

Exploring English Language Insecurity and Reluctance to Engage in English Communication among Students in Traditionally Male-Dominated Academic Programs

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Abstract

English language insecurity remains a persistent yet underexplored phenomenon influencing students' communication experiences in higher education, particularly within traditionally male-dominated academic programs. This study explored how English language insecurity develops, influences students' reluctance to engage in English communication, and the strategies they employ to navigate these experiences. Guided by a qualitative narrative inquiry, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen purposively selected undergraduate students enrolled in Criminology, Maritime Education, Engineering, and Industrial-Technical Education programs in Region IX, Philippines. Thematic analysis revealed that English language insecurity was shaped by five interconnected factors: peer "roasting" culture and ridicule, the stigma surrounding performative English, masculine norms discouraging linguistic vulnerability, the prioritization of technical competence over communication, and accumulated experiences of public humiliation. These experiences subsequently manifested through defensive silence, calculated communication, reverting to familiar languages, missed opportunities for growth, and concerns about future professional communication. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience by preparing extensively, communicating within trusted circles, strategically code-switching, and learning through silent observation. The findings suggest that English language insecurity extends beyond linguistic competence and is socially constructed through peer interactions, disciplinary culture, and gendered expectations. The study contributes a contextualized understanding of English language insecurity in traditionally male-dominated academic programs and underscores the importance of fostering psychologically safe and communicatively supportive learning environments that encourage meaningful English language engagement. ..

Keywords English language insecurity; academic communication; reluctance; male-dominated academic programs;

Introduction

English has become the predominant language of instruction, academic discourse, and professional communication in higher education worldwide, making English communication competence an essential skill for university students. In English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts, proficiency in English not only facilitates classroom participation but also contributes to academic achievement and professional readiness. Previous studies consistently demonstrate that students with higher English proficiency exhibit greater communication confidence and achieve better academic performance, highlighting the critical role of English competence in tertiary education (Badrasawi et al., 2021; Bo et al., 2022; Escala et al., 2025; Khaidzir et al., 2024; Su, 2021). Despite these findings, many students continue to experience difficulties in using English confidently, suggesting that successful communication extends beyond linguistic competence and involves psychological and social dimensions that influence students' engagement in English communication.

One of the most prominent affective factors influencing English communication is English language insecurity, characterized by feelings of inadequacy, self-consciousness, and fear when using English in academic settings. Existing literature consistently reports that students often become insecure because of perceived grammatical inaccuracies, pronunciation difficulties, limited vocabulary, and fear of negative evaluation from teachers and peers (Ahmad & Awang Hashim, 2023; Gatcho & Hajan, 2019; Jugo, 2020; Salameh, 2022; Thi Nhu Ngoc & Dinh Phuong Khanh, 2022). Likewise, qualitative investigations reveal that these insecurities frequently manifest as embarrassment, self-doubt, and anxiety, preventing learners from expressing themselves confidently despite recognizing the importance of English proficiency (Giray et al., 2022; Soriano & Co, 2022; Tapado, 2025). Similarly, Biri (2023) identified fear of evaluation and negative comments as the primary source of writing anxiety among prospective English language teachers, underscoring the influence of evaluative experiences on learners' confidence in using English. Tao et al. (2026) demonstrated that learners' identity significantly influences English speaking proficiency, with speaking anxiety mediating this relationship. These findings suggest that English language insecurity is not merely a linguistic concern but also a psychosocial experience that shapes students' perceptions of themselves as English users.

The literature likewise demonstrates that language insecurity often translates into reluctance to engage in English communication. Carin (2025) further reported that communication apprehension discourages ESL college learners from actively participating in English-mediated classroom interactions. Students experiencing language-related fear commonly avoid recitations, oral presentations, classroom discussions, and other communicative situations because they anticipate criticism or embarrassment (Coutinho dos Santos et al., 2020; Labicane, 2021; Saeed et al., 2022). Studies further indicate that speaking anxiety, low communication confidence, and fear of negative evaluation significantly reduce learners' participation in English-speaking activities, thereby limiting opportunities to develop communicative competence (Badrasawi et al., 2021; Cabansag, 2020; Su, 2021). Although previous research has extensively documented language anxiety and communication apprehension, these studies primarily

explain what students experience rather than providing a deeper understanding of how language insecurity shapes their decisions to withdraw from English communication.

