

## Language Learning as an Intervention for Anxiety Reduction among Vocational Trainees: A Gender-Based Study

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This study investigated the impact of structured language learning on anxiety levels among vocational trainees, with a focus on gender-based differences. A six-month intervention of English language training was administered to 288 trainees from Industrial Training Institutes in Kerala using a quasi-experimental pre-test–post-test design. Anxiety levels were measured with a validated scale. Results showed a significant reduction in anxiety with a large effect size, confirming the effectiveness of communicative and learner-centred approaches in lowering emotional barriers to language learning. Gender-based analysis revealed no significant difference, suggesting the intervention had an equalizing emotional effect across male and female trainees. These findings align with Krashen’s affective filter and Bandura’s self-efficacy theory, while differing from studies reporting persistent anxiety among vocational learners. The results highlight the role of structured language learning in reducing anxiety and promoting equitable outcomes for male and female trainees.

**Keywords:** Language learning, anxiety reduction, vocational trainees, gender differences, communicative English, intervention study

Anxiety, when left unaddressed, can significantly hinder the ability of an individual to thrive in personal, social, educational and professional domains. In the context of skill-based training, individuals undergoing vocational education often face pressures related to job readiness, performance expectations and social stigma. These factors can increase vulnerability to stress and anxiety, which in turn may limit opportunities for career advancement, personal growth and meaningful social participation (Sahu et al., 2020). Learning a new language, particularly in non-native contexts has long been associated with anxiety in the form of apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test-related stress (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986). However, newer perspectives highlight that the process of acquiring a new language is not merely cognitive but also emotional. It can foster confidence, resilience and adaptability. Krashen’s (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis

emphasizes that reducing emotional barriers accelerates language acquisition. Bandura’s (1977) theory of self-efficacy, supported by recent findings (Xu & Xu, 2025), demonstrates that successful learning experiences build confidence, regulate emotions and reduce anxiety across diverse contexts.

Research has also shown that language learning can support personal transformation. It contributes to identity development, self-expression and the creation of social connections that enhance well-being and employability (Dewaele and MacIntyre, 2016; Mercer, 2011). Often hail from disadvantaged backgrounds, vocational trainees learning a language may provide both psychological empowerment and better access to socio-economic opportunities. English, as a global language, was selected for this study because of its direct relevance to career mobility and communication needs

in vocational sectors (Oxford, 2017), but the variable of interest is language learning as an intervention rather than English specifically.

Despite its potential, most existing research linking language learning with emotional well-being has focused on traditional academic settings. There is limited evidence from vocational training contexts, particularly in India, exploring whether language learning interventions reduce anxiety and whether emotional outcomes differ by gender. Studies suggest that men and women may experience and cope with anxiety in distinct ways (Aida, 1994; Dewaele and MacIntyre, 2007), yet this remains underexplored in vocational contexts.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating whether structured language learning can help reduce anxiety among vocational trainees. It also examines whether gender influences the emotional outcomes of such interventions, contributing to a more inclusive understanding of language learning as a tool for psychological well-being.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Anxiety in educational settings impairs concentration, reduces participation and hinders learning outcomes. In vocational education institutions where learners often come from socio-economically and academically disadvantaged backgrounds, anxiety may be more pronounced. Although language learning has been studied in relation to language anxiety, the potential of language acquisition itself as an emotional intervention is still underexplored, especially in the Indian vocational context. This study examines whether learning a new language can reduce anxiety among vocational trainees and whether this effect varies by gender.

### **Significance of the Study**

This research holds significance at multiple levels. At the academic level, it

contributes to the under-researched area of affective outcomes of language acquisition in vocational education (Norton & Toohey, 2011). From a pedagogical perspective, the findings can guide educators and curriculum designers in adopting communicative and experiential approaches that help reduce anxiety and foster resilience (Ellis, 2003). At the policy level, the results have the potential to inform skill development frameworks that address not only employability but also mental health needs (NCERT, 2020; UNESCO, 2018). Finally, at the social level, the study provides insights into gender dynamics in anxiety reduction through language learning, thereby promoting more inclusive educational practices (Hyde, 2014; Sax, 2005).

