



Overcoming Communication Anxiety in English Language Acquisition: The Sociocultural Impact of AI-Mediated Learning Systems

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Abstract: Filipino students frequently experience communication anxiety when using English, which can reduce their participation in classroom interactions and limit opportunities to develop speaking proficiency. As higher education rapidly transitions toward digital ecosystems, there is a critical need to understand how artificial intelligence (AI) and digital platforms mediate language learning. This study explored the sociocultural impact of AI-mediated learning systems on English language acculturation. Eighteen university students from Surigao del Sur, Philippines, were purposively sampled to participate in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Using reflexive thematic analysis, the findings revealed that AI applications function as active sociocultural agents, providing algorithmic scaffolding that mitigates communication apprehension. By utilizing digital tools for private, low-threat practice, learners successfully negotiated their linguistic identities and built confidence, which consequently expanded their physical classroom participation and collaborative social connections. The study concludes that modern English language acquisition must be reconceptualized as a socio-digital acculturation process. Higher education institutions are encouraged to systematically integrate AI literacy and digital communication tools to foster inclusive, hybrid learning environments that reduce anxiety and promote communicative competence.

Keywords: AI-mediated learning, communication anxiety, English language acquisition, language acculturation, sociocultural theory

1. Introduction

Despite the rapid advancement of information and communication technology (ICT) and artificial intelligence (AI) in higher education, there remains a critical gap in understanding how AI-mediated learning systems can be leveraged from a sociocultural perspective to facilitate English language acculturation and overcome communication anxiety among second-language learners. While English is widely used as a medium of instruction in the Philippines, many learners, particularly those whose first languages are Cebuano or Tagalog, continue to experience difficulties in learning and speaking the language. Approximately 73% of students report that speaking English is highly challenging, largely due to communication anxiety that limits their confidence and willingness to express ideas (Pontillas & Rodrigo, 2024). As Philippine higher education institutions transition toward digitally integrated learning environments, they face the dual challenge of developing learners who are linguistically proficient and technologically adaptable. Students navigate varying levels of linguistic preparedness shaped by diverse educational, sociocultural, and digital backgrounds (Adalia et al., 2026; Bagood & Cerna, 2026; Paraman, 2026).

Language acquisition and cultural adaptation are essential processes that heavily influence individuals' identity development, social participation, and overall well-being (Pasquarella et al., 2025). From a traditional sociocultural perspective, learning occurs first through social participation before knowledge is gradually internalized; human development happens across cultural, interpersonal, and individual levels (Gabrielyan & Madatyan, 2025). Intellectual development is inherently mediated by social relationships, cultural values, and symbolic tools, particularly language (Legarde, 2026). Within this system, cognitive growth is shaped by the resources, opportunities, and social practices



available within families, schools, and broader communities (Gee, 2023; Kumar et al., 2025). Furthermore, modern society increasingly requires individuals to construct their identities through personal choices influenced by these sociocultural contexts (Masaki, 2023). Acculturation plays a significant role in this bilingual development and second language acquisition. Higher levels of acculturation are associated with better comprehension and language mastery, highlighting the need for educational programs that address diverse linguistic, familial, and psychosocial needs (Jasemi & Gottardo, 2023; Buttiler et al., 2023).

Research has continuously shown that higher levels of English proficiency, self-confidence, and acculturation facilitate communication, social integration, and cultural adjustment, whereas limited proficiency and communication anxiety can hinder participation and contribute to psychological distress (Aoyama & Takahashi, 2020; Horne, 2024). Historically, participatory instructional approaches, collaborative learning, and supportive teacher–student relationships have strengthened learners’ confidence and encouraged active engagement (Norman & Eslami, 2024; Santos et al., 2025). Involving learners in collaborative knowledge construction allows them to actively shape educational practices responsive to their communities (Ghiso & Campano, 2024).