Beyond individual psychological factors, students' communication experiences are also shaped by their learning environments and social interactions. This observation is consistent with Biri et al. (2024), who emphasized that learners' English engagement is influenced by the interaction of motivational, environmental, and social factors rather than linguistic ability alone. In the same vein, Wahid et al. (2026) demonstrated that students' linguistic background and curriculum alignment significantly predict English proficiency, highlighting the importance of communicative learning environments and instructional practices in shaping learners' English language development. Research has shown that self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, classroom climate, peer support, and educational context significantly influence students' confidence and participation in English communication (Azarias, 2022; Fauzi et al., 2025; Mu et al., 2022; Nativid et al., 2024; Zulkiflee & Nimehchisalem, 2022). Moreover, recent studies argue that linguistic insecurity is socially constructed through classroom interactions, language ideologies, and peer evaluation rather than resulting solely from limited English proficiency (Malik et al., 2021; Valdellon & Lovitos, 2022; Yilmaz & De Jong, 2024; Zhang & Hamid, 2025). These findings underscore that students' reluctance to communicate cannot be understood solely through linguistic ability but must also be examined within the broader social and academic contexts in which communication occurs.

Traditionally male-dominated academic programs constitute a unique educational context because they are characterized not only by their gender composition but also by distinct disciplinary cultures, communication norms, and professional expectations. Fields such as criminology, maritime, engineering, and industrial-technical education have long been recognized as programs with predominantly male enrollment, reflecting persistent gender segregation across higher education (Charles & Bradley, 2002; Hendley, 2015). In the Philippine context, criminology has been consistently identified as a male-dominated program since its establishment in many higher education institutions, while maritime education likewise continues to be overwhelmingly composed of male students despite ongoing efforts toward gender inclusivity (Sotes et al., 2024; Villegas et al., 2022). These programs emphasize discipline, technical competence, and occupational preparedness, where classroom interactions may be influenced by masculine peer cultures and social expectations. Such environments may shape how students perceive the use of English, respond to communication challenges, and negotiate feelings of language insecurity. Despite these distinctive characteristics, little is known about how students in these academic settings experience English language insecurity and how these experiences contribute to their reluctance to engage in English communication.

Despite the growing body of literature on English proficiency, speaking anxiety, communication confidence, and affective factors, limited research has explicitly examined English language insecurity as a distinct phenomenon influencing students' reluctance to engage in English communication. More importantly, although previous studies have investigated diverse groups of university students, English majors, teacher education students, and learners in foreign language classrooms, no study has qualitatively examined how English language insecurity is experienced and negotiated by students enrolled in traditionally male-dominated academic programs, where disciplinary culture and peer norms may uniquely shape communication behaviors. Consequently, the ways in which language insecurity develops within these contexts and influences students' reluctance to engage in English communication remain insufficiently understood. Addressing this gap, the present study explored English language insecurity and reluctance to engage in English communication among students in traditionally male-dominated academic programs. The study examined students' lived experiences, perceived challenges, and contextual influences to provide a deeper understanding of how language insecurity operates within these underexplored educational settings. It further sought to generate insights that may inform more responsive English language instruction and learner support.

The present study was anchored on three complementary theoretical perspectives that collectively explain the phenomenon of English language insecurity and students' reluctance to engage in English communication. First, the concept of Linguistic Insecurity, originally introduced by William Labov (1966) and further expanded in contemporary higher education contexts by Zhang and Hamid (2025), posits that individuals may experience self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy when they perceive their language use as inferior to socially or institutionally valued linguistic norms. Such perceptions often influence learners' linguistic identity, confidence, and participation in communication. Second, the Dynamic Perspective of Second Language Anxiety proposed by MacIntyre and McGillivray (2023) explains that language anxiety is not a stable personality trait but a dynamic, context-dependent emotional state that fluctuates according to learners' social interactions, classroom experiences, and communicative demands. This perspective suggests that students' feelings of insecurity are continuously shaped by the learning environment and interpersonal experiences. Finally, the Second Language Willingness to Communicate (L2 WTC) Model developed by MacIntyre et al. (1998) explains that learners' decisions to initiate communication are influenced by communication anxiety, self-perceived competence, and situational conditions. Recent scholarship continues to affirm that learners with greater confidence and lower communication anxiety demonstrate stronger willingness to communicate in English across various learning environments (Lee & Chiu,

2023). Collectively, these theories provided the theoretical foundation of the present study by explaining how English language insecurity may emerge from learners' linguistic self-perceptions and contextual experiences and how these experiences may contribute to their reluctance to engage in English communication within traditionally male-dominated academic programs.

Research Question:

What factors contribute to students' English language insecurity in these academic programs?

How does English language insecurity influence students' reluctance to engage in English communication?

How do students cope with English language insecurity in their academic communication?

