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Why Anxious Students Avoid the Library: A Psychological Model of English Language Anxiety and Information Avoidance in Nigerian Universities

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ABSTRACT

Students in Nigerian universities are expected to search for, read and use academic sources written almost entirely in English, and some of them experience anxiety when they encounter dense English texts, unfamiliar library systems and the need to ask for help. This paper proposes that English language anxiety may be a significant and under-examined contributor to information avoidance in university libraries. Using a conceptual design based on a purposive integrative review, it brings together the literature on foreign language anxiety, library anxiety, information avoidance, self-efficacy and the stress and coping process, and relates it to the position of English in Nigerian higher education. From this synthesis, the paper develops the Language Anxiety and Information Avoidance Model. The model proposes that the gap between students' English proficiency and the demands of academic sources, combined with evaluative library and classroom settings, may be appraised as threatening and give rise to English reading anxiety, communication apprehension and library anxiety. These responses are expected to result in source avoidance, help avoidance, and anxiety-driven substitution and delay, with possible consequences for the depth of information use and the quality of academic writing. Approachable librarians and information literacy instruction embedded in English courses are among the resources proposed to weaken the link between anxiety and avoidance. The relationships described are theoretical expectations rather than empirical findings, and seven testable propositions are set out to guide empirical research.

INTRODUCTION

Information is a key ingredient of university study. Students are expected to identify scholarly sources, read them critically and use them to develop arguments in their essays, projects and examinations. In Nigerian universities this work is conducted almost exclusively in English. At tertiary level, English is the medium of instruction, the language of the textbooks and journals held in university libraries and the language of the databases to which those libraries subscribe (Bamgbose, 2000; Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). For the majority of undergraduates, English is a second language, learned in school alongside one or more indigenous languages, and the formal academic English of scholarly texts is very different from the English they use in everyday life (Banjo, 1996; Jowitt, 1991). Students nonetheless differ greatly in their command of academic English, according to their schooling, discipline, linguistic background and previous exposure to academic texts.

The challenges some students face are not only cognitive. Reading a dense journal article, searching a database with unfamiliar terms or approaching a librarian to ask for help in formal English are situations in which a student's competence is exposed. Studies of foreign language anxiety have shown that such situations can provoke worry, self doubt and physical tension that disrupt performance (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Studies of library anxiety have shown, separately, that many students feel uncomfortable and inadequate in academic libraries and are reluctant to seek help (Mellon, 1986; Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 2004). Studies of information avoidance have shown that people often choose not to obtain information when they expect it to be unpleasant or threatening (Golman *et al.*, 2017; Sweeny *et al.*, 2010). These three bodies of work have developed largely in parallel.

Informal observation by librarians and lecturers in Nigerian universities suggests that some undergraduates make little use of scholarly sources, rely heavily on lecture notes, handouts and general web searches, and seldom seek the help of librarians, although this pattern has not been systematically documented and is treated here as an observation that requires empirical confirmation. These patterns are usually explained in terms of information literacy, reading culture or access to resources. Such explanations are useful, but they may overlook an emotional dimension. A student who has repeatedly struggled to understand academic English texts, or who fears being judged for imperfect spoken English, may avoid scholarly sources and library help, not because they are unaware of them, but because using them is uncomfortable. If this is the case, interventions that focus only on skills and resources may have limited effect, because the underlying anxiety is left unaddressed. Emotions are known to shape whether information seekers persist or withdraw, including in Nigerian settings (Igbokwe & Nwanekezie, 2025a), and recent studies have begun to link language-related anxiety to library

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use among students who study in a second language (Ebiefung, 2025; Shimray *et al.*, 2025). To the authors' knowledge, however, existing conceptual frameworks have not adequately explained the mechanisms through which English language anxiety may contribute to information avoidance among undergraduates using university libraries in second-language educational environments.

