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**Breaking the Silence: A Thematic Analysis of Neuro-Linguistic
Programming Tools for Alleviating Communication
Apprehension in Secondary Education**



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Abstract

Communication Apprehension (CA) serves as a significant psychological barrier that severely restricts student participation and vocal confidence in secondary classrooms. To address this, Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) offers a dynamic framework designed to restructure an individual's internal dialogue and behavioral responses. However, traditional educational approaches often focus purely on surface-level speaking skills, ignoring the deep-seated emotional struggles and historical speech anxieties that students face, leaving their lived transformations unexplored. To address this gap, this study utilizes a qualitative thematic framework to examine a structured, 10-session NLP and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) "Tri-Lens" intervention implemented among a purposively selected sample of 10th-grade students (N=60) in Karachi, selected through criterion-based purposive sampling using PRCA-24 baseline screening. Data were gathered through semi-structured post-intervention interviews and analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. Six distinct themes emerged from the data: (1) breaking down negative internal self-talk, (2) managing physical anxiety responses, (3) transforming the classroom into a safe space for open discussion, (4) healing past emotional setbacks in speaking, (5) overcoming deep-seated mental blocks, and (6) shifting student identity from passive observers to active speakers. The findings demonstrate that while logical cognitive reframing functions as an essential preliminary step, cognitive automaticity is required to sustain long-term vocal agency. Finally, this paper synthesizes these qualitative trajectories within Bloom's Affective Domain, offering researchers and policymakers a conceptual model for integrating neuro-cognitive self-regulation routines into mainstream secondary curricula.

Keywords: Qualitative Thematic Analysis, Vocal Agency, Neuro-Linguistic Programming, Subconscious Automation, Affective Domain, Secondary Classrooms.

For decades, formal secondary education systems have traditionally operated under a Cartesian paradigm that isolates cognitive development from affective experience, assuming academic competence to be strictly a function of information

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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processing (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). Curricular guidelines and instructional designs predominantly focus on content mastery, text memorization, and formal linguistic accuracy. However, contemporary educational psychology establishes that the cognitive domain does not function in isolation; it is fundamentally mediated, and frequently constrained, by the affective domain (Pekrun, 2006). When a learner experiences intense performance anxiety- specifically Communication Apprehension (CA), the emotional distress acts as an affective filter (Krashen, 1982), reducing the cognitive processing capacity available for complex meaning-making and verbal articulation (MacIntyre, 1999).

Within the specific socio-cultural milieu of secondary schools in Karachi, Pakistan, this affective barrier is deeply structural rather than merely situational. Influenced by post-colonial educational structures characterized by high power distance (Hofstede, 2011) and teacher-centric pedagogies, classrooms routinely prioritize compliance over dialogic expression (Shamim, 2008). Through prolonged exposure to these environments, students internalize an authoritative "script" where silence is equated with respect and linguistic non-conformity carries an acute risk of negative evaluation, peer ridicule, or academic failure (Aftab, 2012). Traditional pedagogical frameworks attempt to dismantle this "Culture of Silence" superficially by introducing communicative tasks such as role-plays or group presentations. However, these tasks frequently fail because they demand behavioral performance without providing learners with the internal, neuro-cognitive self-regulation tools necessary to deconstruct the underlying subconscious fear. To foster authentic communicative agency, instructional design must intentionally integrate psychological interventions that target the subconscious, affective dimensions of learning.

Theoretical Grounding and Analytical Synthesis

To holistically address the multifaceted phenomenon of Communication Apprehension (CA) within secondary education, this article establishes an integrative theoretical framework that synthesizes three distinct yet complementary domains: McCroskey's (1984) Communication Apprehension Paradigm, Beck's (1967) Cognitive Behavioral Model, and the pragmatic, interventionist protocols of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) originated by Bandler and Grinder (1979). While

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traditional pedagogical designs frequently treat classroom performance anxiety as a superficial behavioral deficit, contemporary neuro-educational literature demonstrates that CA operates as a deeply entrenched, multi-tiered psychological construct involving cognitive distortions, acute physiological reactivity, and restrictive socio-cultural conditioning (MacIntyre, 2021; Zeidner, 2023).