METHODS

Research Design

A qualitative narrative inquiry framed the investigation of how students in traditionally male-dominated academic programs constructed meaning from experiences of English language insecurity and how these experiences shaped their reluctance to engage in English communication. Narrative inquiry was particularly appropriate because language insecurity develops through accumulated educational, interpersonal, and sociocultural experiences rather than isolated communicative events. By eliciting participants' stories, the inquiry captured the temporal, contextual, and emotional dimensions of English language insecurity, allowing the phenomenon to be understood as it unfolded across classroom interactions, peer relationships, and academic participation. This approach further enabled the researchers to examine how students interpreted, negotiated, and responded to experiences that influenced their communicative behaviors within their respective academic programs (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

Research Locale

The inquiry was conducted in selected higher education institutions across Region IX (Zamboanga Peninsula), Philippines, offering traditionally male-dominated academic programs, including Criminology, Maritime Education, Engineering, and Industrial-Technical Education. These programs were selected because they represent academic environments where English serves as an essential medium for classroom discourse, technical communication, and professional preparation, while simultaneously reflecting disciplinary cultures that have historically been characterized by predominantly male enrollment. Situating the inquiry within Region IX provided opportunities to examine English language insecurity within a sociolinguistically diverse context where English functions as a second language alongside Filipino and various local languages, thereby enriching participants' narratives of English communication in higher education.

Population and Sampling

Purposive sampling guided participant selection to ensure that each narrative directly reflected the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2024). The participant pool comprised fifteen (15) undergraduate students enrolled in traditionally male-dominated academic programs from selected higher education institutions in Region IX. Rather than seeking statistical representation, participant selection prioritized depth, relevance, and richness of experience. Eligible participants were male undergraduate students currently enrolled in traditionally male-dominated academic programs, specifically Criminology, Maritime Education, Engineering, or Industrial-Technical Education, within selected higher education institutions in Region IX. Participants were required to be at least 18 years old, have completed at least one academic semester, and possess prior experience communicating in English during classroom discussions, oral presentations, recitations, or similar academic activities. Additionally, participants must have self-identified experiences of feeling insecure, hesitant, or reluctant to communicate in English and voluntarily agreed to participate through informed consent. The demographic profile of the participants is presented below in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Participants

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	18–20 years old	8	53.3
	21–23 years old	6	40.0
	24 years old and above	1	6.7
Sex	Male	15	100.0
Year Level	First Year	3	20.0
	Second Year	4	26.7
	Third Year	4	26.7

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
	Fourth Year	4	26.7
Academic Program	Criminology	5	33.3
	Maritime Education	4	26.7
	Engineering	3	20.0
	Industrial-Technical Education	3	20.0
Total		15	100.0

Research Instrument

Data were generated through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, allowing participants to narrate their experiences of English language insecurity and their reluctance to engage in English communication while providing sufficient flexibility for probing and clarification. The interview guide was developed from the study's research questions and theoretical framework, ensuring alignment with the constructs of linguistic insecurity, second language anxiety, and communication engagement. To establish content validity, the interview protocol underwent expert evaluation by three specialists in English language education, applied linguistics, and qualitative research, whose recommendations informed revisions in question wording, sequencing, and conceptual alignment. A pilot interview involving participants who satisfied the inclusion criteria but were excluded from the final sample further refined the interview protocol by enhancing question clarity, coherence, and depth. Rather than relying on statistical indices of reliability, the trustworthiness of the instrument was strengthened through expert validation, pilot testing, consistent interviewing procedures, and reflexive probing, all of which enhanced the credibility and dependability of the narratives generated (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

Data Collection Procedure

Prospective participants who satisfied the established inclusion criteria were identified through coordination with program administrators and faculty members. Invitations describing the purpose of the inquiry were extended individually, after which informed consent was secured prior to participation. Interviews were scheduled at mutually convenient times and conducted in quiet, distraction-free environments conducive to open and reflective conversations. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded to preserve the accuracy of their narratives, while field notes documented contextual observations, non-verbal expressions, and emerging reflections that complemented the interview transcripts. Data collection continued until sufficient narrative depth and informational adequacy were achieved, ensuring comprehensive representation of participants' experiences with English language insecurity and communication reluctance (Hennink et al., 2020).

Data Analysis

Narrative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2022). Analysis began with repeated reading of the interview transcripts to achieve familiarity with participants' narratives, followed by the systematic generation of initial codes that represented meaningful units of data. Related codes were subsequently organized into preliminary themes, which were reviewed, refined, and clearly defined to ensure coherence and distinctiveness across the dataset. Theme development remained grounded in participants' narratives while being interpreted in relation to the study's theoretical framework on linguistic insecurity, second language anxiety, and second language willingness to communicate. An iterative process of reviewing transcripts, codes, and emerging themes enhanced the credibility, consistency, and trustworthiness of the analysis, allowing patterns of meaning to accurately reflect participants' experiences of English language insecurity and their reluctance to engage in English communication (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Ethical Considerations

The inquiry adhered to the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice throughout the research process. Ethical clearance and the necessary institutional permissions were obtained prior to data collection. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was secured after participants were fully informed of the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, anticipated benefits, and their right to decline participation or withdraw at any point without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were safeguarded through the use of participant codes and the removal of all personally identifiable information from interview transcripts and research records. Audio recordings, transcripts, and related documents were stored in password-protected digital files accessible only to the researchers and will be securely retained and disposed of in accordance with institutional research policies. Given that participants were asked to recount personal experiences of English language insecurity, interviews were conducted with sensitivity and respect, allowing participants to skip questions or discontinue the interview whenever they experienced discomfort. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, credibility was established through prolonged engagement with the data, member checking of

interview transcripts, and the maintenance of an audit trail documenting key methodological and analytical decisions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2024).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1: *What factors contribute to students' English language insecurity in these academic programs?*

