# The Impact of Social Phobia on English Language Students from the Point of View of Cognitive Behavioral Theory

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of social phobia on English language learners through the lens of cognitive behavioral theory (CBT). The researchers used the Al-Hanafi (2022) Social Anxiety Scale in a pilot study of 30 students from the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training Kuwait. Internal consistency and reliability were tested by Cronbach's alpha. Randomly selected students (298) participated in an online survey that used the Social Phobia Scale. The results showed that the total mean was 32.7, the standard deviation was 12.2, and the percentage was 46, 8%. The impact of social phobia was medium because the sample tendency was "sometimes." Some of the results from the lowest-rated items represented the students' core beliefs. This study suggests using CBT to clarify the behavior of English students to prepare them for society and connect with other states.*

**Keywords:** cognitive behavioral theory, negative automated thoughts, social phobia, English language

## INTRODUCTION

The term *university* is derived from a meeting that has the aim of stimulating learning and encouraging students to think deeply, access knowledge and facts, gain communication ability, establish cultural character, and become widely informed (Alhadithi, 2011; Zuraiqi, 2021). Lectures are a critical element in the educational process, in which the student meets to access scientific research, which is the focal point between the professor and the student who engages with and listens to the lecture; this process also prepares the student to become a scientific

rapporteur who can prescribe and respond to questions (AL-Fadhli, 2015). Some students worry before they speak in public, sometimes sweating and slurring their words. Students might be anxious about their grades and their academic performance (McKenzie, 2013/2010). The anxiety level increases when learners are conducting tasks that are not in their mother tongue. Ali (2023) showed that the problems encountered by English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in speaking English fluently at the university level had many causes that restricted speech. First, the study showed that 71% of the students felt unconfident while using English; second, 69% of the students feared criticism; third, 70% of the students did not practice regularly; and finally, 77% of the students had trouble pronouncing hard words. According to American Psychological Association, *anxiety* is "an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes like increased blood pressure" (n.d.).

Freeman and Freeman (2012) mentioned that Peter Lang invented the "three-systems" model of anxiety, which characterizes anxiety in three modes: the way we think and speak, the way we act, and body language. Furthermore, there are many types of anxiety disorder, such as anxiety due to body disease, anxiety not linked to phobias, obsessive compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress, and social phobia anxiety (McKenzie, 2013/2010).

Social anxiety disorder or social phobia disorder is a disorder that impacts function in a person's career and vocational and social life, and it leads the person to avoid effectively sharing their life with others, which causes solitude and a decrease in a person's social and career success, preventing them from successful social engagements and fulfilling their desired social roles (Al-Ansari, 2017).

As a head of the English unit in the college of business in Kuwait, I have observed that many of the leaners mention that they feel tension when they speak or read in English in lectures. Accordingly, this study examines the phobias of learners of EFL in our college as reflected in their low academic performance and final grades. Moreover, the purpose of this study is to examine the psychological difficulties of English learners in the college of business and to encourage the faculty members to consider students during the lectures and exams from the point of view of cognitive behavioral theory (CBT).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Cognitive Behavioral Theory

CBT was founded by psychologist Aaron T. Beck. Similarly, Albert Ellis built a type of cognitive theory called *rational emotive behavior therapy* that shares many resemblances with CBT (What Is CBT? n.d). CBT is a common therapeutic practice that cures many known disorders such as depression and anxiety. This therapy is a kind of talk therapy that includes recognizing and defining useless ideas so that individuals can learn a substitute thinking style to help them with the way they feel. Furthermore, CBT is interested in the link between emotions, thoughts, and actions and was developed from cognitive and behavioral therapy (Morrow, 2022). CBT posits that thoughts, emotions, and physical acts are connected and affect

each other. The cognitive appraisal model is a useful method to represent this connection (see Figure 1; What Is CBT? n.d).