To investigate these dynamics empirically, this study utilized a qualitative thematic framework to examine the lived transformations of 10th-grade students (N=60) in Karachi, Pakistan. Crucially, rather than employing a randomized sample, participants were selected through criterion-based purposive sampling based on high anxiety baselines derived from the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24). This rigorous screening ensured that the subsequent 10-session "Tri-Lens" intervention directly targeted learners navigating the most acute manifestations of psychological resistance.

Operationally, the synthesis of these three fields allows the intervention to systematically restructure the learner's internal state across explicit and implicit psychological tracks. McCroskey's (1984) paradigm establishes the foundational diagnostic lens, recognizing that CA is inherently context-specific and varies dynamically across communicative micro-settings, including dyadic interactions, small-group discussions, and formal public presentations (King & Smith, 2022; Dewaele & Al-Mubarak, 2024). Once these context-specific triggers are isolated, Beck's (1967) Cognitive Behavioral Model provides the cognitive-restructuring machinery required to engage the conscious mind. Highly apprehensive students in restrictive, high-power-distance classrooms routinely succumb to cognitive distortions such as catastrophization and selective abstraction, wherein minor linguistic or delivery errors are perceived as definitive social failures (Hofmann et al., 2021).

By introducing structured cognitive reframing, learners are trained to consciously identify, challenge, and dismantle these maladaptive schemas, a process shown in recent secondary education literature to significantly mitigate cognitive load and baseline performance fear (Otterbeck & Jansson, 2023; Essau et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, while conscious cognitive reframing establishes the necessary logical baseline for vocal agency, empirical evidence indicates that explicit reasoning

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is frequently overridden when a learner encounters an acute, real-time evaluative threat. At this critical juncture, the sympathetic nervous system activates a fight-or-flight response that effectively bypasses the prefrontal cortex, rendering conscious logical deliberation inaccessible and inducing somatic paralysis at the podium (Immordino-Yang, 2020; Taylor & Crone, 2023).

To bridge this operational limitation, this framework integrates the sensory-motor and linguistic protocols of NLP to modulate the subconscious, implicit track of emotional regulation. By leveraging specific sensory anchoring techniques, timeline restructuring of historical speech micro-traumas, and Milton-Model hypnotic language patterns, the intervention circumvents the conscious "critical factor" to automate physical and emotional states of confidence directly within the nervous system.

Recent advancements in applied linguistics and stress-management research heavily emphasize that long-term behavior modification relies on shifting self-regulation skills from explicit, effortful processing to implicit, automated execution (Pekrun, 2024; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2025). Within this optimized article framework, NLP does not operate in isolation; rather, it functions as the physiological automation mechanism that converts the conscious insights gained via CBT into permanent, pre-conscious habits of vocal agency, ultimately mapping these qualitative trajectories onto Bloom's Affective Domain to offer a scalable curricular model for secondary education.

Findings and Discussion

The qualitative findings reveal profound, structural shifts in how students perceive, manage, and execute classroom communication. Rather than reflecting a temporary, performative boost in speaking capacity, the participant narratives demonstrate deep psychological adjustments across six core interrelated themes.

Theme 1: Metacognitive Restructuring of Maladaptive Internal Dialogue

The qualitative data indicates that severe communication apprehension is primarily driven by an unceasing stream of negative internal dialogue. Under the immediate pressure of a classroom speaking task, highly apprehensive students routinely experience a cognitive rush of self-defeating thoughts. By introducing Meta-Modeling

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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protocols alongside Beck's cognitive reframing, the intervention equipped participants with the linguistic tools to consciously identify, interrogate, and dismantle these cognitive distortions. This cognitive shift is clearly reflected in the experience of Participant 04 (Cohort X_1):

"Before this training, whenever the teacher called my name, a voice inside my head immediately said, 'You will forget everything, you will look foolish, everyone will laugh.' By using the linguistic exercises, I learned to pause and question that voice. I realized it was a false script I had given myself."