Theme 1. "Roasting" Culture and Peer Ridicule

Thirteen of the fifteen participants described peer "roasting" as one of the primary factors contributing to their English language insecurity. They shared that speaking English within their academic programs often exposed them to teasing, sarcastic remarks, or labels such as "*conyo*" and "*feeling sosyal*," making English communication socially risky rather than academically rewarding. Rather than risking embarrassment, participants deliberately limited their participation in classroom discussions, avoided speaking English unless required, or shifted to Filipino to maintain acceptance within their peer groups. For these students, language insecurity stemmed not merely from limited English proficiency but from anticipating negative peer reactions whenever they attempted to communicate in English.

"We were practicing our capstone pitch and I tried using some formal terms I found online. Immediately, my blockmates started laughing and going, 'Bro, who are you trying to impress? Just speak normally.' Now I just keep my explanations as short and simple as possible so they don't clown on me." P2

"If you mispronounce a word or stutter for even a second during a group meeting, the other guys will never let you live it down. They'll turn your mistake into an inside joke for the rest of the semester. It's funny when it happens to someone else, but it makes you want to keep your mouth shut during class." P8

This finding aligns with previous studies demonstrating that fear of negative evaluation and peer judgment significantly influence students' English communication experiences (Ahmad & Awang Hashim, 2023; Giray et al., 2022; Salameh, 2022; Thi Nhu Ngoc & Dinh Phuong Khanh, 2022). Similarly, Yilmaz and De Jong (2024) emphasized that peer interactions and classroom dynamics substantially shape learners' language anxiety and willingness to participate in English communication. The present finding extends this literature by illustrating how the informal culture of "roasting" within traditionally male-dominated academic programs reinforces English language insecurity, where speaking English is perceived as inviting ridicule rather than demonstrating competence.

Theme 2: The Stigma of Performative English

Ten of the fifteen participants shared that demonstrating a high level of English proficiency often attracted unwanted attention from their peers, who interpreted fluent English as an attempt to appear intellectually superior or socially elite. Rather than being recognized as a communication skill, speaking English fluently was frequently associated with being "*conyo*," "*feeling sosyal*," or trying too hard to impress others. Consequently, several participants admitted intentionally simplifying their English, code-switching to Filipino, or remaining silent to avoid being perceived as pretentious and to preserve authentic peer relationships. Their narratives suggest that language insecurity was not solely driven by linguistic limitations but also by the social consequences attached to displaying English proficiency.

"Whenever we have group discussions, I intentionally use basic English. If you speak too fluently, the other guys look at you like your personality is fake and you're just being performative to impress the professor. It's just easier to blend in so you don't alienate your friends." P1

"I actually speak English naturally at home, but in this engineering program, the guys view speaking straight English as a try-hard performance. I had to consciously force myself to speak with a thicker accent and use basic grammar just so they wouldn't think I was being performative and boastful." P13

This perspective resonates with previous studies emphasizing that peer evaluation and classroom social dynamics significantly influence students' English communication behaviors (Giray et al., 2022; Tapado, 2025; Yilmaz & De Jong, 2024). Likewise, Zhang and Hamid (2025) argued that linguistic insecurity is shaped by learners' perceptions of how their language use is socially evaluated within particular communities, often prompting individuals to regulate their linguistic behavior to gain acceptance.

Theme 3. Masculine Norms and Linguistic Vulnerability

Ten of the fifteen participants described an academic culture in which confidence and composure were expected, leaving little room to openly struggle with English communication. Participants explained that admitting difficulty in speaking English or displaying hesitation during classroom interactions was often interpreted as a sign of weakness or incompetence and/or even being labeled as "*gay*" by peers, creating additional pressure to conform to prevailing masculine norms within their academic environment. Consequently, many chose to remain silent, avoid asking questions, or refrain from participating in discussions rather than risk exposing their linguistic

difficulties. Within these predominantly male academic environments, maintaining an image of confidence often took precedence over practicing or improving English communication.

"In our major, if you start speaking fluent English with a nice accent, the guys will immediately start smirking and call you gay or 'bading.' It's like you're not allowed to sound educated without your masculinity being questioned. I just use street slang so nobody gives me a weird label." P9

"...you always have to act like you know exactly what you're doing. Admitting you don't understand something or stuttering in English feels like a sign of weakness. I'd rather just nod along and stay silent than show any vulnerability in front of the guys." P6

This story extends previous research that identifies classroom climate, peer interactions, and communication anxiety as significant influences on students' English-speaking experiences (Azarias, 2022; Nativid et al., 2024; Zulkiflee & Nimehchisalem, 2022). While earlier studies primarily emphasized anxiety arising from linguistic limitations, the present findings suggest that the social expectations embedded within predominantly male academic environments further intensify students' English language insecurity.