**Figure 1**
*Cognitive Appraisal Model (What Is CBT? n.d.)*
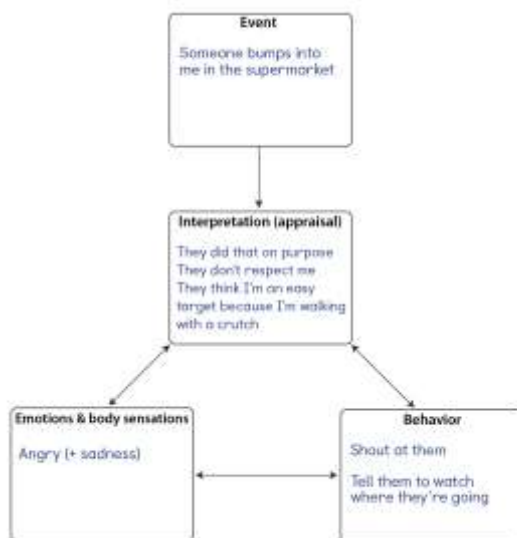


The foundation of CBT is negative automated thoughts. These are thoughts that we notice when we consider them, but are otherwise negative and repetitive, having an immediate impact on mood from time to time. The individual doesn't deliberately consider these negative ideas; they occur automatically and without effort. For instance, a person who has social phobia doesn't expect positive feedback from people but has a mental self-image of themselves with a red, perspiring face, which has a direct impact on their mood states (Kennerley et al., 2017, 2018).

Conversely, core beliefs are an individual's essential thoughts of themselves and others, but most of time they are not conscious of them. These beliefs are based in an absolute public phase that is gained in early life due to child experience. In contrast, underlying assumptions are a middle connecter between negative automated thoughts and core beliefs; these assumptions have more defined bases of life to apply than core beliefs, and are more common than negative automated thoughts (Kennerley et al., 2017/2018).

There are many factors that lead to anxiety, like social position, personality, defaults and beliefs, self-image, and people's action toward others (Whally & Kaur, 2021). Additionally, anxiety and performance are correlated. So, anxiety rises when a person's physical and intellectual performance rises. As a result, anxiety will continue to rise while the performance declines quickly at some point. Furthermore, having a balance in anxiety will make you do your job in a good way, whereas being anxious will result in a bad job performance (McKenzie, 2013/2010).

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The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2013) provides standards for social phobia such as anxiety in social positions when a person is receiving scrutiny from others; because of the fear of being rated negatively, the person avoids social situations. In addition, the anxiety ratio is unreal compared with the social position, which can last for 6 months or more and can lead to weakness in social, professional, and critical fields of performance. One of the reasons for anxiety is social phobia, which is defined by the American Psychological Association (2018) as "an anxiety disorder that is characterized by extreme and persistent social anxiety or performance anxiety and that causes significant distress or prevents participation in social activities."

**Previous CBT Studies on English Language Learners**
Haroun and Al-Darraji (2022) stated that students at the University of Benghazi had trouble speaking in English as an overseas language as a result of their lack of practice, which affected their speaking and listening skills in English; moreover, their use of Arabic language was an obstacle to talking fluently in English because they used the Arabic language in and outside the classroom to communicate with others. The proportion of students who spoke English was only 5%. In addition, Alshabeel (2001) explained that the students majoring in English at Al-Albayt University faced constraints on their ability to learn English including problems with listening, because of the lack of a university professor who spoke English as their primary language; the absence of practice; problems with reading as a result of feeling shy and not understanding new terms; problems with speaking owing to the lack of a university professor to correct their errors; and problems with writing as a consequence of choosing hard topics to write about and limited practice time.

For example, the students will feel so anxious about the results of the exam that they can't revise their subjects well. Thus, they feel even more worried when they waste time in worrying about the result. Therefore, whenever their anxiety rises, their preparation for the exam declines (McKenzie, 2013/2010). The study data statistics showed that the prevalence of social phobia among students in the Humanities and Social Sciences faculty of Kasdi Merbah University in Ouargla amounted to 23.75% (Meidon & Hathat, 2022).

The results of Al-Ibrahim and Al-Zitawi (2019) showed that there was a significant difference in the level of social phobia among a sample of students in two groups in a cognitive behavioral counseling program at the Faculty of Educational Sciences at Jadara University in favor of the experimental group at the posttest and the one-and-a-half-month follow-up. This means that the group counseling program was effective in reducing the level of social phobia among members during the study and follow-up. Additionally, Al-Kathiri and Al-Harbi (2023) found that preparatory year students at the University of Hafar al-Batin had a high degree of difficulty in learning English; the main challenges were lecture duration, concentrating on the theoretical rather than the practical side of learning English, formulating complex sentences, and making many spelling errors while writing. Conversely, the professors had difficulty in identifying variations in the ability of their students and often used unsuitable teaching styles. The research of Shatanawi and Al-Shaboul (2023) indicated that the average scores of social phobias between female students at the University of Hafr Al-Batin were medium because of parenting methods

with females. The highest area in social phobia was performance anxiety, which included not feeling comfortable while talking in the middle of a crowd and feeling anxious when someone stared, whereas the lowest area was evaluation anxiety, which included crying easily and feeling that others were better.