However, as classrooms evolve into digitally connected ecosystems, the mechanisms of sociocultural mediation must be reconceptualized to include human-computer interaction. The integration of AI into language learning provides a new layer of sociocultural scaffolding. Recent studies confirm that AI tools function as digital collaborators that systematically meet learners’ needs, enhance the learning process, reduce second language (L2) anxiety, and increase motivation (Mahmood & Azeez, 2025). By providing a digital avenue for continuous, low-pressure practice, AI systems offer protective scaffolding against the fear of negative evaluation. Yang (2026) supports this, demonstrating through a systematic review that AI enhances a learner’s willingness to communicate (WTC) by reducing anxiety and building confidence by creating a low-threat environment. This digital acculturation operates through both affective and cognitive pathways that function synergistically to reduce foreign language anxiety (Yang, 2026).

Furthermore, a student’s technological fluency directly impacts their linguistic confidence in smart classrooms. Providing direct empirical support, Zhang, Nie, Fan, and Liu (2025) demonstrate that AI literacy improves self-efficacy in AI learning and diminishes classroom anxiety, both of which are significant mediators in the relationship between AI literacy and willingness to communicate. Therefore, AI literacy acts as a critical mediating factor that bridges the gap between digital tool utilization and psychological readiness to engage in English-mediated academic environments.

Despite the increasing recognition of sociocultural learning as an effective educational approach globally, its application, particularly concerning the integration of AI and ICT, within the Philippine educational context remains relatively limited. There is a pressing need to incorporate meaningful social and digital interactions into instructional practices to foster learners’ cognitive development and socio-emotional well-being (Mahilum & Escarlos, 2025). To address this, the present study explores how AI-mediated learning systems and sociocultural principles can be synthesized to support English language acculturation. Specifically, it examines how higher education learners navigate communication anxiety, build academic identity, and adapt culturally through interactions mediated by emerging educational technologies.

2. Methods

Research Design

This paper explored the perceptions and experiences of higher education learners about how acculturation in English language acquisition takes place in academic setting with emphasis on sociocultural perspectives. To align with the technological scope, this included a specific focus on the impact of AI-mediated learning systems and digital environments. An exploratory qualitative design is an approach used to investigate phenomena that may have received limited attention in a particular context. Exploration aims to discover new insights by examining participants’ perspectives, experiences, and interpretations, which identify emerging concepts, patterns, and relationships that may not be evident through structured or quantitative methods (Chavez et al., 2026).

Participants

The participants in this study were higher education learners from Surigao del Sur, Philippines. Purposive sampling was employed to identify and select participants who could provide rich and relevant information regarding the phenomenon under investigation (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). The selection criteria included the following: (1) currently enrolled in a higher education institution during Academic Year 2025–2026; (2) regularly uses English as a

medium of communication and instruction in classroom learning activities, supplemented by AI tools or digital platforms; (3) has experienced academic and social interactions that require the use of English with teachers, classmates, or other members of the academic community; (4) is willing to share personal experiences and perceptions related to English language learning and acculturation, including technology use; and (5) voluntarily agrees to participate in the study by providing informed consent. There were 18 university students who participated in one-on-one interviews.

Instrumentation

Semi-structured interview questions were designed to extract narratives from the participants. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions that encouraged participants to freely describe their thoughts, feelings, and experiences regarding their interactions with both human peers and digital learning tools, while allowing the researcher to ask probing and follow-up questions for clarification and deeper exploration of emerging ideas. This enabled participants to express their perspectives in their own words while ensuring that the discussion remained aligned with the digital and sociocultural objectives of the study (Chavez, 2025). Table 1 presents the open-ended questions asked during the one-on-one interview sessions.

Table 1. Interview guide questions based on the study objective.

Objectives	Interview Questions
To describe how AI-supported language acculturation happens in higher education classrooms	How do your classroom experiences, along with your use of digital tools like AI, shape the way you communicate and interact with others in English?
	What classroom activities, support from teachers or peers, and AI tools have helped you use English more confidently?
	What challenges or anxieties have you experienced when using English, and how did you overcome them using digital tools or help from others?