Theme 4: Technical Competence Over Communication

Eight of the fifteen participants perceived that their academic programs placed greater emphasis on technical knowledge and practical skills than on English communication. They explained that classroom success was often measured through demonstrations of technical competence, laboratory performance, field exercises, or professional procedures, while English proficiency received comparatively little attention unless required during presentations or language courses. Consequently, many participants viewed English communication as a peripheral rather than essential component of their professional preparation, reducing their motivation to practice the language and gradually reinforcing their feelings of insecurity when English use became necessary.

"If your hands are dirty and you get the job done, you're one of the boys. But if you try to explain the mechanical problem in smooth, fluent English, they'll laugh and think you're too soft for the engine room. It's better to just give short, rough commands so they know you can handle the physical labor." P14

"They expect you to sound blunt and aggressive, like a real cop. Speaking too articulately makes you look like a sheltered 'conyo' kid who can't handle real police work, so I just stick to rough, basic words to keep their respect." P3

This result corroborates previous studies emphasizing that students' academic environments shape their attitudes toward English communication and influence their communicative behaviors (Azarias, 2022; Bo et al., 2022; Escala et al., 2025). Although English proficiency has been consistently associated with improved academic performance and communication confidence (Badrasawi et al., 2021; Khaidzir et al., 2024), the present findings suggest that students in profession-oriented, predominantly male academic programs often perceive technical competence as the primary indicator of academic success. Such perceptions may unintentionally reduce opportunities to develop communicative competence and contribute to English language insecurity.

Theme 5: Accumulation of Past Humiliation

Six of the fifteen participants attributed their present reluctance to communicate in English to embarrassing experiences that occurred long before entering college. They recalled incidents during elementary, junior high school, or senior high school in which they were publicly corrected, laughed at, mocked for mispronouncing English words, or made to feel inadequate because of their language ability. Although these experiences occurred years earlier, participants explained that the emotional impact remained vivid, leading them to anticipate similar reactions whenever they were required to communicate in English. Consequently, many entered college already carrying feelings of hesitation and self-doubt that continued to influence their classroom participation.

"During my first year, I was explaining a fuel system layout and totally butchered the pronunciation of a basic tool. The whole lab laughed, and the seniors called me out for sounding clueless. That memory sticks. Now, even if I know the exact fix for an engine issue, I keep my mouth shut so I don't get clowned on again." P9

"Back in senior high, I choked during a graded speech and everyone in the back row started snickering at my broken English. It felt like total public humiliation. Now in college, the professor asks me to analyze a case out loud in English, my mind goes blank. I just say 'no comment' to avoid the risk entirely." P2

This experience is consistent with previous studies indicating that negative language-learning experiences can produce enduring emotional consequences that shape learners' future communication behaviors (Gatcho & Hajan, 2019; Jugo, 2020; Soriano & Co, 2022; Tapado, 2025). Likewise, Coutinho dos Santos et al. (2020) found that embarrassment and fear of public mistakes often discouraged students from participating in English-speaking activities, while Thi Nhu Ngoc and Dinh Phuong Khanh (2022) emphasized that repeated experiences of negative evaluation reinforced learners' communication anxiety.

Research Question 2: *How does English language insecurity influence students' reluctance to engage in English communication?*

Theme 1. Defensive Silence

Twelve of the fifteen participants described silence as their immediate response whenever they experienced English language insecurity in classroom interactions. Rather than risking grammatical mistakes, mispronunciation, or negative peer reactions, participants deliberately refrained from answering questions, volunteering during discussions, or expressing their ideas in English. Several admitted pretending not to know the answer, avoiding eye contact with instructors, or allowing classmates to respond first despite knowing they could contribute. For these students, silence functioned as a protective strategy that minimized the possibility of embarrassment, criticism, or unwanted attention, ultimately reinforcing their reluctance to engage in English communication.

"...during group work, I just don't talk. I let them do the talking. It's safer to just be the quiet guy who does the work than the guy who can't even explain a basic formula." P8

"I know the coding stuff perfectly, but when it comes to English, I just freeze. That's why I always sit at the back and stay completely invisible. If you don't say anything, they can't laugh at you." P10

This narrative corroborates previous studies demonstrating that English language anxiety frequently manifests through reduced classroom participation and avoidance of oral communication (Cabansag, 2020; Giray et al., 2022; Labicane, 2021; Saeed et al., 2022). Similarly, Soriano and Co (2022) observed that students often withdrew from English-speaking situations because silence was perceived as less threatening than exposing their linguistic limitations. The present findings extend this body of knowledge by showing that silence was not merely the absence of communication but a deliberate self-protective response to anticipated social evaluation within traditionally male-dominated academic programs.