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study is guided by Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory (reinforced by Xu & Xu, 2025), Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, together highlighting how reduced emotional barriers, self-confidence, experiential engagement and social interaction collectively support language learning and emotional well-being. The study conceptualizes language learning as an intervention that can influence anxiety levels among vocational trainees. It assumes that structured language learning, delivered through interactive and experiential methods, can reduce learner anxiety. Gender is included as a grouping variable to compare whether male and female trainees experience similar or different emotional outcomes.

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) conceptualized foreign language classroom anxiety as a situation-specific form of anxiety characterized by communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. Complementing this, Krashen (1982) proposed the Affective Filter

Hypothesis, emphasizing that heightened anxiety restricts language input processing and acquisition. Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy framework further explains that mastery experiences reduce anxiety by strengthening learners' beliefs in their ability to succeed. Collectively, these frameworks established language learning as a process shaped not only by cognition but also by emotional regulation, confidence and perceived competence.

Building on this foundation, contemporary research has begun to position language learning as an intervention capable of improving psychological well-being. Meta-analytic evidence indicates a moderate effect of language-focused instruction in reducing speaking anxiety (Selvanur Kayhan, 2022). Psychosocially informed language pedagogy has also demonstrated anxiety-reducing benefits when emotional scaffolding accompanies skill instruction (Kralova et al., 2018). Learner-centered and interactive methods, including communicative tasks, technology-mediated speaking practice and structured communication training, have been associated with reduced anxiety and increased willingness to communicate (Akta<sup>o</sup>, 2023; Reeves et al., 2021). Together, these findings suggest that language learning environments that prioritize interaction, scaffolding and emotional safety can function as supportive spaces for anxiety reduction.

Recent scholarship further indicates that anxiety outcomes are shaped more strongly by learning climate than by stable demographic predictors. Classroom emotional support, interactional quality and teacher-learner rapport significantly buffer language anxiety (Gkonou et al., 2017; Dewaele & Pavelescu, 2021), while collaborative pedagogies reduce communication apprehension among socially sensitive learners (Bensalem, 2018). Positive psychology-oriented language practices

enhance emotion regulation and learner engagement (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2022), and large-scale evidence confirms that instructional design and classroom experience influence anxiety more strongly than learner-specific traits (Teimouri, Goetze & Plonsky, 2019). These findings support the view that structured language environments can operate as equalizing psychosocial spaces when pedagogically designed for emotional inclusion.

Despite growing evidence, most studies are drawn from general academic or foreign language classrooms, with limited representation from vocational learning contexts. In India, vocational trainees often navigate intersecting stressors including socio-economic disadvantage, limited prior exposure to English instruction and heightened performance pressure, increasing their susceptibility to anxiety. Although gender differences in emotional expression have been documented, emerging research suggests that supportive learning environments can mediate these differences, indicating the importance of pedagogical conditions over assumed demographic vulnerabilities.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines whether a structured English language intervention can reduce anxiety among vocational trainees in Kerala and whether these benefits extend equitably across genders. By situating language learning within an applied psychological framework, this study contributes context-specific evidence to the growing discourse on language pedagogy as an anxiety-responsive, psychosocial and potentially equalizing intervention in vocational training contexts.

### **Objectives**

- To examine pre intervention anxiety levels among vocational trainees.

- To assess post intervention anxiety levels after the language training
- To evaluate the effectiveness of language learning in reducing anxiety.
- To compare anxiety reduction between male and female trainees.
- To explore whether gender influences the effectiveness of the intervention.