Data Collection

Data collection was carried out through individual semi-structured interviews with each participant. Interviews were scheduled at a time and venue that were convenient for the participants. Interviews were conducted through an online videoconferencing platform to ensure accessibility and continuity of the data collection process.

Prior to the interviews, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the procedures involved. Upon obtaining their consent, all interview sessions were audio-recorded to preserve the accuracy and completeness of the information shared. Each interview generally lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, although the duration varied depending on the richness of participants' narratives and the extent of discussion generated during the interview.

After the completion of the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim to produce accurate accounts from the participants. The transcripts were subsequently verified against the original recordings to ensure transcription accuracy and data integrity. To maintain confidentiality and uphold ethical standards, participants' identities were safeguarded through the use of pseudonyms or alphanumeric identification codes. The verified transcripts constituted the primary qualitative dataset and were subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, salient categories, and emergent themes that explained how language acculturation occurs in English language acquisition among higher education learners from a sociocultural perspective.

Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was conducted to identify, organize, and develop patterns of meaning embedded within participants' narratives. Reflexivity was practiced throughout the analytical process by continuously examining how the researcher's perspectives and decisions influenced data interpretation while striving to ensure that the resulting themes faithfully represented the participants' experiences and the purpose of the study (Toye et al., 2025).

The analysis involved repeated reading of the interview transcripts to achieve familiarity with the data, followed by the identification and coding of meaningful statements. Similar codes were grouped into broader categories, from

which themes integrating both sociocultural dynamics and technological mediation were developed, reviewed, and refined to ensure coherence and alignment with the research objectives. Throughout the process, the researcher practiced reflexivity by critically examining analytical decisions and interpretations while continuously revisiting the transcripts to ensure that the themes remained grounded in the participants' narratives (Xu, 2026).

3. Results

Question 1: How do your classroom experiences, along with your use of digital tools like AI, shape the way you communicate and interact with others in English?

Theme 1: Expanded Classroom Participation

Students perceived that speaking in English enabled them to participate more confidently in class discussions, oral presentations, group work, and other instructional interactions. As learners became more accustomed to using English as a medium of communication, supplemented by digital tools that allowed them to practice in low-threat environments, they demonstrated greater willingness to express their ideas, ask questions, provide feedback, and contribute to classroom discourse. From a sociocultural perspective, this language serves as a mediating tool that facilitates meaningful participation in shared learning experiences and supports learners' integration into the academic community.

"At first, I was really shy to speak in English because I was afraid of making mistakes. But as our teachers kept encouraging us, and I started checking my sentences with a grammar app, I slowly became more comfortable joining class discussions."

"Using English in class made me participate more because I realized everyone was also trying their best. Using a quick translation tool gave me the confidence to share my ideas."

"Before, I just listened during discussions. Now I volunteer to answer questions because I'm more used to speaking English and practicing with digital chatbots."

Theme 2: Negotiating Linguistic Identity

Students described experiences of overcoming communication anxiety, building self-confidence, and gradually perceiving themselves as capable English users through continuous classroom interactions. Although many initially encountered linguistic and psychological challenges, continuous exposure to English-mediated learning environments, paired with digital practice spaces, contributed to increased self-efficacy, personal growth, and confidence in communicating with others. Essentially, language acculturation involves not only the acquisition of linguistic competence but also the transformation of learners' self-perceptions and identities within academic contexts.

"In my first year, I was always nervous whenever I had to speak English. After practicing every day using language apps, I became more confident and stopped doubting myself."

"I still make mistakes sometimes, but I don't feel embarrassed anymore. I know it's part of learning, and my digital writing assistant helps me catch the big errors."

"Before, I avoided talking because I thought people would judge my pronunciation. Now I'm more focused on getting my message across, especially since I can listen to how translation apps pronounce the words."

Theme 3: Building Social Connections

Students emphasized that using English enhanced their interactions with classmates, instructors, and other members of the academic community by facilitating collaboration, knowledge sharing, and mutual understanding. Learners developed stronger peer relationships, established productive academic networks, and cultivated a greater sense of belonging within their educational environment through regular engagement in English-mediated communication and digital collaboration. In this context, language acculturation is fundamentally a social process in which meaningful interactions support both language development and participation in the broader academic culture.