Theme 2: Calculated Communication

Eleven of the fifteen participants described their English communication as carefully calculated rather than spontaneous. Instead of freely expressing their thoughts, they deliberately assessed whether speaking English was necessary, who was listening, and how their responses might be received before deciding to participate. Many participants admitted that they communicated in English only during graded presentations, oral examinations, or when directly called upon by their instructors. In less formal classroom situations, they intentionally remained reserved, believing that limiting their English communication reduced the likelihood of making mistakes or attracting unnecessary attention. Consequently, classroom participation became a calculated decision shaped more by self-protection than by genuine communicative intent.

"I just give one-word answers if the professor asks me something. Like, if he asks for the formula or the fix, I just say the exact tech term and that's it. No long sentences, no extra explanations. The less words I use, the less chance I have to mess up the grammar or look dumb in front of the guys. I just say what's needed for the grade and shut up." P9

"I only speak up if the machine is failing or if we need to log the data right then. I keep it strictly to business—just 'pass the tool' or 'check the monitor.'" P1

This perception supports previous research indicating that learners' communication behaviors are influenced not only by linguistic competence but also by psychological and situational factors (Nativid et al., 2024; Su, 2021; Yılmaz & De Jong, 2024). Existing studies have shown that students experiencing language anxiety often regulate their participation according to their perceived confidence and anticipated evaluation from others (Ahmad & Awang Hashim, 2023; Tapado, 2025). The present findings extend this understanding by demonstrating that participants did not completely withdraw from English communication; instead, they strategically selected situations in which the perceived social and academic risks were manageable.

Theme 3. Reverting to Familiar Languages

Eight of the fifteen participants shared that English language insecurity frequently prompted them to shift from English to Filipino or their respective local languages during classroom interactions. Rather than continuing to struggle with English, participants explained that using a more familiar language enabled them to express their ideas more naturally, avoid linguistic errors, and communicate without fear of negative evaluation. Several participants described beginning their responses in English before unconsciously switching to Filipino or another local language whenever they felt uncertain, while others intentionally relied on code-switching as a means of maintaining conversational flow. For these students, language shifting functioned less as a reflection of linguistic deficiency than as a strategy for preserving communicative confidence and emotional comfort.

"When it's just us groupmates in the lab, it's automatically Tagalog. It's hard to act like you're good at English in our setup, your bros might just tease you for being a show-off. But it's especially true when we're talking about technical stuff, like circuitry or troubleshooting." P12

"I really try to use English when the prof asks me, but once I get stuck on a word, that's when I go back to Tagalog. I don't care if my participation score gets deducted, but that's the only way I can actually explain our system architecture properly without looking like an idiot in front of the class." P15

This conclusion is consistent with previous studies demonstrating that learners often employ code-switching and familiar language resources to manage communication anxiety and reduce linguistic pressure (Cabansag, 2020; Giray et al., 2022; Labicane, 2021). Similarly, Tapado (2025) found that students frequently resorted to their first language whenever feelings of insecurity interfered with English communication. The present findings extend this literature by illustrating that participants' language choices were deliberate responses to English language insecurity rather than mere habits of bilingual communication.

Theme 4. Missed Opportunities for Growth

Five of the fifteen participants acknowledged that their reluctance to engage in English communication had caused them to miss valuable academic and personal development opportunities. Participants reflected that they often declined leadership roles, avoided volunteering during classroom discussions, limited their participation in presentations, or refrained from joining activities that required extensive English communication. Several recognized that these repeated decisions gradually hindered the development of their communication skills, confidence, and professional preparedness. Although participants understood the importance of English for their future careers, English language insecurity frequently outweighed their willingness to take communicative risks, resulting in opportunities that remained unrealized.

"There was this major drone project, and the professor was looking for a team lead to coordinate with an international partner. I knew the tech inside out, but the thought of handling meetings in English made me back down. I just let another guy take it. I missed out on a huge networking opportunity and a great resume booster, all because I was terrified of stuttering in English in front of everyone." P1

"When we are analyzing case studies or crime scenes in class, I have so many questions about the penal code, but I don't raise my hand. Our professors are strict and demand formal English answers. I am scared" P9

This outcome reinforces previous research demonstrating that sustained communication anxiety and low communication confidence can restrict learners' academic participation and impede the development of communicative competence (Bo et al., 2022; Escala et al., 2025; Khaidzir et al., 2024). Likewise, Su (2021) reported that students with greater communication confidence were more likely to participate actively in oral communication and employ effective communication strategies, while those experiencing anxiety engaged less frequently in English-speaking activities. Competence and confidence over time. Similarly, the Dynamic Perspective of Second Language Anxiety (MacIntyre & McGillivray, 2023) suggests that recurring avoidance behaviors may reinforce anxiety through the absence of positive communicative experiences. Consequently, participants' narratives indicate that English language insecurity not only constrained present communication but also restricted experiences that could have facilitated personal, academic, and professional development.

