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THE MAP IS NOT THE TERRITORY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF GRADE 10 STUDENTS REFRAMING CLASSROOM FEAR IN KARACHI

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ABSTRACT

Communication apprehension (CA) can keep capable secondary school students silent in classrooms where participation is expected. Although interventions for CA have been studied, little qualitative work in Pakistan has examined how students themselves experience and make sense of an intervention designed to reduce it. This qualitative study explored how grade 10 students in Karachi experienced a ten-session Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) intervention and what changes in classroom communication they attributed to it. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 purposively selected students (six from each of two private schools following different educational systems) one week after the intervention. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. Six themes were developed: Breaking the Wall of Silence, Reshaping Thoughts, Redrawing the Map, Taming the "Inner Critic," The Body as a Remote Control, and From "I Can't" to "I Can." Participants described fear that was felt in the body, fueled by anticipated judgment, and sustained by harsh self-talk. They described learning to notice and reshape these patterns through anchoring, visualization, reframing, and attention to posture and breath. Accounts were not uniformly positive: several participants said they still felt shy or needed reinforcement sessions, and speaking to authority figures remained difficult for some. Because the data are self-reports, the findings cannot establish effectiveness. They do offer a context-sensitive account of how adolescents interpret NLP-based tools, and they suggest that approaches addressing students' internal representations of speaking, alongside supportive classroom conditions, merit further study.

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Introduction

Learning in school is a social activity. Students ask questions, test their ideas against those of peers, and receive feedback by speaking, and sociocultural theory holds that such talk is part of how understanding develops, not merely a way of displaying it (Vygotsky, 1978). When students stay silent, teachers lose evidence of what learners understand, and learners lose opportunities to learn through interaction. Silence, however, does not always signal missing knowledge. Communication apprehension (CA), defined by McCroskey (1977, 1984) as fear or anxiety associated with real or anticipated communication with other people, can lead a student who knows the answer to withhold it. Earlier work on reticence described such students as otherwise normal speakers for whom avoidance of speaking had become the central problem (Phillips, 1968; Keaten & Kelly, 2000).

In Pakistan, conditions in many secondary classrooms can sharpen this problem. Research with Pakistani learners reports that fear of mistakes, fear of negative evaluation, peer pressure, hesitation, and shyness are common barriers to speaking (Basit et al., 2021; Nasir & Ansari, 2021; Soomro et al., 2023). Students in grades 9 and 10 also face board-examination pressure, which can shift classroom time toward written work and syllabus coverage and away from oral participation, and cultural expectations of respect toward teachers and elders can make speaking up feel risky. Most available studies, however, concern university students, focus on English-language speaking anxiety, and rely on questionnaires. Secondary school students' own accounts of what makes speaking frightening, and of what helps, are comparatively rare.

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) is one of several approaches that have been proposed for helping people change how they think, feel, and behave in communication situations. Developed in the 1970s by Bandler and Grinder (1975, 1979), it offers practical techniques such as anchoring, reframing, language-pattern questioning, and visualization. NLP has been used in language teaching, coaching, and counseling (Pishghadam et al., 2011; Tosey & Mathison, 2009), but its theoretical foundations and evidence base are contested (Craft, 2001).

This article reports a qualitative study conducted in Karachi. It asks how grade 10 students who experienced apprehension about speaking in class described their experience of classroom communication before and after a ten-session NLP intervention, how they made sense of the techniques, and what difficulties remained. The study contributes (a) an adolescent, school-based, Pakistani perspective to a literature dominated by adult and university samples, and (b) a transparent account that links students' descriptions to established psychological processes while acknowledging the limits of what self-reports can show.

Literature Review

Communication Apprehension in the Classroom

McCroskey (1977, 1984) conceptualized CA as a person's level of fear or anxiety about communicating, which may be relatively stable across situations or triggered by particular settings. Research in this tradition commonly distinguishes four contexts: group discussion, meetings, interpersonal (dyadic) conversation, and public speaking (McCroskey, 1984).

Bodie (2010) offered an influential account of how apprehension operates during speaking. Public speaking anxiety, he argued, involves physiological arousal, ruminative thoughts, and difficulties in self-regulation: anxious speakers direct attention toward monitoring their own anxiety and performance and away from delivering their message. This helps explain why a student can understand material well yet go blank when called upon. It also suggests that interventions might work by changing how students interpret and regulate their internal states, not only by teaching speaking skills.

The Pakistani Educational Context

Studies in Pakistan have documented speaking-related anxiety mainly among college and university students. Soomro et al. (2023) combined questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with college students and teachers and identified an inferiority complex, peer pressure, loss of words, hesitation, lack of confidence, and shyness as barriers to speaking English. Basit et al. (2021) found that students experienced anxiety during classroom presentations because of fear of poor performance, limited language ability, and concern about making mistakes. Nasir and Ansari (2021) similarly examined factors contributing to CA among English language learners in Pakistan. Across these studies, fear of being judged and of being wrong recurs, and language proficiency is only part of the picture.