This narrative reveals the transition from automated, catastrophic thinking to deliberate metacognitive monitoring. By learning to "pause and question," the participant interrupts the automated anxiety loop, exposing the irrationality of their underlying cognitive schemas (Beck, 1967). This restructuring fundamentally alters the subjective nature of the communicative task itself. Rather than viewing classroom speech as an unavoidable vulnerability, students reshape their cognitive appraisal of the environment, as articulated by Participant 09 (Cohort X_2):

"Reframing completely changed how I think before speaking. Instead of seeing a presentation as an execution trap where I am being judged, I reframed it as a simple conversation where I am sharing information with my peers. Changing that label inside my mind removed the immediate impulse to freeze."

By altering the conceptual "label" from an "execution trap" to a "simple conversation," the student dramatically reduces their functional cognitive load. This deliberate shift in cognitive appraisal validates contemporary socio-affective frameworks, which show that down-regulating the perceived threat level of an audience preserves working memory capacity for real-time linguistic articulation (Hofmann et al., 2021; King & Smith, 2022).

Theme 2: Somatic Stabilization Through Sensory Calibration and Anchoring

Beyond conscious cognitive distortions, participants frequently noted that high apprehension manifested as acute physiological distress, including uncontrollable shaking, tachycardia (racing heartbeat), and sudden vocal paralysis. The narrative corpus confirms that sensory anchoring protocols—leveraging individual visual, auditory, and kinesthetic preferences—enabled students to physically regulate these

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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somatic threats. Participant 11 (Cohort X_1) detailed this physical stabilization:

"My hands used to shake so violently that I couldn't hold a cue card. When we set up the kinesthetic anchor, I chose a specific knuckle press associated with feeling completely secure and calm. Now, right before I stand up to speak, I fire that anchor. My heartbeat slows down, and my hands stay steady."

This experience highlights the practical value of anchoring as a neuro-cognitive conditioning mechanism. When the sympathetic nervous system triggers a fight-or-flight response, conscious logic is often overridden by somatic panic. Firing a pre-conditioned kinesthetic anchor establishes a rapid, automated physiological counterweight, bringing the autonomic nervous system back into equilibrium. Furthermore, students achieved somatic stability by deliberately altering their internal visual representations, as described by Participant 07 (Cohort X_2):

"I learned to adjust my internal mental images. The fear used to look like a giant, dark screen in front of my eyes. By mentally shrinking that image, pushing it away, and stepping into a brightly lit memory of confidence, my physical anxiety disappeared. The change felt mechanical rather than just wishful thinking."

This reflection highlights the core mechanics of NLP submodality manipulation (Bandler & Grinder, 1979). By altering the structural qualities of the internal mental image—shrinking the size and modifying the proximity of the mental threat—the student directly reduces its emotional impact. Describing this adjustment as "mechanical" proves that sensory calibration operates as a systematic, structured psychological routine rather than mere abstract positive thinking, leading directly to measurable somatic relief (Zeidner, 2023).

Theme 3: Shifting the Classroom Space from Evaluative Threat to Horizontal Dialogue

The historical socio-cultural background of secondary schools in Karachi heavily reinforces a rigid pedagogical framework, where classrooms are perceived as high-risk, vertical spaces dominated by judging authority figures. The qualitative transcripts demonstrate that the intervention successfully helped students re-conceptualize this environment, shifting the perceived power dynamics that traditionally fuel communication apprehension. Participant 08 (Cohort X_1) evaluated

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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Online ISSN: 3006-5895

this environmental transformation:

"I used to see the teacher as an examiner waiting to penalize my mistakes. The reframing exercises helped me see the teacher as a guide and my classmates as partners in dialogue. The classroom stopped feeling like a courtroom."

The transition from a "courtroom" to a space of partnership indicates a profound disruption of the authoritative "script" common in high-power-distance educational systems (Hofstede, 2011). By stripping the classroom of its absolute evaluative threat, the intervention cultivates a horizontal learning environment. This supportive dynamic is further reinforced by shared cohort experiences, as noted by Participant 05 (Cohort X_2):

"The pressure to be perfect kept me silent for years. Once our cohort collectively engaged in the communication routines, we realized everyone was working through the same underlying anxiety. This shared vulnerability dismantled the threat of peer judgment."