### Hypotheses

- H<sub>1</sub> : There is no significant difference between pre-test and post-test anxiety levels among vocational trainees after the language learning intervention.
- H<sub>2</sub>: There is a significant difference between pre-test and post-test anxiety levels among vocational trainees after the language learning intervention.
- H<sub>3</sub> There is no significant difference in anxiety level reduction between male and female vocational trainees following the language learning intervention.
- H<sub>4</sub>: There is a significant difference in anxiety level reduction between male and female vocational trainees following the language learning intervention.

### Method

A quasi-experimental pre-test–post-test single-group design was employed to measure the impact of the intervention. This design enabled the researcher to assess changes within the same group of participants before and after the English language training and to compare anxiety reduction across gender groups.

### Participants

The study sample comprised 290 vocational trainees from selected Industrial

Training Institutes (ITIs) in Thrissur district, Kerala. The participants included both male and female students, aged between 18 and 24 years, enrolled in various trades. A purposive sampling technique was employed, ensuring the inclusion of trainees who had enrolled for and completed the full six-month intervention program.

### Intervention: English Language Training

The intervention consisted of a six-month structured English language training program, conducted weekly and designed using Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) principles. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes, focusing on LSRW (Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing) skills, supported by experiential learning activities and competency-building tasks aimed at reducing language-related anxiety and enhancing communication confidence.

### Tools Used

Anxiety levels of participants were assessed using the *Anxiety Scale* developed by Kranthi K. Sreevasthava (2021). The instrument comprises 30 dichotomous (Yes/No) items designed to evaluate anxiety symptoms across three domains: personal, academic and social. Responses were scored with Yes = 1 and No = 0 and the tool is reverse-scored, such that lower scores indicate higher anxiety and higher scores indicate lower anxiety. Raw scores were interpreted with reference to the manual's norm table and subsequently converted into Z-scores for standardized analysis.

The scale demonstrates satisfactory internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.72$ ) and possesses strong face and content validity, having been reviewed by experts in psychology and education. Although specific construct validity indices are not reported, the tool has been employed

in multiple Indian educational and applied research contexts, which supports its ecological validity.

The choice of this instrument was guided by its cultural appropriateness and contextual relevance for Indian learners. While internationally recognized measures such as Spielberger's State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (1983) and Horwitz et al.'s Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (1986) are widely used, they were standardized on Western populations and may not adequately capture the unique manifestations of anxiety within Indian vocational training contexts. By contrast, the present tool is practical for classroom administration, accessible to respondents with varying literacy levels and sensitive to socio-cultural dynamics that shape learner anxiety.

**Procedure**

Prior to the intervention, the researcher conducted a pre-test using the anxiety scale.

Participants were briefed about the study's purpose and assured of confidentiality and voluntary participation. After the six-month training program, the post-test was administered under similar conditions. All responses were scored and recorded for analysis.

Ethical clearance was obtained and informed consent was collected from students and institutional authorities. Participants were allowed to withdraw at any stage without any consequences. The study followed ethical standards for psychological research, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation and the right to withdraw without consequence.

The statistical analysis was conducted using Jamovi, following assumptions of normality and equality of variances. The table below summarizes the hypotheses, the statistical tests used and their rationale:

Chart 2: Statistical Techniques Used

Hypothesis	Statistical Test	Rationale
H <sub>1</sub> : There is a significant difference between pre-test and post-test anxiety levels among vocational trainees after the language learning intervention.	Paired Sample t-test	To compare means of pre- and post-intervention scores within the same group of participants
	Cohen's d (Effect Size)	To measure the magnitude of the intervention's impact (small, medium, large).
	Shapiro-Wilk Test	To test the assumption of normality of pre- and post-test scores (required for t-test validity).
H <sub>2</sub> : There is a significant difference in anxiety reduction between male and female vocational trainees after the language learning intervention.	Independent Samples t-test	To compare post-test scores (or change scores) between independent groups: males vs. females.
	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	To check if male and female groups have equal variances (required assumption for t-test).
	Cohen's d (Group Comparison)	To evaluate the effect size of gender difference in anxiety reduction.

**Assumptions and Data Validation**

Prior to conducting inferential statistics, the following checks were performed:

Normality: Tested using the Shapiro–Wilk test for both pre-test and post-test anxiety scores.