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants
A total of 298 random students participated in this study from the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training, College of Business Studies. All students completed the Social Phobia scale in an online survey.

### *Procedure*
The study adapted the Social Anxiety Scale of Al-Hanafi (2022), consisting of 19 items to measure social anxiety. The scale was applied and codified on Ain Shams University students. The answers were formatted in a Likert scale ranging 1–5 (always, often, sometimes, a little, and rarely), and the total score ranged 19–95. There were also inverted items that were corrected inversely (9, 11, 12, and 14). Al- Hanafi (2022) verified the validity of the scale through factorial validity and internal consistency. For factorial validity, the results showed the emergence of one factor and the numbers of items saturated on it (19); its saturation extended from 0.3 to 0.63 and explained 19.31% of the total variation. As for internal consistency, all items were related and significant. The reliability of the scale was verified by Cronbach's alpha at 0.88, which is high reliability. For reliability by split-half, the coefficient reliability was 0.8, which is high reliability.

For this study, the researchers used content validity and, based on their opinions, some words were changed to match the study sample; Item 6 was deleted because it did not relate to what was measured, and Item 7 was changed and some words were added. The inverted items became 6, 9, 11 and 13, so the number of items in the scale became 18. A pilot study including 30 students was conducted at the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training in Kuwait. Internal consistency ranged 0.309–0.810, so all items were acceptable and significant (Table 1). For reliability by Cronbach's alpha, the coefficient reliability was 0.861, which is high reliability (Table 2). After the pilot study, several items were deleted (5, 6, 11, and 13), so the number of items became 14, and the total score ranged 14–70. The researchers then recalculated internal consistency and reliability.

### Table 1
*Internal Consistency*

| Items | Corrected Item-Total Correlation |
|-------|----------------------------------|
| 1 | 0.527 |
| 2 | 0.558 |

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| 3 | 0.369 |
| 4 | 0.810 |
| 5 | 0.699 |
| 6 | 0.337 |
| 7 | 0.287 |
| 8 | 0.469 |
| 9 | 0.646 |
| 10 | 0.438 |
| 11 | 0.545 |
| 12 | 0.599 |
| 13 | 0.648 |
| 14 | 0.309 |

**Table 2**
*Reliability Statistics*

| Cronbach's Alpha | No. of Items |
|---|---|
| 0.861 | 14 |

**FINDINGS**

The results illustrate that the total mean was 32.7, the standard deviation was 12.2, and the percentage was 46.8%. The sample tendency was "sometimes," which means that the impact of social phobia on the students was medium. This study aligns with the study of Bany Ahmed (2017), in which the prevalence of social phobia was average among refugee students in North Jordan, and also with a study by Elhusseini (2011), which found that 50.58% of the students had moderate social phobia. The results are presented in Table 3, ranging from highest to lowest.

**DISCUSSION**

This section explains the main patterns that are in line with the findings and compares this study's patterns with those of similar studies for more support. The 14 items of the questionnaire are grouped into three parts based on the goal of each item: speaking in English in classroom, using the English language outside the classroom, and social interaction in the classroom.

**Table 3**
*Descriptive Statistics for the 14 Items*

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| No. | Items | Mean | St. Deviation | Central tendency | Order |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | I feel nervous when they ask me to speak English in the classroom. | 2.96 | 1.329 | sometimes | 2 |
| 2 | I fear meeting people for the first time in the classroom. | 1.77 | 1.139 | never | 11 |
| 3 | I find it hard to form new friendships in the classroom. | 2.29 | 1.372 | rarely | 9 |
| 4 | I feel insecure when someone notices me when I speak English. | 2.73 | 1.470 | sometimes | 4 |
| 5 | I feel uncomfortable when I speak in English with others in a new class. | 2.80 | 1.477 | sometimes | 3 |
| 6 | I feel afraid to meet others in the classroom. | 1.58 | 1.052 | never | 13 |
| 7 | I attended an event at the university without knowing anyone. | 2.55 | 1.484 | rarely | 7 |
| 8 | I find it hard to start a conversation in English with someone. | 3.01 | 1.400 | sometimes | 1 |
| 9 | I worry about negative evaluations from others in classroom. | 2.42 | 1.466 | rarely | 8 |
| 10 | I hesitate when I ask someone about things in English. | 2.55 | 1.461 | rarely | 6 |
| 11 | I fear that no one loves me. | 1.68 | 1.147 | never | 12 |
| 12 | I feel that others bully me. | 1.56 | 1.097 | never | 14 |
| 13 | I feel nervous if I have to speak in English to someone with a higher position. | 2.72 | 1.495 | sometimes | 5 |
| 14 | My heart beats rapidly when I am with other students in a social situation. | 2.14 | 1.399 | rarely | 10 |
| Total | | 32.7617 | 12.25790 | sometimes | |

Means of items were never (1–1.8), rarely (1.8–2.6) sometimes, (2.6–3.4), often (3.4–4.2), and always (4.2–5). Total means were never (10–18), rarely (18–26), sometimes, (26–34), often (34–42), and always (42–50).