NLP as an Educational and Therapeutic Approach

NLP began as an attempt to model the language and behavior of effective therapists. Its meta-model uses questions to challenge vague, absolute, or limiting statements (Bandler & Grinder, 1975), and later work added techniques such as anchoring (associating a physical cue with a desired emotional state), reframing (reinterpreting the meaning of an experience), rapport building, and visualization (Bandler & Grinder, 1979; O'Connor & Seymour, 2002). A frequently taught presupposition holds that people respond to their internal maps of reality rather than to reality itself, so changing the map can change the response (Bandler & Grinder, 1979).

The approach is controversial. Craft (2001) questioned NLP's status as a learning theory and the coherence of its modeling claims, while Tosey and Mathison (2003) responded that her critique relied on secondary sources and that NLP merits serious attention as an approach to communication, personal development, and learning. Pishghadam et al. (2011) discussed an NLP

approach to language learning, and in Pakistan, Baloch et al. (2022) interviewed college teachers and found limited knowledge of NLP terminology, although some described using practices similar to NLP techniques. Mehdi et al. (2022) interviewed participants about NLP's effects on behavior and reported greater self-awareness of thoughts and feelings, but without examining CA specifically. To our knowledge, qualitative accounts from secondary school students who completed an NLP program aimed at CA are not available for Pakistan.

Several NLP techniques resemble processes with independent support in psychology, which gives a basis for interpreting students' accounts without relying on NLP's own theory. Reframing and challenging absolute self-talk parallel cognitive restructuring in cognitive therapy (Beck, 1976), whose efficacy has been reviewed extensively (Hofmann et al., 2012). Visualization parallels mental simulation, which Taylor et al. (1998) found to support self-regulation and coping, particularly when people imagine the steps leading to a goal and not only the desired outcome. Future-oriented positive imagery has also been shown to reduce anxiety in anticipation of public speaking (Landkroon et al., 2022).

Research Questions

The study was guided by three questions:

1. How did participating students describe their experience of classroom communication before the NLP intervention?
2. How did they experience and make sense of the NLP techniques taught during the intervention?
3. What changes in their communication, and what remaining difficulties, did they report afterward?

Methodology

Research Design and Orientation

The study used a qualitative, interpretive design with semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. This orientation fits the aim of understanding how students themselves experience and make sense of an intervention, in their own words.

Context and Intervention

The intervention consisted of ten 60-minute sessions delivered over two weeks, after regular school hours, on the premises of each school. The same facilitator delivered the sessions in both schools. The facilitator, a professional psychologist and certified NLP master practitioner with about a decade of experience working with adolescents, worked under the researcher's supervision. A pilot with 10 students beforehand showed that abstract NLP vocabulary created cognitive burden, so terminology was translated into age-appropriate language and sensory (visual, auditory, kinesthetic) activities were adapted to classroom culture.

The sessions moved from rapport and self-awareness, through anchoring and reframing, to group discussion, formal and semi-formal speaking, and integration of tools. Techniques included rapport building, timeline work, anchoring, reframing, language-pattern awareness, visualization, and guided relaxation imagery. The researcher also documented the timetable, tools, and students' in-class responses; these records informed interpretation of the interviews.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were grade 10 students from two private secondary schools in Karachi, one following the local board system and the other an international board curriculum. This contrast was deliberate: classroom culture, assessment pressure, and teaching style differ between systems, and the study sought accounts from more than one setting. Students who reported apprehension about speaking in class were invited to take part in the intervention (30 per school).

From these intervention participants, 12 students (six per school) were purposively selected for interview. Selection aimed at variation: students were included whether they felt the sessions had helped a great deal or only a little, so that the interviews would not represent only the most positive experiences.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted by the researcher one week after the final session. The one-week gap was intentional, giving student's time to notice whether anything had changed in their everyday communication. The interview guide contained six open-ended questions asking students about (a) how they felt about speaking in front of others before the sessions and what had changed most, (b) sharing ideas in group work, (c) giving an opinion when asked in class or in a meeting, (d) what they told themselves after making a mistake, (e) whether and how they had used any of the techniques, and (f) their first thought if asked to give a presentation the next day. Interviews were conducted bilingually so that students could speak in the language they found most natural, and were audio-recorded with consent.