Homogeneity of Variance: Assessed via Levene’s test before comparing gender-based group differences.

Effect Size: Calculated using Cohen’s d to interpret the practical significance of differences found.

**Results**

The results present the statistical analyses conducted to address the objectives and test the hypotheses of the study. The analyses are presented in alignment with the research objectives and hypotheses, supported by relevant descriptive and inferential statistics using Jamovi software.

Table 1: Descriptive Results

Group	N	Mean (Pre)	SD (Pre)	Mean (Post)	SD (Post)
Female	145	13.5	4.14	22.7	3.45
Male	143	11.1	4.90	22.6	3.61

The pre-intervention mean anxiety score for females was higher (M = 13.5) compared to males (M = 11.1), indicating higher initial anxiety levels among female trainees. Post-intervention scores increased significantly for both genders, reflecting reduced anxiety (as per the tool’s scoring system: higher scores = lower anxiety).

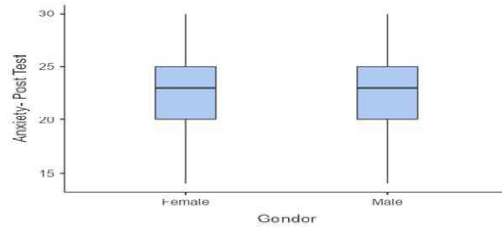
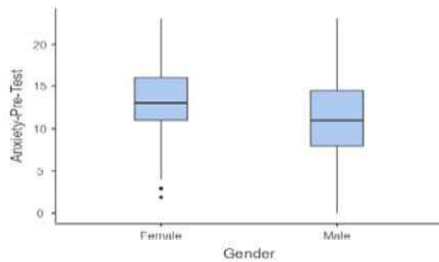


Figure 1: Descriptive Results

**Hypothesis 1**

There will be a significant difference between pre-test and post-test anxiety levels among vocational trainees following the language learning intervention.

To determine whether the language learning intervention significantly reduced anxiety levels, a Paired Samples t-test was conducted on pre- and post-test anxiety scores across the entire sample.

Table 2: Paired Samples t-test

Variable	t	df	p-value	Effect Size (Cohen’s d)
Pre vs Post Anxiety Score	-32.10	287	< .001	1.89 (Large Effect)

The effect size (Cohen’s d = 1.89) indicates a very large reduction in anxiety following the intervention. The direction of the t-value reflects increased post-test scores (lower anxiety)

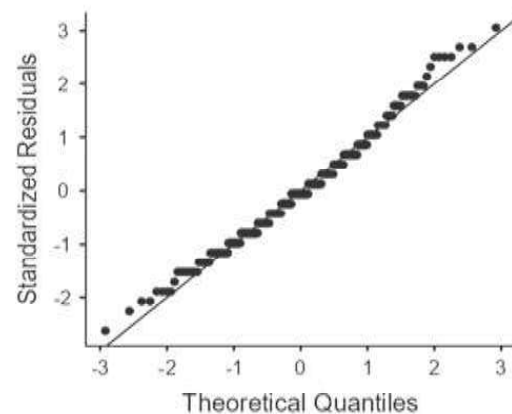


Figure 2: Paired Samples t-test

**Shapiro-Wilk Normality Test:**

W = 0.986, p = 0.008

Although the normality test indicated slight deviation ( $p < 0.05$ ), the large sample size ( $N = 290$ ) supports robustness of the t-test. The negative t-value reflects a significant *increase in post-test scores*, consistent with anxiety reduction.

The null hypothesis  $H_1$  is *rejected*. There is a statistically significant and substantial reduction in anxiety levels among vocational trainees following the language learning intervention, with a large effect size ( $d = -1.89$ ).

**Hypothesis 2**

*There will be a significant difference in pre-test anxiety levels between male and female trainees.*

To compare anxiety score differences between male and female participants, an Independent Samples t-test was performed on both pre- and post-test scores.