"Speaking English helped me communicate better with my classmates, especially during group activities. We usually draft our ideas online first, so we understood each other more easily."

"I became closer to my classmates because we usually use English when working on projects. Using shared digital documents made it easier for us to share ideas."

"Whenever we had group discussions, speaking English made everyone participate. It felt like we were all working toward the same goal, both in class and in our online group chats."

Question 2: What classroom activities, support from teachers or peers, and AI tools have helped you use English more confidently?

Theme 1: Collaborative Classroom Engagement

Students described classroom discussions, group projects, peer collaboration, role-playing activities, and cooperative tasks as opportunities to practice English in authentic and meaningful contexts. These shared learning experiences, heavily supported by collaborative online platforms, reduced communication apprehension, encouraged active participation, and allowed learners to develop linguistic competence through interaction with others. From a sociocultural perspective, collaborative engagement provides a socio-digital environment where language learning is co-constructed through dialogue, negotiation, and mutual support.

"Our group activities really helped me practice speaking English because we had to explain our ideas to each other, and sometimes we used AI to brainstorm together."

"I became more confident when we worked in groups. My classmates were supportive, and we used translation tools together, so I wasn't afraid of making mistakes."

"Role-playing activities were fun because they let me practice English in real-life situations instead of just reading from a book."

"Whenever we had partner work, I felt more comfortable speaking English because I was only talking to one person before sharing with the whole class, and I could type out my thoughts first."

Theme 2: Teacher and Algorithmic Scaffolding

Students emphasized that constructive feedback, encouragement, guided questioning, modeling of appropriate language use, and the creation of a supportive classroom atmosphere strengthened their confidence in communicating in English. In this process, teachers functioned as primary facilitators who scaffolded learners' development, while AI applications served as secondary scaffolds. This dual support system enabled learners to progress beyond their current abilities through structured social and digital interaction.

"Our teacher always encouraged us to speak English, even if we made mistakes. That made me feel more confident to try."

"Whenever I couldn't express my thoughts clearly, my teacher and my translation app helped me find the right words instead of correcting me right away."

"My teacher gave feedback in a nice way, so I didn't feel embarrassed. Checking my grammar with AI before submitting also motivated me to improve."

"When I was struggling during presentations, my teacher encouraged me to continue instead of stopping. That really boosted my confidence."

"Our teacher created a classroom where everyone felt safe to speak English. We weren't afraid of being laughed at."

Theme 3: Academic Exposure and Continuous Practice

Students identified activities such as oral presentations, research reporting, classroom debates, academic writing, seminars, and everyday classroom communication as valuable opportunities to practice English in real academic situations. Repeated engagement with these authentic language experiences, heavily supplemented by AI research and writing tools, enabled learners to internalize English as a functional means of communication rather than merely an academic subject. Basically, language acculturation develops through continuous participation in English-mediated academic practices, building both linguistic competence and integration into the academic culture.

"The more presentations we had, the more comfortable I became speaking English in front of other people. I usually prepared my scripts using an AI assistant."

"Writing research papers in English helped me improve because I had to use the language regularly, not just during English class. AI tools also taught me how to organize my thoughts more clearly."

“Joining classroom debates forced me to think and respond in English. It was challenging at first, but preparing my arguments online really helped me improve.”

“Since most of our reports were in English, I eventually got used to organizing my thoughts and explaining them clearly.”

“We use English almost every day in class, so it became part of my routine. It doesn’t feel as difficult as it did before.”

“Attending seminars where the speakers used English helped me become more familiar with academic words and expressions.”

Question 3: What challenges or anxieties have you experienced when using English, and how did you overcome them using digital tools or help from others?