Theme 5. Professional Dread

Four of the fifteen participants expressed apprehension about their future careers, recognizing that English communication would be an indispensable component of their chosen professions. Participants acknowledged that their reluctance to engage in English extended beyond the classroom, shaping concerns about future job interviews, workplace interactions, professional presentations, and communication with clients, colleagues, or international counterparts. Several admitted worrying that their current avoidance of English communication would eventually place them at a disadvantage once they entered the workforce. For these participants, English language insecurity evolved from an academic concern into a source of uncertainty about their professional competence and career readiness.

"Our instructors keep saying international shipping lines only hire cadets who can pass the English Marlins Test. I'm a good mechanic, I can dismantle a fuel injector blindfolded, but the thought of a foreign chief engineer yelling at me in English on the bridge makes me sick." P13

"...I'm close to graduating, but I feel totally unready for the actual job because my communication skills are stuck." P3

This finding expands previous research linking English proficiency with academic achievement and communication confidence by illustrating that the consequences of English language insecurity extend into students' professional aspirations (Bo et al., 2022; Escala et al., 2025). Likewise, Khaidzir et al. (2024) emphasized that communication anxiety can undermine learners' confidence in public speaking, while Su (2021) demonstrated that greater communication confidence promotes more active engagement in English communication. The present findings suggest that participants were not only concerned about communicating effectively in the present but were also anticipating the long-term professional implications of their reluctance to use English.

Research Question 3: How do students cope with English language insecurity in their academic communication?

Theme 1. Preparation as Protection

Thirteen of the fifteen participants described extensive preparation as their primary strategy for coping with English language insecurity. Rather than speaking spontaneously, participants reported rehearsing presentations

multiple times, writing complete scripts, mentally translating responses, practicing pronunciation, and anticipating possible questions before participating in English-mediated classroom activities. Several participants explained that thorough preparation provided a sense of control and reduced the uncertainty associated with speaking English, enabling them to participate despite their persistent feelings of insecurity. For these students, preparation functioned not only as an academic practice but also as a protective mechanism that minimized the possibility of making mistakes and experiencing embarrassment during communication.

"When we have a graded reporting on the Revised Penal Code, I don't just study the slides—I write down a full script of every single word I'm going to say in English. I memorize it line by line until late at night." **P11**

I make a cheat sheet of standard maritime phrases and keep it in my pocket. I memorize the exact technical commands the night before so it flows out naturally during the drill." **P7**

This experience supports previous research indicating that learners frequently adopt communication strategies and preparatory behaviors to manage English-speaking anxiety and improve communication performance (Badrasawi et al., 2021; Khaidzir et al., 2024; Su, 2021). Likewise, Mu et al. (2022) emphasized that interventions which strengthen learners' psychological readiness can reduce anxiety and enhance confidence during English communication. The present findings extend this literature by demonstrating that participants' preparation was driven less by a desire for academic excellence than by the need to safeguard themselves from the perceived risks associated with English communication.

Theme 2. Communicating Within Trusted Circles

Twelve of the fifteen participants shared that they became more willing to communicate in English when interacting with individuals they trusted, such as close friends, supportive classmates, understanding instructors, or familiar group members. Rather than avoiding English entirely, participants explained that they intentionally reserved English communication for environments where they felt accepted and were less likely to be judged or ridiculed for making mistakes. Several participants noted that these trusted circles allowed them to speak more freely, ask questions without hesitation, and gradually build confidence through positive communication experiences. Within these supportive relationships, English communication became less intimidating and more manageable despite their continuing language insecurity.

"For group projects, I always stick with my fixed circle of friends. Even if our English isn't perfect, we don't police each other's grammar." **P9**

"With my boys, even if my grammar is totally broken or I use the wrong words, we just laugh it off privately." **P8**

This aligns with previous studies highlighting the importance of supportive classroom environments and positive interpersonal relationships in reducing communication anxiety and encouraging English participation (Azarias, 2022; Bacus & Cañete, 2025; Nativid et al., 2024). Similarly, Ahmad and Awang Hashim (2023) emphasized that learners' confidence in English communication is influenced by the social atmosphere surrounding classroom interactions, while Yılmaz and De Jong (2024) demonstrated that peer relationships significantly shape students' willingness to communicate. The present findings further suggest that trusted social networks function as psychological safe spaces where participants can experiment with English communication without fear of ridicule or negative evaluation.

Theme 3. Strategic Code-Switching

Ten of the fifteen participants described code-switching as a deliberate strategy for managing English language insecurity while remaining engaged in classroom communication. Rather than abandoning conversations altogether, participants intentionally alternated between English and Filipino or their local language whenever they struggled to express ideas, recall vocabulary, or maintain fluency. Several explained that code-switching enabled them to communicate their intended message without becoming overwhelmed by the pressure to speak in grammatically accurate English. For these students, alternating languages was not perceived as a linguistic weakness but as a practical means of sustaining communication while minimizing the emotional burden associated with speaking English.