Table 3 : Pre-Test Anxiety Comparison:

t value	df	p-value	Cohen's d	Levene's p
4.473	286	<.001	0.5272	0.055

Significant gender difference in pre-test anxiety levels.

Female trainees reported significantly higher anxiety than males before the intervention.

Table 4: Post-Test Anxiety Comparison:

t value	df	p-value	Cohen's d	Levene's p
0.305	287	0.760	0.0359	0.574

No significant gender difference in post-test anxiety scores.

post-intervention anxiety levels were statistically similar across genders.

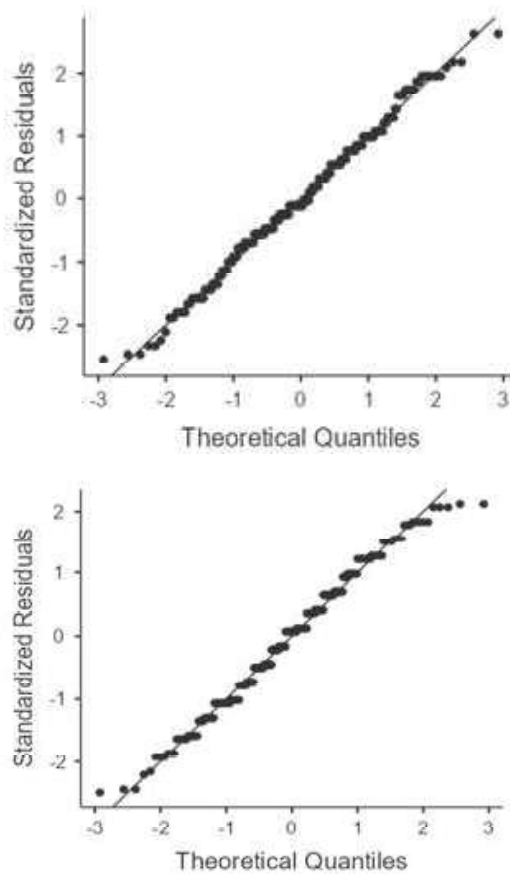


Figure 3: Pre-test-Post Test Anxiety Comparison:

- The null hypothesis  $H_1$  is partially rejected. Gender was a significant factor before the intervention, but not after, indicating that the intervention had an equalizing effect.

**Results**

The results revealed that the structured language learning intervention led to a significant reduction in anxiety among vocational trainees. A paired sample t-test showed that post-test scores ( $M = 22.6$ ,  $SD = 3.57$ ) were significantly higher than pre-test scores ( $M = 12.3$ ,  $SD = 4.55$ ),  $t(287) = 32.1$ ,  $p < .001$ , with a very large effect size ( $d = 1.89$ ). Because higher scores indicate

lower anxiety, this confirms that the intervention effectively reduced anxiety.

Gender-based analysis showed that female trainees reported higher pre-test anxiety ( $M = 13.5$ ,  $SD = 4.14$ ) than males ( $M = 11.1$ ,  $SD = 4.90$ ),  $t(286) = 4.47$ ,  $p < .001$ , reflecting significant differences before the intervention. However, post-test comparisons revealed no significant difference between females ( $M = 22.7$ ,  $SD = 3.45$ ) and males ( $M = 22.6$ ,  $SD = 3.57$ ),  $t(286) = 0.43$ ,  $p = .67$ ,  $d = 0.05$ . This indicates that while initial gender disparities were present, the intervention equalized outcomes, benefiting both groups equally.

### **Discussion**

The present study investigated the impact of language learning as an intervention for reducing anxiety among vocational trainees, with a particular focus on whether gender influences the emotional outcomes of such an intervention. A six-month structured language program was administered to 290 trainees and results were analysed in relation to the hypotheses framed in the introduction.