This collective realization fosters an inclusive community of practice. When students openly acknowledge their shared vulnerability, the threat of peer ridicule loses its power. This shift directly neutralizes the environmental triggers isolated in McCroskey's (1984) situational apprehension paradigm, transforming a restrictive space into an open forum for shared learning (Shamim, 2008; Dewaele & Al-Mubarak, 2024).

Theme 4: Affective Clearing of Historical Communicative Micro-Traumas

A significant portion of highly apprehensive students traced their chronic classroom silence back to early childhood experiences of academic embarrassment or harsh public evaluation. The qualitative data demonstrates that the Timeline Protocol allowed participants to safely process and resolve these historical emotional blocks, which had long acted as subconscious barriers to speech. Participant 02 (Cohort X_1) provided a detailed account of this affective release:

"In the 6th grade, I mispronounced a word during a reading task, and the teacher yelled at me while the entire class laughed. I carried that specific memory like a heavy weight; every time I opened my mouth to speak, my brain flashed back to that moment. During the timeline session, I was able to look back at that younger version

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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Online ISSN: 3006-5895

of myself from a safe distance, release that old embarrassment, and leave it in the past. It felt like an emotional release."

This narrative reveals how historical communicative micro-traumas can cause a permanent, systemic inflation of communication anxiety. For years, the student's brain treated any public speaking task as an immediate replication of past trauma, triggering a protective baseline of silence. By utilizing the timeline protocol, the student detaches the emotional intensity from the historical memory. Viewing the event "from a safe distance" allows for cognitive integration, helping the participant separate their current capabilities from past childhood experiences. Participant 03 (Cohort X_2) validated this liberation from historical constraints:

"I always thought my fear was just part of who I am. Going back along my timeline helped me realize it was an automatic reaction tied to an old event that no longer applies to my life today. Disconnecting from that memory made it much easier to speak up now."

This disconnection breaks the long-standing cycle of secondary anxiety. By understanding that their fear is an acquired, context-specific reaction rather than an unchangeable personality trait, the student reclaims emotional control, clearing the way for confident classroom expression (Immordino-Yang, 2020; MacIntyre, 2021).

Theme 5: Bypassing the Conscious Critical Factor via Subconscious Automation

Traditional pedagogical encouragement frequently fails because the conscious mind immediately rejects positive reinforcement when it contradicts a deeply embedded self-image of inadequacy. The qualitative findings demonstrate that permissive, neuro-linguistic suggestions effectively bypass this conscious "Critical Factor," allowing new habits of confidence to take root directly within the subconscious mind. Participant 01 (Cohort X_1) explained this operational mechanism:

"When teachers used to tell me to 'just be confident,' it never worked because my mind didn't believe them. But the relaxation and visualization exercises during the sessions seemed to bypass my skepticism. I didn't have to force myself to feel confident; the words simply flowed naturally when I stood up."

This testimony highlights why direct conscious commands like "be confident" are usually ineffective for students with deep-seated communication anxiety; the

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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conscious critical factor immediately filters out the praise as unrealistic. In contrast, by using indirect, permissive linguistic structures during relaxation routines, the intervention gently circumvents conscious resistance. This allows confidence to develop organically as an automated behavioral state rather than an exhausting, conscious effort, as affirmed by Participant 06 (Cohort X_2):

"The training did not feel like a normal lecture where you have to memorize rules. It felt like we were practicing a new mental habit. I noticed that when I am asked a spontaneous question now, I answer immediately without that long, anxious hesitation I used to have."

This spontaneous response indicates that the skill has successfully transitioned from explicit, effortful processing to implicit, automated execution. By reducing the "anxious hesitation," the student demonstrates cognitive automaticity, which is essential for maintaining fluent, long-term vocal agency in dynamic classroom environments (Pekrun, 2024; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2025).