This paper attempts to fill that gap. Its central argument is that English language anxiety may be a significant contributor to information avoidance among Nigerian undergraduates, working through specific behaviours that libraries and language teachers can address. The paper has three aims: first, to synthesise research on foreign language anxiety, library anxiety, information avoidance, self-efficacy and coping into an account of anxiety-driven information avoidance in university libraries; second, to present the Language Anxiety and Information Avoidance Model, specifying its antecedents, appraisal process, anxiety responses, avoidance behaviours, outcomes and moderating resources, together with the hypothesised pathways between them; and third, to derive testable propositions and practical implications for academic libraries, English departments and university policy. The paper is conceptual. It reports no new data; it builds on existing theory and evidence and presents a model that future empirical studies can test, refine or reject.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Key Concepts

English language anxiety is used here to mean the feelings of tension, apprehension and worry that arise when a person has to read, write, listen to or speak English in situations where their competence matters. It is a situation-specific form of anxiety, distinct from general anxiousness, in the sense used by Horwitz *et al.* (1986). Library anxiety refers to the discomfort, fear and sense of inadequacy that some students feel when using an academic library, including the fear of revealing to staff what they do not know (Mellon, 1986). Information avoidance is any behaviour designed to prevent or delay the acquisition of available but potentially unwanted information (Sweeny *et al.*, 2010). In this paper it means not only avoiding a piece of information but also avoiding the sources, services and people through which the information could be obtained. Self-efficacy is a person's belief in their capability to carry out the actions needed to achieve a given outcome (Bandura, 1997).

Two distinctions are critical to the argument. First, English language anxiety and library anxiety are related but different. Library anxiety may arise from sources that have nothing to do with language, including unfamiliar library procedures, staff attitudes, technology and limited information literacy (Mellon, 1986; Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 2004). English language anxiety, in turn, can arise in classrooms and other settings outside the library. Library anxiety is therefore treated here as a separate anxiety response with its own sources, which is expected to be positively associated with English language anxiety where library collections, systems and services operate in a second language. It is not treated as a mediator through which language anxiety must pass. Second, the use of easier or more familiar sources is not in itself avoidance. Students may select lecture notes or simplified sources for reasons of convenience, relevance, accessibility, time or sound search strategy. Anxiety-driven substitution is used here only for cases in which alternative sources or interactions are deliberately chosen in order to escape anticipated discomfort associated with English-language sources or interactions.

Theoretical Foundations

Foreign Language Anxiety

Based on the uniqueness of the language learning process, Horwitz *et al.* (1986) argued that foreign language anxiety is a distinct complex of self perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours. They found three related components: communication apprehension, the fear of speaking with others in the language; fear of negative evaluation; and test anxiety. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) demonstrated that language anxiety influences every stage of cognitive processing, from input to processing to output, so that anxious learners take in less, understand less and express less. Saito *et al.* (1999) extended the concept to reading and found reading anxiety to be distinct from general language anxiety, related to the difficulty of the text and the reader's unfamiliarity with its conventions, and to increase as perceived reading difficulty increases. These results have direct implications for university libraries, where the main activity is reading challenging texts in a second language. Language anxiety has also been documented among university students in multilingual African higher education, where fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension have been linked to reluctance to speak and withdrawal from engagement (Ige, 2025), and college students learning English as a second language elsewhere report anxiety about speaking alongside difficulties with vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar (Vergara-Burgos, 2025).

Library Anxiety

Mellon (1986), drawing on the writing journals of undergraduates, found that most students described their first experiences of using the academic library in terms of fear, feeling lost and being ashamed of their lack of competence. Just as importantly, students believed that other students were competent and that their own inadequacy should be concealed, so they did not ask for help. Later research developed scales to measure library anxiety and identified its dimensions, including barriers with staff, affective barriers, comfort with the library and knowledge of the library (Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 2004). Jiao and Onwuegbuzie (1997) found that library anxiety is related to students' characteristics and experiences, including their background and frequency of library use. Gross and Latham (2007) found that students with low information literacy skills often overestimate