#### **Effect of Language Learning on Anxiety ( $H_2$ )**

The findings strongly support the first hypothesis indicating that the structured language intervention was associated with a significant reduction in anxiety among vocational trainees. This outcome aligns with foundational and contemporary research identifying language learning as both a cognitive and affective process with therapeutic potential. The observed anxiety reduction can be explained through interlinked psychological, linguistic and instructional mechanisms. First, the program's repeated communicative practice created frequent mastery experiences, which likely strengthened self-efficacy consistent with Bandura's (1977) assertion that confidence develops through progressive

task accomplishment and successful performance experiences. This interpretation supports earlier evidence that self-efficacy mediates reductions in academic and communication anxiety (Xu & Xu, 2025). Second, the meaning-focused, low-evaluation task design appears to have lowered emotional resistance consistent with Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which states that reduced anxiety facilitates participation and learner engagement. This aligns with Kayhan's (2022) meta-analysis confirming that structured language interventions have moderate therapeutic effects on speaking-related anxiety. Third, scaffolded speaking tasks, guided corrective feedback and incremental complexity of communicative challenges may have reduced cognitive load and performance pressure, a mechanism also emphasized by Kralova et al. (2018), who demonstrated that instructional scaffolding combined with supportive classroom interaction significantly lowers foreign language anxiety. Furthermore, collaborative dialogue, peer language negotiation and paired interaction embedded within the program may have fostered social reassurance and shared meaning-making, echoing findings by Akdağ-Çimen and Çepme (2022) and Aktaş (2023), who show that interactive language pedagogies increase participation and reduce fear of communicative performance. Finally, the intervention's structured repetition, fluency-focused speaking cycles and contextual language use likely promoted automaticity in expression decreasing self-monitoring pressures and reducing moment-to-moment communication stress supporting prior evidence that anxiety is lowered when learners shift from accuracy vigilance toward communicative flow (Horwitz et al., 1986; Ellis, 2003). Collectively these mechanisms indicate that the intervention worked not only as a language acquisition process but as an anxiety-responsive pedagogical framework that supported emotional regulation,

scaffolded communication confidence and reduced affective barriers to spoken language use.

### **Gender Dynamics in Anxiety Reduction (H<sub>3</sub>)**

The second hypothesis (H<sub>3</sub>), which posited gender-based differences in anxiety reduction, was partially supported. Consistent with prior literature, female trainees demonstrated significantly higher baseline anxiety than males, a pattern commonly attributed to higher emotional self-disclosure, stronger awareness of evaluative threat and greater willingness to report communication distress in formal assessment settings (Aida, 1994; Park & French, 2013). However, the absence of significant gender differences in post-test scores indicates that the intervention not only reduced anxiety but also neutralized pre-existing gender disparities. This supports growing evidence that anxiety in language learning is more context-responsive than trait-determined and that gender-based differences often reflect socially conditioned emotional expression rather than fixed psychological characteristics (Dewaele et al., 2019; Teimouri, Goetze & Plonsky, 2019).

The equalizing effect observed in this study can be explained through the specific pedagogical design of the intervention. The learning environment emphasized scaffolded oral practice, collaborative meaning-making, low-evaluation communicative tasks and iterative speaking opportunities, all of which are known to reduce affective barriers and promote psychological safety in language classrooms (Gkonou et al., 2017; Ross & Stracke, 2016). Such conditions may have allowed female learners, who are often more responsive to relational and interactive learning structures, to rapidly convert communicative willingness into reduced anxiety. Conversely, the relatively smaller observable shift among male trainees may

not indicate lower responsiveness but rather lower initial acknowledgment of anxiety due to socialized norms around emotional restraint, self-presentation and avoidance of vulnerability in performance-based tasks (Dewaele et al., 2016; Voyer & Voyer, 2014). Sustained exposure to low-pressure interactive speaking formats appears to have gradually moderated these response patterns leading to comparable anxiety outcomes at post-test.