"I always start my presentation in English just to show the professor I'm trying. But once I get to the actual math or the fluid mechanics part, my vocabulary just runs out. Instead of freezing and looking stupid, I quickly switch to Tagalog. I'll say, 'We used this material because its tensile strength is higher, so it won't easily break.' Mixing the languages is my fallback. It's the only way I can prove to them that I actually know the engineering design even if my English isn't smooth." **P4**

"...If I force myself to explain that purely in English, I'll stutter and it will look like I don't know my own code. Code-switching is how I survive the technical questions without losing points." **P7**

This is consistent with previous studies suggesting that multilingual learners employ code-switching as a communicative strategy to compensate for linguistic limitations and reduce communication anxiety (Cabansag, 2020; Labicane, 2021; Tapado, 2025). Likewise, Mu et al. (2022) emphasized that learners often adopt adaptive communication strategies to regulate anxiety and maintain participation in English-mediated interactions. The

present findings further demonstrate that participants consciously used code-switching not merely because they were bilingual, but because it enabled them to navigate moments of linguistic uncertainty without completely withdrawing from communication.

Theme 4. Silent Apprenticeship

Seven of the fifteen participants shared that they coped with English language insecurity by learning through careful observation rather than active participation. Instead of immediately engaging in English communication, they listened attentively to fluent classmates, observed how instructors explained concepts, and paid close attention to pronunciation, vocabulary, sentence construction, and presentation styles. Several participants explained that they preferred to watch and mentally rehearse these communication patterns before attempting to use English themselves. Although they remained relatively quiet during classroom interactions, participants viewed observation as an important way of gradually developing their confidence and communicative competence without exposing themselves to immediate judgment or embarrassment.

"During crime scene processing or combat drills, I don't speak or volunteer to lead the briefing. I just stay quiet, watch the instructors closely, and follow instructions perfectly." P6

"...by being the quiet, reliable guy who does the actual technical work, I can survive the lab without ever having to speak a single sentence" P2

This complements previous studies emphasizing that learners adopt various self-regulated strategies to cope with language anxiety and strengthen communication confidence (Mu et al., 2022; Nativid et al., 2024; Su, 2021). While existing research has largely focused on overt coping behaviors such as preparation and communication strategies, the present findings highlight observation as a subtle yet meaningful form of language learning. Rather than interpreting classroom silence solely as disengagement, participants' narratives suggest that silence may also represent an intentional period of learning, reflection, and skill acquisition.

CONCLUSION

Beyond identifying isolated factors, the findings reveal that English language insecurity among students in traditionally male-dominated academic programs is fundamentally embedded within the social culture of their academic environment. Rather than originating solely from limited English proficiency, participants' insecurity developed through recurring experiences of peer ridicule, expectations surrounding masculine identity, disciplinary norms that prioritized technical competence over communication, and lingering memories of previous humiliation. These conditions subsequently influenced how participants navigated English communication, leading them to adopt protective behaviors such as remaining silent, communicating selectively, reverting to familiar languages, and avoiding opportunities that required extensive English use. Despite these challenges, participants were not passive recipients of insecurity. Instead, they actively negotiated their circumstances through careful preparation, trusted social networks, strategic code-switching, and observational learning, demonstrating resilience while continuing to participate in their academic communities.

The findings therefore suggest that English language insecurity should not be understood merely as an individual communication problem but as a contextual phenomenon shaped by the interaction of academic culture, peer relationships, and students' lived experiences. More importantly, the study successfully extends existing literature by demonstrating that the communication behaviors of students in traditionally male-dominated academic programs cannot be adequately explained by language anxiety alone. Instead, reluctance to engage in English communication emerges from a complex negotiation between maintaining social acceptance, preserving masculine identity, meeting disciplinary expectations, and preparing for future professional demands. These insights contribute a more contextually grounded understanding of English language insecurity and highlight the need for learning environments that promote psychological safety, supportive peer cultures, and authentic opportunities for English communication without fear of social judgment.

Collectively, the findings provide strong support for the three theoretical perspectives underpinning the study. Linguistic Insecurity Theory explains how participants' perceptions of being socially evaluated for their English use fostered persistent self-doubt, particularly within peer cultures where speaking English was often associated with ridicule, pretentiousness, or deviations from accepted masculine norms. Likewise, the Dynamic Perspective of Second Language Anxiety illustrates that English language insecurity was not a fixed personal characteristic but a context-dependent emotional response shaped by repeated classroom experiences, peer interactions, and disciplinary cultures. Finally, the L2 Willingness to Communicate Model explains how these emotional and social experiences influenced participants' communication decisions, resulting in defensive silence, calculated communication, and strategic coping behaviors. Taken together, the findings demonstrate that English language insecurity is a socially negotiated phenomenon in which language, identity, emotion, and context continuously interact to shape students' communicative behavior.

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