their abilities, which suggests that avoidance of help can coexist with confidence that is not justified by skill. Onwuegbuzie and Jiao (2000) linked library anxiety to academic procrastination, a finding relevant to the delay behaviours discussed below. More recent studies have begun to examine library anxiety in multilingual and African settings. Adeeko and Adetimirin (2023) found that most undergraduates in federal universities in North Central Nigeria experienced moderate levels of library anxiety, with inadequate knowledge of the library as its most common feature. Shimray *et al.* (2025) examined library anxiety among non-English-speaking postgraduate students and identified technological, affective and staff barriers as major contributors, and Ebiefung (2025) found that anxiety about speaking a foreign language, including accent-related anxiety, affected African graduate students' information seeking when they interacted with librarians.

Information Avoidance

Sweeny *et al.* (2010) state that avoidance of information is more probable when the information may require a change in one's beliefs, demand unwanted action or elicit negative feelings, and that avoidance is more likely when people feel they have few resources to deal with what they might learn. Golman *et al.* (2017) cite evidence from economics and psychology that avoidance is common and often intentional, and that people control their exposure to information to protect their feelings and self image. Although most models assume that people turn to information sources to reduce uncertainty, Case and Given (2016) point out that information avoidance has been noted in information behaviour research for a long time. Wilson (1999) places this type of behaviour within a larger model in which psychological, demographic and environmental variables intervene between the need for information and the search for it.

Self-Efficacy, Appraisal and Coping

Bandura (1997) argues that people avoid activities they believe exceed their capabilities and carry out those they judge themselves able to manage. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) explain that stress occurs when a person appraises a situation as threatening and judges their coping resources to be insufficient, and that people react either by trying to solve the problem or by trying to control their feelings, sometimes through avoidance. Kuhlthau's (2004) model of the information search process adds that uncertainty and anxiety are natural at the beginning of an information search, and that students given proper guidance at that stage are more inclined to continue. Combined, these theories predict that a student who regards an English-medium information task as threatening, and doubts their ability to manage it, is likely to deal with the resulting anxiety by avoiding the task or the help that would make it manageable.

LITERATURE REVIEW

English in Nigerian Higher Education

English is the official medium of instruction in Nigerian universities, and almost all the textbooks, journals and databases held by university libraries are in English (Bamgbose, 2000; Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). Students enter university with widely varying levels of English proficiency, reflecting differences in the quality of their secondary schooling. A distinct Nigerian variety of English is used confidently in everyday life (Jowitt, 1991), but many first-year students are unfamiliar with the formal academic register of scholarly writing, with its specialised vocabulary, long sentences and abstract argument (Banjo, 1996). Proficiency in academic English is not uniform: it varies with the quality of schooling, discipline, linguistic background and prior exposure to academic texts, and many students read academic English competently. Nevertheless, it is hypothesised here that a gap between the English students use comfortably and the English that academic sources demand may be present for a meaningful proportion of students, especially in their early years of study, which would make it a structural issue rather than the problem of a few individuals. This is a theoretical expectation that requires empirical confirmation in Nigerian universities.

Reading Academic Texts in a Second Language

Reading in a second language places heavy demands on working memory and attention. Attentional control theory explains that anxiety reduces the efficiency of these processes by diverting attention towards worry and away from the task (Eysenck *et al.*, 2007). For a student reading a journal article in academic English, anxiety and difficulty therefore feed on each other: the harder the text, the greater the anxiety, and the greater the anxiety, the less efficiently the text is processed. Igbokwe and Nwanekezie (2025b) argue that Nigerian students reading academic texts in English benefit from explicit instruction in metacognitive reading strategies, such as planning, monitoring and repairing comprehension, which give readers a sense of control over difficult texts. Without such strategies, a reader who meets an incomprehensible passage may have few options other than to give up.