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**Speaking English in the Classroom**

As for the items 1, 4, 9 , and 5 (*I feel nervous when they ask me to speak English in the classroom; I feel insecure when someone notices me when I speak English; I worry about negative evaluations from others in the classroom;* and *I feel uncomfortable when I speak in English with others in a new classroom*), all the students had negative automated thoughts while being asked questions, being noticed by someone, being evaluated, and while speaking in a new class. These negative automated thoughts triggered negative emotions such as feeling nervous, insecure, concerned, or uncomfortable. Also, the negative emotions that affected their attempts to express themselves in English were obstacles for learners engaging in the learning process of EFL. Furthermore, anxiety might illuminate any language learning motivation and enthusiasm.

**Using English Language Outside the Classroom**

The highest rated item was 8 (*I find it hard to start a conversation in English with someone*), for which the total mean was 3.01 and the standard deviation was 1.400. The sample tendency was "sometimes," which proves that starting a conversation in English language is affected by negative automated thoughts, so the students felt it was challenging to begin a new dialog with other people. This represents the effect of their emotions on their willingness to speak in English; moreover, they tended to avoid speaking in English outside the classroom, which affected their ability to practice English. This finding is supported by Haroun and Al-Darraji (2022) in a study that showed the difficulties of talking in English and the effects of Arabic as the mother tongue.

Also, items 13 and 10 (*I feel nervous if I have to speak in English to someone with a higher position* and *I hesitate when I ask someone about things in English)*, suggested that the students had negative automated thoughts in these situations, so their feelings of nervousness and hesitation led to difficulties in their actions, which affected their self-confidence. The anxiety increased when speaking to people in a higher position to avoid negative judgments or evaluation. Izgiç et al. (2004) reported on the prevalence of social phobia among university students recruited from Cumhuriyet University. Self-esteem was lower among those with social phobia than among those without social phobia, because people who suffer from social phobia look at themselves in a bad way while focusing on negative thoughts, which leads to lower self-confidence.

However, the inverted Item 7 *(I attended an event in university without knowing anyone)* was rated in the middle of the items: the total mean was 2.55, and the standard deviation was 1.484. The sample tendency was "rarely." The students' behavior was that they rarely attended events at the university, which means that they have negative automated thoughts and avoid attending an event where they don't know anyone because they feel afraid and anxious that they may have to engage with other students in English.

**Social Interaction in the Classroom**

Furthermore, Items 2, 3, and 6 *(I fear meeting people for the first time in the classroom, I find it hard to form new friendships in the classroom, and I feel afraid to meet others in the*

*classroom)* describe the negative automated thoughts involved in forming new friendships, meeting people for the first time, and meeting others in class. These thoughts will produce emotions such as fear and frustration, which may cause them to bypass any new social interactions with others.

Conversely, Items 11, 12, and 14 *(I fear that no one loves me, I feel that others bully me, and My heart beats rapidly when I am with other students in a social situation)* were among the lowest-rated items in the results because these items represent the students' core beliefs about themselves acquired during childhood. Additionally, their reactions in social situations, such as panicking, a racing heartbeat, and doubting may indicate that they had bad experiences in their past when placed in the same position.

## CONCLUSION

The goal of the study was to use CBT to explain the social phobia of English students at the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training in the College of Business in Kuwait. The study found that the students had a moderate social phobia. CBT concentrates on negative automated thoughts, emotions, and behavior, and examines how they affect each other. CBT explains the outcome of the study. Also, the findings of the study revealed that the items that represent core beliefs were the lowest rated by the English students because their thought patterns acquired in childhood did not affect them very much.

Many studies have indicated the importance of CBT in treating and explaining social phobia; for example, Al-Faidi (2016) proved that a counseling program based on CBT reduced the level of social phobia among students in the experimental group. In addition, Al-Mahaireh (2018) recommended using CBT as an active cure to reduce the symptoms of social phobia. This study suggests using CBT to illustrate the actions of English students to help them find their place in society and connect with other nations.

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