Theme 1: Overcoming Communication Anxiety

Students with fear, nervousness, and self-doubt while adapting to the use of English in academic settings. They reported concerns about making grammatical mistakes, mispronouncing words, or being negatively evaluated by others, which initially limited their classroom participation. However, through repeated opportunities to speak, engage in discussions, and practice in low-threat digital spaces, they gradually became more confident in expressing themselves. In this process, language acculturation is facilitated by sustained participation in supportive social environments that reduce communication apprehension over time.

“I was really nervous every time I had to speak English because I thought my classmates would laugh if I made mistakes. Now, I practice my pronunciation with a phone app before class.”

“At first, I avoided answering questions because I was afraid my grammar wasn’t correct. Checking my sentences digitally made me less worried over time.”

“Whenever I spoke English, I kept thinking about my pronunciation. Eventually, I realized that trying was more important than being perfect.”

“I used to get anxious during recitations, but after joining class discussions more often, I started feeling more confident.”

Theme 2: Continuous Multimodal Learning

Students made efforts to overcome linguistic barriers such as limited vocabulary, difficulties in pronunciation, grammatical inaccuracies, and challenges in comprehending academic English. They described actively improving their language skills through regular practice, reading academic materials, seeking feedback, expanding their vocabulary, and heavily utilizing digital dictionaries and AI translation systems. Adaptation to an English-mediated academic environment is an ongoing developmental process supported by continuous engagement with meaningful language activities.

“I realized that the only way to improve my English was to keep using it every day, even if I made mistakes.”

“Whenever I came across unfamiliar words, I looked up their meanings and tried to use them in my assignments and conversations. Having a digital dictionary on my phone helped a lot.”

“Reading books and journal articles in English, and sometimes using AI to summarize them, really helped me understand the language better over time.”

Theme 3: Supportive Academic Communities

Students emphasized the importance of social support in helping learners navigate the challenges of English language acculturation. They mentioned several mechanisms such as encouragement, guidance, and assistance they received from teachers, classmates, and peers, which enabled them to overcome linguistic and psychological barriers. Constructive feedback, collaborative learning, peer encouragement, and the sharing of useful digital resources build a sense of belonging and motivated learners to persist despite difficulties. From a sociocultural perspective, language learning is a socially mediated process in which supportive communities promote both linguistic development and successful integration into the academic culture.

“My classmates always encouraged me to speak English, even when I wasn’t confident. They never made me feel embarrassed.”

“Whenever I had trouble expressing myself, my friends helped me find the right words instead of criticizing me.”

“Our teachers were very patient. They corrected our mistakes in a way that made us want to keep improving.”

“I felt more comfortable using English because everyone in our class was supportive and respected each other’s efforts, and we shared helpful digital tools in our group chats.”

4. Discussion

English language acquisition has been widely recognized as a multidimensional process that involves cognitive, social, cultural, and communicative dimensions of learning. However, a primary contribution of this study is the reconceptualization of this process through the lens of human-computer interaction and educational technology. In modern higher education, acquiring proficiency in English involves more than mastering linguistic rules; it requires learners to engage with both human peers and artificial intelligence (AI) systems to adapt to the cultural norms and communicative practices of the academic community. This study introduces a novel framework by demonstrating that digital platforms and AI applications function not merely as passive learning aids, but as active sociocultural agents that mediate language acculturation.

In a traditional sociocultural perspective, higher-order cognitive processes originate within social interactions and are subsequently internalized by individuals, fundamentally shaping learning through social mediation and collaborative engagement (Osei-Himah & Naah, 2026). This study expands this paradigm by revealing that Filipino students now develop linguistic competence through a hybrid ecosystem of human and algorithmic interaction. AI tools, such as generative chatbots, digital writing assistants, and translation platforms, act as digital more knowledgeable others (MKOs). As Mahmood and Azeez (2025) argued, when AI tools are used systematically to meet learners’ needs, they enhance the learning process, reduce L2 anxiety, and increase motivation. By utilizing these technologies before engaging in physical classroom discourse, learners are exposed to linguistic norms and academic expectations in a private, highly supportive digital space.