The findings therefore align with contemporary views that structured, socially mediated language learning environments can override gender-linked emotional expression patterns when instruction systematically reduces fear of judgment, increases cooperative communication and normalizes linguistic risk-taking. Importantly, the results contribute to the limited body of evidence in vocational training contexts by demonstrating that gender differences in language-related anxiety are not immutable but pedagogically negotiable. The present study extends existing literature by showing that communicative language intervention, when intentionally designed around support, repetition and interaction, can function as an equalizing psychosocial mechanism that reduces gender-based affective variance without requiring gender-targeted modification. This positions language learning not only as a cognitive skill-building exercise but also as an emotionally equalizing and socially empowering process for diverse learner groups.

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings have several applied implications for vocational training contexts. First, language classrooms can serve dual developmental functions, strengthening communication competence while simultaneously addressing affective barriers to learning. For vocational learners who often experience academic self-doubt, limited

prior exposure to English and apprehension toward evaluative settings, structured communicative pedagogy may offer a psychologically safe entry point for skill acquisition and self-expression. Second, embedding language instruction within interaction-rich, scaffolded and confidence-centered frameworks appears to support learner engagement beyond linguistic outcomes contributing to reduced intimidation, increased participation and improved emotional comfort in learning. These results offer practical justification for integrating anxiety-sensitive language pedagogy within skill development programs, particularly in socioeconomically heterogeneous training environments where affective vulnerability may impede learning uptake.

### **Limitations**

The absence of a control group restricts causal inference and future research may strengthen evidence through comparison conditions or mixed method longitudinal designs. Additionally, while gender differences were reduced post-intervention, other unmeasured variables such as prior informal language exposure, personality traits, peer familiarity, socioeconomic background or trainer interaction style might have influenced emotional outcomes. Subsequent research may also explore moderating variables such as learner motivation profiles, classroom socioemotional climate and differential impact across vocational streams. Despite these limitations, the study contributes context-specific evidence from Indian vocational training environments demonstrating that structured language interventions can function as meaningful psychosocial support mechanisms that reduce anxiety and promote equitable learner engagement. The findings highlight the need for further empirical attention toward language learning as an affect-responsive pedagogical inter-

vention capable of supporting psychological and communicative development in applied skill training contexts.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future studies should incorporate randomized control designs and larger, more diverse samples to strengthen causal claims. Longitudinal research could explore the durability of anxiety reduction over time. Examining additional moderators such as socio-economic background, age and prior learning experience would provide deeper insight into individual differences. Comparative studies of different instructional methods, including technology-mediated, immersive and blended approaches, could identify optimal strategies for reducing anxiety and promoting emotional well-being in vocational learners.

This study demonstrates that structured language learning can reduce anxiety and support emotional well-being among vocational trainees, with comparable benefits across genders. By highlighting the underlying psychological and pedagogical mechanisms, the findings underscore the role of language learning as a dual cognitive and emotional intervention. Implementing supportive, task-based and confidence-building strategies in vocational language programs transforms learning from an experience of apprehension into one of growth, self-expression and resilience. These results emphasize the importance of integrating affective considerations into language pedagogy to support both skill development and psychological empowerment.

### **Conclusion**

The present study set out to investigate whether structured English language learning could reduce anxiety among vocational trainees in Kerala and whether gender influenced the outcomes of such an intervention. Guided by theories of affective

filtering, self-efficacy, experiential learning and sociocultural engagement, the study addressed the emotional as well as cognitive dimensions of language acquisition in vocational contexts.

All the objectives formulated at the outset were successfully achieved. The study examined the pre-intervention anxiety levels of vocational trainees, revealing that female trainees reported higher anxiety than their male counterparts. It then assessed post-intervention levels following six months of structured communicative English training and found a substantial reduction in anxiety across the entire sample. The effectiveness of language learning as an intervention was confirmed through a large effect size, establishing it as a powerful tool for lowering emotional distress in educational settings. Furthermore, the study compared male and female outcomes and found that although females initially experienced greater anxiety, gender no longer played a significant role after the intervention. This demonstrated that the program had an equalizing effect, benefitting learners across genders equally.

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