Library Use and Help Seeking

Mellon's (1986) observation that anxious students conceal their difficulties rather than ask for help has been repeated in many settings (Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 2004). In Nigeria, the use of library resources by students is uneven even within a single university (Nwanekezie & Igbokwe, 2022). Asking a librarian for help in person often involves explaining a need in formal spoken English, to an adult in a position of authority, in a public space, although online, written or informal channels of help may also be available. For a student who already fears negative evaluation of their English, this combines communication apprehension with library anxiety. Head and Eisenberg (2010) found that many students prefer familiar sources, such as course readings and general web searches, and rarely consult librarians, even when they find research difficult. Such preferences may reflect convenience, but they may also reflect avoidance of situations in which students expect to struggle.

Information Avoidance in Academic Settings

Research on information avoidance has concentrated on health, finance and personal matters (Golman *et al.*, 2017; Sweeny *et al.*, 2010), and relatively little attention has been paid to avoidance in academic work. Yet the conditions that predict avoidance, namely the expectation of unpleasant emotion and doubt about one's ability to cope, are present whenever a student with limited confidence in English faces a demanding English source. Avoidance in this context is unlikely to mean refusing all information. It is more likely to take the form of choosing easier alternatives, such as lecture notes, summaries or simplified web pages, delaying the task, or relying on classmates. Such choices are not necessarily avoidance, since they may reflect convenience or sound judgement about relevance; they become anxiety-driven substitution when they are made in order to escape anticipated discomfort with English sources. In that case they allow the student to complete the work while avoiding the situations that cause anxiety, but potentially at the cost of depth and quality.

Libraries and English Departments as Sources of Support

International guidance on information literacy stresses that students need not only skills but also dispositions, such as persistence and tolerance of ambiguity, to use information effectively (Association of College and Research Libraries [ACRL], 2016). Igbokwe and Nwanekezie (2026) set out a model of collaboration between the university library and the Department of English, in which librarians lead the work on sources and English lecturers lead the work on language, to develop students' competence in academic writing. Such collaboration offers a natural basis for addressing anxiety as well as skill, because students' difficulties with sources and with academic English are closely connected. Recent conceptual work on translanguaging in information literacy instruction for multilingual students (Yu & Matteson, 2025) suggests further ways in which libraries can make instruction less threatening by recognising students' full linguistic repertoires, and students in a Philippine college reported that using their mother tongue alongside English in class helped them understand concepts and gave them confidence (Vacalares & Agan, 2025).

Gap in the Literature

Three gaps emerge from this review. First, research on foreign language anxiety has focused on the language classroom and has rarely followed anxious learners into the library, where they must use English to learn other subjects. Second, research on library anxiety has seldom treated proficiency in the language of the library's collections as a source of anxiety, because most of it was conducted in settings where students read in their first language. Third, research on information avoidance has paid little attention to academic settings and to language as a trigger of avoidance. Recent studies have begun to examine language-related anxiety in library use (Ebiefung, 2025; Shimray *et al.*, 2025), but to the authors' knowledge they have not yet been brought together in a framework that explains the mechanisms through which English language anxiety may contribute to information avoidance among undergraduates in second-language educational environments such as Nigeria.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper adopted a conceptual research design based on an integrative review of literature. The goal of an integrative review is to generate new frameworks and perspectives by critically combining existing literature rather than summarising it (Torraco, 2005), and the approach corresponds to what Jaakkola (2020) calls a theory synthesis design, in which existing theories from different fields are brought together to explain a phenomenon that none of them explains fully on its own. A systematic review was not undertaken, because the aim was to build a model rather than to estimate the size of effects.

Scope and sources. The review covered literature published between the mid 1980s, when the foundational accounts of foreign language anxiety, library anxiety and the stress and coping process appeared, and 2025. Sources were located through Google Scholar, publisher and journal websites and the reference lists of key works, and their bibliographic details were checked against Crossref, publisher or journal records before submission.