An essential component of effective English language acquisition is the development of a positive learning culture that reduces learners’ anxiety and creates psychological safety. Traditionally, this relied entirely on mutual respect, inclusivity, and encouragement from teachers and peers (Marisa & Santi, 2024). The findings of this study contribute a critical technological dimension to this concept: the mitigation of communication anxiety through digital mediation. AI systems provide learners with a low-threat environment that functions synergistically through affective and cognitive pathways to reduce foreign language anxiety (Yang, 2026). By allowing students to practice pronunciation, verify grammar, and organize their thoughts digitally without the fear of human judgment, technology effectively immunizes them against the communication apprehension that historically limited their participation. Furthermore, as Zhang, Nie, Fan, and Liu (2025) confirmed, the development of AI literacy itself improves self-efficacy and diminishes classroom anxiety, acting as a critical bridge to a student’s willingness to communicate.

This socio-digital learning culture also profoundly impacts the development of students’ academic identities. As students engage in meaningful classroom interactions and experience encouragement from peers, their sense of belonging is now significantly reinforced by continuous, instant algorithmic feedback. This hybrid support strengthens their confidence in using English to communicate ideas, solve problems, and participate in scholarly activities (Hashmi, 2026). The continuous provision of meaningful learning opportunities is no longer confined to physical classroom hours; AI integration provides accessible, authentic communicative contexts that enable students to independently apply linguistic knowledge and develop fluency continuously (Marisa & Santi, 2024).

Despite the shift toward AI-mediated learning, the role of human educators remains paramount, albeit evolved. Being the individuals who interact most directly with learners, teachers are the primary drivers of English language acquisition and language acculturation. However, their role now encompasses the orchestration of both human and algorithmic scaffolding. Teachers shape the learning experiences by establishing classroom norms, guiding students on the ethical and effective use of AI tools, and cultivating an environment where both digital preparation and physical participation are encouraged (Merdiaty & Sulistiasih, 2024; Sholeh et al., 2024).

A sociocultural perspective on AI-mediated English language acquisition in the Philippines addresses a critical gap in existing literature. While previous studies have examined English proficiency and traditional instructional

strategies (Mahilum & Escarlos, 2025), this research contributes a novel understanding of how information systems and human-computer interactions shape cultural and linguistic adaptation in higher education. This study establishes that English language acculturation is a dynamic process driven by both social and technological interactions. By synthesizing sociocultural theory with ICT integration, the findings prove that meaningful participation in digitally supported collaborative learning experiences, algorithmic scaffolding, and positive academic cultures are essential to developing confident, communicatively competent learners in the modern digital era.

5. Conclusion

From a sociocultural perspective, English language acquisition in modern higher education must be recognized as a socio-digital acculturation process. The integration of AI-mediated learning systems and collaborative digital platforms effectively provides essential protective scaffolding, reducing communication anxiety and fostering academic identity. Human-computer interaction functions synergistically with traditional classroom dynamics to create a low-threat environment where learners can safely negotiate their linguistic identities, build digital and social networks, and achieve communicative competence.

Higher education institutions must officially integrate AI literacy and digital collaboration tools into their language curricula to support technological and linguistic fluency. Educators should transition into facilitators of both human and algorithmic scaffolding by designing blended learning environments that actively encourage digital preparation prior to physical classroom participation. Furthermore, instructional strategies must incorporate interactive, technology-driven tasks, such as AI-assisted brainstorming, digital peer review, and online collaborative research, to provide continuous, authentic opportunities for language practice that minimize the fear of negative evaluation and promote a highly supportive academic culture.

Future research should employ quantitative or mixed-methods approaches to measure the precise statistical impact of specific AI applications on learners' willingness to communicate across broader, more diverse student populations. Longitudinal studies are necessary to examine the long-term effects of AI-mediated scaffolding on students' independent linguistic competence, specifically evaluating language performance when digital tools are restricted or removed. Lastly, further investigation is required to address the ethical implications, potential technological dependency, and the digital divide concerning AI access in resource-constrained educational settings.

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