Theme 6: Epistemological Evolution and Identity Reconstruction

The final overarching theme captures a profound evolution in how students perceive their own identity. Rather than showing a temporary adjustment in classroom performance, the transcripts reveal a deeper transition, with participants moving entirely from passive onlookers to active, expressive contributors. Participant 12 (Cohort X_1) detailed this reconstruction of self:

"I used to identify as a permanently quiet, shy student who simply sat in the back row. Today, I see myself as someone who has something valuable to say and has the right to say it. The intervention didn't just give me speaking tips; it changed how I see my place in the classroom."

This narrative proves that the intervention achieved far more than superficial skill development; it altered the student's fundamental self-schema. Shifting from a "permanently quiet student" to a "communicative agent" indicates that the intervention successfully influenced the highest levels of the learner's identity. This evolution in self-concept reshapes their entire approach to learning, as summarized by Participant 10 (Cohort X_2):

"Finding my voice has changed how I approach my education. I no longer sit

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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passively waiting for the class to end. I actively participate, ask questions, and share my ideas because I know my voice matters. The silence is gone."

Conclusion

The six qualitative themes identified in this study demonstrate that overcoming Communication Apprehension (CA) is not an instantaneous behavioral shift, but rather a structured journey through Bloom's Affective Domain. Traditional secondary education in Pakistan typically stops at the first level—forcing students to *Receive* or *Respond* to low-stakes linguistic cues under compliance-driven conditions. In contrast, the integration of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) protocols allows learners to systematically climb this hierarchical ladder.

Initially, techniques like sensory anchoring and sub modality calibration stabilize the nervous system, enabling students to calmly receive environmental stimuli without triggering immediate somatic panic. As negative internal dialogue is dismantled through cognitive reframing, students begin to actively respond, seeking out opportunities for horizontal classroom dialogue. The emotional release achieved through the timeline protocol allows students to adjust their core values, shifting their perception of speech from an "execution trap" to a valuable medium for personal growth. Ultimately, this leads to *Characterization*—the highest level of the affective domain—where the learner's identity is fundamentally reconstructed. The student no longer forces themselves to speak through effortful conscious control; rather, communicative agency becomes an automated, core feature of their personal and academic identity.

Recommendations

To dismantle the structural "Culture of Silence" across secondary classrooms in Pakistan, educational policymakers and regional examination boards (such as the Board of Secondary Education Karachi) must move away from purely text-based, rote-memorization evaluation frameworks. Based on the empirical outcomes of this intervention, three structural policy recommendations are proposed:

- **Formal Integration of Oral and Speaking Assessments:** Examination boards must introduce mandatory, standardized oral communication assessments into the

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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secondary school curriculum, accounting for at least 20% of the total language examination grade. Crucially, these exams must not simply evaluate formal grammatical accuracy, but must explicitly measure interactive fluency and communicative confidence, thereby shifting the institutional incentive structure from silent compliance to active vocal expression.

- **Institutionalization of Affective Self-Regulation Routines:** Curricular frameworks should incorporate brief, structured neuro-cognitive self-regulation routines—such as somatic anchoring, strategic breathing exercises, and positive mental visualization—directly into daily classroom lesson plans. Rather than viewing anxiety management as an extracurricular luxury, these micro-interventions should be built into the standard instructional design of secondary school language classes.
- **Systemic Teacher Training in Socio-Affective Pedagogies:** Provincial teacher-training directorates must reform their professional development programs to equip educators with the skills needed to manage classroom anxiety. Teachers should be trained to use permissive language patterns, establish horizontal classroom dynamics, and recognize the physical signs of severe communication anxiety, moving from an authoritative "examiner" persona to a supportive facilitator of student dialogue.

Limitations

While this article provides strong qualitative evidence of psychological transformation, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the qualitative phase focused deeply on a purposive sample of twelve participants (n=12) within the specific socio-cultural context of secondary schools in Karachi, which may limit the direct transferability of the findings to different regional or international educational landscapes. Second, while post-intervention interviews captured immediate structural changes in student identity, long-term follow-up studies are needed to evaluate the sustainability of these automated neuro-cognitive habits over multiple academic years. Future research should explore integrating these psychological protocols into larger, across diverse public and private school networks to evaluate their scalability and long-term impact on academic performance.

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