Choice of theoretical traditions. Five traditions were chosen because each accounts for one part of the phenomenon: foreign language anxiety for the emotional response to using a second language; library anxiety for discomfort with the library as an institution; information avoidance for the choice not to obtain available information; self-efficacy for the avoidance of tasks people doubt they can perform; and the stress and coping model for how a situation comes to be appraised as threatening and how people respond to it. Studies of English in Nigerian higher education, academic reading and library use were then added to relate these theories to the setting of the paper.

Selection and evaluation. Three principles guided selection: relevance to the relationship between language, emotion and information behaviour; attention to students in higher education, with priority given to Nigeria and comparable settings where English is a second language; and recognition of the work in its field. Each source was read for its central claim, its evidence base and its fit with the other strands. Because much of the foundational evidence comes from settings outside Nigeria, claims about Nigerian students are offered as theoretical expectations rather than established facts.

Treatment of contradictory perspectives. Where the literature offered competing explanations, these were retained and incorporated rather than eliminated. The most important example is the possibility that students'

choice of easier sources reflects convenience or rational search strategy rather than avoidance (Head & Eisenberg, 2010). This led to the narrower definition of anxiety-driven substitution used in the model. Likewise, the evidence that library anxiety has many non-linguistic sources led to library anxiety being treated as a separate response rather than as a form of language anxiety.

From synthesis to model. The model was developed in four steps. First, the central claims of each tradition about anxiety, appraisal and avoidance were summarised. Second, these claims were organised into a sequence of antecedents, appraisal, anxiety responses, avoidance behaviours and outcomes. Third, specific pathways between particular antecedents, responses and behaviours were identified where the literature gave grounds for them. Fourth, moderating resources were identified from the literature on library instruction, reading strategies and help seeking, and the relationships were stated as propositions. Because the paper is conceptual, its findings are arguments and hypothesised relationships rather than measured effects, and they should be judged by their clarity, coherence and usefulness for empirical research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Language Anxiety and Information Avoidance Model

The model suggests that three antecedent conditions, when appraised by students as threatening, may give rise to three anxiety responses; that these responses may result in three forms of avoidance; and that avoidance may in turn affect the depth of information use, the quality of academic writing and, over a longer period, the development of proficiency. Moderating resources are proposed to weaken the link between anxiety and avoidance. The model is shown in Figure 1, and the specific hypothesised pathways between its elements, with the proposition that tests each one, are set out in Table 1.