Data Analysis

Recordings were transcribed and analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases: becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Codes were developed from the transcripts rather than from a predetermined framework. Theme names draw on participants' own images where possible (the "wall," the "map," the "remote control"). Only after themes were defined were they read against NLP concepts and the psychological literature reviewed above. Quotations are reported with light edits for grammar and punctuation that do not alter meaning.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was addressed using the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was supported by presenting participants' own words alongside interpretation and by comparing interview accounts with the researcher's session records. Dependability was supported by documenting data collection, coding, and analytic decisions. Confirmability was supported by reflexive attention to the researcher's expectations. Transferability is supported by describing the schools, the intervention, and the participants in enough detail for readers to judge applicability to similar settings.

Researcher Positionality

The researcher is an educationist who designed the study, coordinated the schools, selected and supervised the facilitator, and collected the data, but did not deliver the NLP sessions. This position brings contextual knowledge but also a risk: students may have wished to please the person who organized the program. This risk is discussed under limitations.

Ethical Considerations

Formal consent was obtained from school management and parents, and assent from students, before any data collection. Students were told that participation would not affect their academic records and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Names, schools, and the facilitator were anonymized, and students are identified only by codes. Audio files were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher and deleted after transcription and analysis.

Findings

Interviews described a shift from fear that felt physical, fixed, and invisible to others toward fear that students could notice, shrink, and manage. Before the sessions, participants described speaking as frightening in physical, cognitive, and social ways: St 12's heart "would beat so fast" that following the teacher became impossible, St 7's mind "always got blank," and St 9 believed that everyone "was just waiting for me to make a mistake." One participant summarized the pattern: "Even though I knew the answer, I hesitated to speak because I feared making a mistake in front of everyone." Silence protected students who understood the material (RQ1). Six themes captured what changed (Table 1).

Table 1: Themes, Related NLP Tools, and Illustrative Participants

Theme	Core idea	Related NLP tool as described by students	Participants quoted
1. Breaking the Wall of Silence	Fear becomes smaller and easier to push aside	Breathing anchors	St 12, St 7

2. Reshaping Thoughts	Speaking is rehearsed in imagination before it happens	Visualization, step-by-step sequencing	St 27, St 30
3. Redrawing the Map	Fear of judgment is recognized as a self-made interpretation	"Map is not the territory," reframing	St 9
4. Taming the "Inner Critic"	Absolute self-talk and the inner voice are changed	Language-pattern awareness, changing voice qualities	St 5, St 18
5. The Body as a Remote Control	Bodily signals are noticed early and shifted	Swish pattern, posture	St 22, St 8
6. From "I Can't" to "I Can"	Shyness is reinterpreted as a learnable behavior	Practice-based sessions, reinforcement	St 12, St 13

Theme 1: Breaking the Wall of Silence

St 12 described apprehension as a wall that changed after the sessions:

> Communication was always like a dark wall between me and my class, but the breathing anchors worked for me. Now the wall is not scary; it feels like a thin sheet which could be pushed away. I still get afraid, but the fear is small now. (St 12)

The fear did not vanish; its thickness, darkness, and loudness changed. St 7 similarly learned that the blank mind was "a mental trick" but added, "I think I need to attend more sessions to build my confidence."

Theme 2: Reshaping Thoughts

A second group of students rehearsed speaking in imagination. St 27 pictured "a movie playing in my mind where I saw myself standing firm and confident," so that the real presentation felt "normal and usual." St 30 rehearsed sequence instead of outcome:

> I learnt to imagine stepping stones on the floor. Now when I want to say something, I just move from one stone to the next in my head, which saves me from getting lost. (St 30)

The difference matters because mental simulation supports coping more when people imagine the process than when they imagine only the outcome (Taylor et al., 1998). St 30's jumbled thoughts also match the attention disruption Bodie (2010) describes.

Theme 3: Redrawing the Map

Students were taught that people react to an internal map rather than the territory itself. St 9 applied this idea:

> I used to think that everyone in class was just waiting for me to make a mistake, but when I realized that it's just a map which I created in my mind . . . I felt lighter. The territory was just my fellow learners who were probably just as nervous as I was. (St 9)

Classmates changed from judges to fellow participants. The researcher also noted that students spoke comfortably during interviews, although this may reflect rapport built during the program.

Theme 4: Taming the "Inner Critic"

St 5 noticed absolute words in their self-talk ("I used to say 'always' and 'never' a lot") and replaced "I always fail" with "Last time was hard, but this time I have a new plan." A global, permanent judgment became specific, temporary, and paired with a plan, which resembles cognitive restructuring (Beck, 1976) and the NLP meta-model's challenge to universal statements (Bandler & Grinder, 1975). St 18 changed the voice instead of its words: when she made the scary voice sound like "a cartoon character," it "made me laugh, and once I laughed, the fear just broke apart."

