking, because this gives me experience to learn better in the future.”

Perceived Impact on Learning and Participation

Participants were also asked to indicate the extent to which these socio-emotional factors interfered with their learning. As shown in Table 2, a majority of students reported that emotional barriers **significantly reduced their motivation and participation** in English language activities.

Table 2. Perceived Impact of Socio-Emotional Factors on Language Learning (N=124)

Impact Statement	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
My fear of making mistakes prevents me from speaking in class.	3	11	24	41	21
I feel less motivated to practice English because I am afraid of criticism.	5	15	29	36	15
Embarrassment makes it difficult for me to participate in group activities.	4	13	22	40	21
Anxiety about pronunciation affects my confidence in using English.	2	10	20	45	23

These findings confirm that socio-emotional factors are perceived as **significant obstacles to effective English language acquisition** among Georgian university students. In particular, embarrassment and anxiety were frequently cited as reasons for avoiding participation, hesitating to ask questions, or refraining from volunteering during classroom discussions.

Students emphasized that embarrassment and anxiety often became obstacles to active engagement: *“Children's psychology is sensitive, and different events are perceived differently... trauma from childhood manifests in adulthood and prevents self-expression and goal-setting.”*

Positive Attitudes and Motivation

Despite these challenges, many respondents expressed a **strong desire to improve their language skills** and overcome emotional barriers. One student shared: *“My wish is*

to improve my level of English.” Another added: „As long as I can yapp, I won’t be shy, thx u very much.”

These perspectives suggest that while embarrassment and anxiety are common, some learners demonstrate resilience and commitment to language development.

Variation by University Type

Analysis by university type (public vs. private) did not reveal substantial differences in the prevalence of emotional barriers; however, students from private universities reported slightly higher levels of embarrassment during oral presentations, while public university students reported more frequent anxiety about pronunciation.

Summary of Key Findings

- Over **70%** of respondents indicated that embarrassment and fear of negative evaluation occur *sometimes* or *often*.
- Nearly **60%** agreed or strongly agreed that these emotions reduce their motivation to practice English.
- Feelings of awkwardness were especially pronounced during oral presentations and spontaneous speaking tasks.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that socio-emotional factors, particularly embarrassment and anxiety, are pervasive among Georgian university students learning English as a foreign language. More than half of participants reported frequent discomfort when speaking in class, fear of negative judgment, and self-consciousness during oral presentations. These results are consistent with previous research demonstrating that affective variables—such as foreign language anxiety, fear of mistakes, and perceived peer evaluation—pose substantial barriers to communicative competence and language development (Horwitz et al., 1986; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002).

In the Georgian higher education context, embarrassment appears to function as a self-limiting mechanism, discouraging learners from participating in classroom activities or taking risks in using new vocabulary and structures. This is especially significant given the central role of spoken interaction in developing fluency. Some students also expressed feelings of inadequacy and frustration, reinforcing the idea that socio-emotional barriers may contribute to decreased motivation and a reluctance to engage in sustained practice.

Importantly, several participants articulated resilience and proactive attitudes toward overcoming these challenges, underscoring the potential of supportive interventions to cultivate confidence and reduce anxiety. As one student commented, „I don’t feel embarrassed when I forget a word... because this gives me experience to learn better in the fu-

ture.“ Such perspectives highlight that embarrassment is not universal or insurmountable but is shaped by individual dispositions, prior experiences, and classroom climate.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how emotional and social factors intersect with language acquisition in Georgia. It also underscores the relevance of SDG 4: Quality Education, which calls for learning environments that are not only accessible and equitable but also emotionally supportive. To meet this goal, universities and instructors must recognize that language proficiency depends as much on addressing psychological and social dynamics as it does on teaching grammar and vocabulary.

Recommendations

To address the socio-emotional barriers identified in this study, it is essential for English language instructors and institutions to create more supportive and psychologically safe learning environments. Teachers should normalize mistakes as part of the learning process and use encouraging, non-threatening feedback to reduce fear of judgment. Incorporating low-stakes speaking activities—such as pair work and small group discussions—can ease performance anxiety and promote active participation. Furthermore, raising teacher awareness through professional training on emotional sensitivity and peer dynamics is crucial. Establishing collaborative classroom norms that value respect, empathy, and peer support can also help students feel less isolated or self-conscious. Universities should provide students with access to counseling or academic support services, and language programs should consider embedding emotional resilience and confidence-building exercises into their curricula. Together, these strategies can help learners overcome embarrassment, develop communicative confidence, and thrive in their language learning journey.

Conclusion

This study highlights the critical role that socio-emotional factors—particularly embarrassment—play in shaping English language acquisition among Georgian university students. While many learners struggle with fear of mistakes and peer judgment, targeted pedagogical and institutional strategies can mitigate these challenges and support more inclusive, motivating, and emotionally safe language classrooms. Addressing these barriers is not only pedagogically sound, but also aligns with the broader goals of SDG 4, promoting quality education that supports both cognitive and emotional development.

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