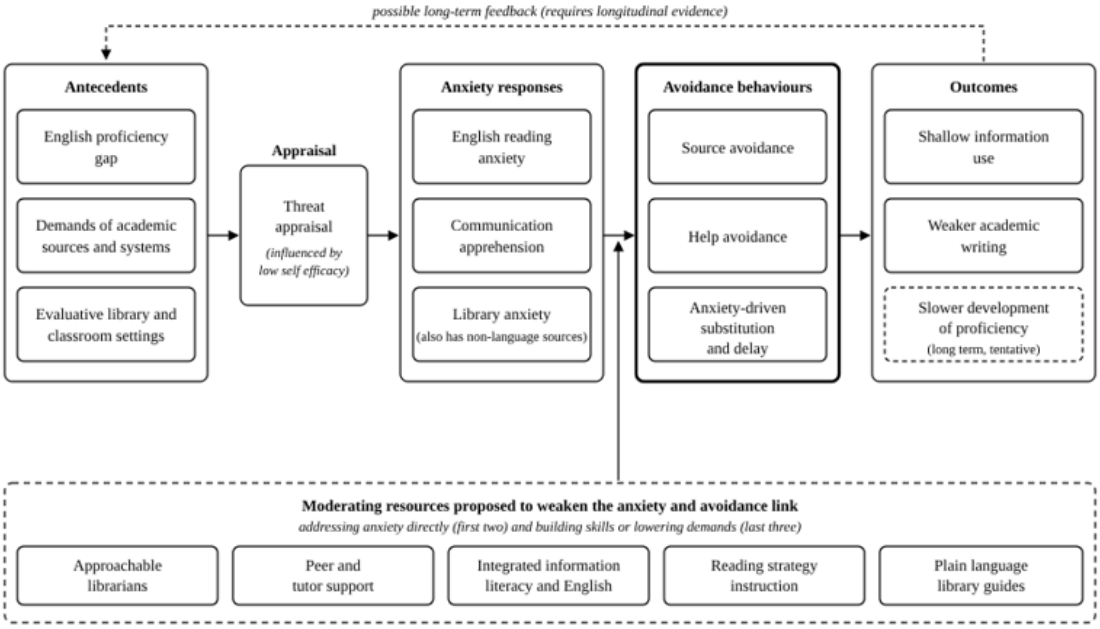


Figure 1: The Language Anxiety and Information Avoidance Model. Antecedent conditions, when appraised as threatening, are expected to give rise to anxiety responses that lead to avoidance behaviours and outcomes; moderating resources are proposed to weaken the anxiety and avoidance link. Self-efficacy is shown as an influence on threat appraisal. Block arrows summarise the specific pathways listed in Table 1; P4 proposes a sequential route from source avoidance and substitution through shallow information use to writing quality, and a parallel route from help avoidance to writing quality. Dashed elements indicate tentative, long-term relationships that require longitudinal evidence.
Source: the authors.

Antecedent Conditions

English proficiency gap. The first condition is the difference between the level of English a student has and the level that academic sources require. The size of the gap differs between students, and what counts is not proficiency alone but the distance between proficiency and the demands of the task. The gap is expected to affect reading most directly.

Demands of academic English sources. The second condition lies within the sources and systems themselves. Journal articles, scholarly books and database interfaces employ specialised vocabulary, complex sentences, abstract argument and unfamiliar conventions. Saito *et al.* (1999) found that reading anxiety rises with the perceived difficulty of the text and with unfamiliarity with its conventions, so the characteristics of academic sources are expected to affect reading anxiety and, where they concern catalogues and databases, library anxiety.

Evaluative library and classroom settings. The third condition is the social setting in which information work

takes place. Libraries are public spaces with formal rules, staffed by professionals whom students may view as distant or judgemental (Mellon, 1986), and assignments are graded. Fear of negative evaluation, one of the three components of foreign language anxiety identified by Horwitz *et al.* (1986), is therefore built into the setting. This condition is expected to have the most direct effect on communication apprehension and library anxiety.

Threat Appraisal

The antecedent conditions do not produce anxiety automatically. Taking up the account of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), the model includes threat appraisal as an explicit component: anxiety is expected when a student perceives an information task as threatening and judges their own resources to be inadequate to meet it. Self-efficacy is treated as a separate construct that influences appraisal: low self-efficacy for reading academic English and for using the library is expected to make a threat appraisal more likely (Bandura, 1997). In Figure 1, therefore, self-efficacy is shown not as part of threat appraisal but as a factor that influences it. Including appraisal explains why students facing similar conditions may respond differently: a student with a moderate proficiency gap but confidence in their reading strategies may appraise a difficult article as a challenge rather than a threat.

Anxiety Responses

English reading anxiety. Faced with a dense English text, an anxious student may worry about not understanding it, and this worry diverts attention from the reading itself (Eysenck *et al.*, 2007; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994).

Communication apprehension. Seeking help in person from a librarian or lecturer usually involves explaining a need in spoken English. A student who fears that their spoken English will be judged may experience communication apprehension (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986).

Library anxiety. Unfamiliar catalogues, databases, rules and staff can make the library itself a source of discomfort and a feeling of inadequacy (Mellon, 1986; Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 2004). As explained in the Key Concepts subsection, library anxiety is treated as a separate response with its own non-linguistic sources. Where the library's systems and services operate in English, however, English language anxiety and library anxiety are expected to be positively associated, and this association is expected to be stronger where students perceive library services as less accessible in language terms (a moderated association, stated in P1b). Their effects on help avoidance are expected to be additive, each contributing independently (P3). Whether the two anxieties also influence each other reciprocally over time is not proposed here and is left to future longitudinal research.