Theme 5: The Body as a Remote Control

St 22 became "a body detective" who feels "my shoulders getting tight or my breath getting short" and uses the Swish technique to swap fear for a feeling of power: "I found the remote control for my own nerves." St 8 stood straight and looked at eye level because "if my body looks confident my brain starts to believe it too." Both describe agency, catching early signs and responding. We have no physiological measures, so these claims remain at the level of perception.

Theme 6: From "I Can't" to "I Can"

St 12 reflected on shyness:

> I understand now that shyness is just a behavior. Though I still feel like a shy person by personality . . . I don't feel like I've completely changed. I think I need more reinforcement sessions to truly believe I can be a leader in class. (St 12)

St 13 credited practice: "I felt the change in my muscles, and I stopped thinking that 'I can't' and started thinking 'I haven't done it before, but I can try.'" Learning by doing resembles the mastery experiences that build self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), but St 12's ambivalence suggests the beginning of a different self-understanding, not a completed change.

Gains with Limits

Not every account was one of straightforward success. St 7 and St 12 asked for more sessions, and some students said that speaking to teachers or senior people stayed difficult even when speaking to peers had become easier. Participants from both school systems described similar experiences, although with six interviewees per school this comparison is tentative.

Discussion

Before the sessions, students described speaking as an embodied, cognitive, and social threat in which they expected judgment and felt their minds fail (RQ1). They made sense of the techniques as concrete, practicable tools, explained through vivid metaphors (RQ2). They reported feeling calmer and more willing to speak, while also describing continuing shyness, a need for reinforcement, and persisting difficulty with authority figures (RQ3).

The accounts suggest that CA is more than a fixed trait. Much of the fear was tied to particular interpretations (everyone is waiting for me to fail), self-statements (I always fail), and bodily signals. Bodie's (2010) argument that anxiety diverts attention from the message offers a plausible reason why students reported blank minds and why tools that give attention something to do, such as a breathing anchor, a stepping-stone sequence, or a posture cue, might help. This remains an interpretation of self-reports, not a demonstrated mechanism.

Students' descriptions also map onto processes with independent support: reframing resembles cognitive restructuring (Beck, 1976; Hofmann et al., 2012), visualization resembles mental simulation (Taylor et al., 1998; Landkroon et al., 2022), and practice-based learning resembles mastery experiences (Bandura, 1997). Whatever benefit students perceived may therefore not depend on NLP's own vocabulary, which is useful given the doubts raised about it (Craft, 2001; Tosey & Mathison, 2003).

The findings fit the Pakistani context, where fear of judgment and of mistakes recurs (Basit et al., 2021; Nasir & Ansari, 2021; Soomro et al., 2023). St 9's discovery that classmates were "probably just as nervous" suggests that apprehension may be widely shared yet hidden, so normalizing nervousness may lower the perceived threat.

Earlier Pakistani qualitative work described teachers' limited familiarity with NLP (Baloch et al., 2022) and adults' greater self-awareness after NLP sessions (Mehdi et al., 2022). The present study adds an adolescent perspective and a focus on speaking, and it raises two cautions. Students used the program's own vocabulary ("map and territory," "anchors," "Swish"), so some of what we heard may be learned discourse. Rapport with a skilled facilitator, group support, relaxation, and speaking practice were also present, so the data cannot show which element mattered (Tosey & Mathison, 2009).

Implications for Practice

Teachers can lower the stakes of speaking by treating mistakes as feedback, normalizing nervousness, and offering short, low-pressure speaking tasks before formal presentations. Brief routines students found useful (a breathing cue, a posture cue, stepwise rehearsal, replacing absolute self-talk) can be taught without jargon, and schools could add short follow-up sessions. Because some NLP activities, including guided relaxation imagery, involve altered states in minors, programs should be delivered by qualified facilitators with parental consent and school oversight.

Limitations and Future Research

The sample is small (12 students), purposive, and drawn from two private schools in one city, so findings are not statistically generalizable. All data are self-reports collected one week after the intervention, so they cannot show that NLP caused change or that it lasted. The researcher who organized the program also conducted the interviews, which may have encouraged socially desirable answers, and there was no comparison group. Quotations were translated from bilingual interviews, so some nuance may be lost. Future studies could use longitudinal interviews and classroom observation, include teachers and parents, compare NLP-based programs with skills-only or cognitive-behavioral programs, and use participant diaries to capture real-time use of the tools.

Conclusion

Grade 10 students in Karachi described communication apprehension as a wall of fear felt in the body, fueled by imagined judgment and harsh self-talk, and described an NLP-based program as giving them practical ways to notice and change these patterns. Their accounts of reframing, rehearsal, voice change, and posture are consistent with established psychological processes, and their ambivalence, including continued shyness and difficulty with authority, argues against reading the program as a complete remedy. The study cannot show that NLP works, but it shows how students experienced it and where their needs remain.

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