Avoidance Behaviours

Source avoidance. The student avoids scholarly English sources, such as journal articles and academic books, in order to escape the discomfort of reading them. This corresponds to the deliberate management of exposure to unpleasant information described by Sweeny *et al.* (2010) and Golman *et al.* (2017).

Help avoidance. The student does not seek help from librarians or lecturers, even when stuck. Avoidance of librarians is considered the principal outcome, because library anxiety relates most directly to librarians and library services; avoidance of lecturers is considered a related but separate outcome. As Mellon (1986) observed, anxious students may hide their difficulties rather than reveal them.

Anxiety-driven substitution and delay. The student postpones the task, relies on classmates or chooses easier sources in order to escape anticipated discomfort. Following the definition in the Key Concepts subsection, substitution counts as avoidance only when it is motivated in this way, and not when easier sources are chosen for reasons of relevance, convenience or time. Delay of this kind corresponds to the link between library anxiety and procrastination reported by Onwuegbuzie and Jiao (2000). In the terms used by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), these strategies manage the emotion rather than the problem.

Outcomes

The model distinguishes immediate outcomes from longer-term ones. The immediate outcomes are shallow information use, in which students draw on a narrow range of easier materials and engage with them superficially, and weaker academic writing, in which assignments show limited evidence, weaker argument and incomplete referencing. Weaker writing may equally reflect prior writing ability, discipline or the demands of a particular assignment, so the model proposes only that avoidance may contribute to it, over and above these factors (see P4). The longer-term outcome is slower development of academic English proficiency: by avoiding academic texts, students may lose practice that would otherwise improve their academic English. This is the most tentative element of the model, and confirming it would require longitudinal evidence.

Relationships among the Elements

The model is expected to operate as a possible reinforcing cycle rather than a single chain. If avoidance persists over time, it may sustain the proficiency gap and low self-efficacy, making later threat appraisals more likely. This feedback relationship is plausible on theoretical grounds (Bandura, 1997) but has not been demonstrated, and it is shown as a dashed line in Figure 1 to indicate that it requires longitudinal evidence. The antecedents need not all be present for anxiety to arise, but their effect is expected to be strongest when they coincide.

The model also distinguishes avoidance from simple lack of skill. Some students who lack information literacy skills but experience little anxiety may seek help, whereas students with adequate skills may nevertheless avoid sources or assistance when anxious. This distinction

Table 1: Hypothesised Pathways in the Language Anxiety and Information Avoidance Model

Path	Hypothesised relationship	Main theoretical basis
a1	English proficiency gap → (threat appraisal) → English reading anxiety (P1a)	Saito *et al.* (1999); MacIntyre & Gardner (1994)
a2	Demands of academic sources and systems → reading anxiety and library anxiety (supporting pathway; not separately proposed)	Saito *et al.* (1999); Mellon (1986)
a3	Evaluative library and classroom settings → communication apprehension and library anxiety (supporting pathway; not separately proposed)	Horwitz *et al.* (1986); Mellon (1986)
a4	English language anxiety ↔ library anxiety, a positive association moderated by perceived language accessibility of library services (P1b)	Mellon (1986); Shimray *et al.* (2025); Ebiefung (2025)
b1	English reading anxiety → source avoidance (P2)	Sweeny *et al.* (2010); Eysenck *et al.* (2007)
b2	Communication apprehension → avoidance of help from librarians (P3) and from lecturers (secondary outcome)	Horwitz *et al.* (1986); Mellon (1986)
b3	Library anxiety → avoidance of help from librarians (P3), and substitution and delay	Mellon (1986); Onwuegbuzie & Jiao (2000)
c1	Source avoidance and anxiety-driven substitution → shallow information use (P4, sequential step)	Sweeny *et al.* (2010); Golman *et al.* (2017)
c2	Shallow information use → weaker academic writing (P4, sequential step); help avoidance → weaker academic writing (P4, parallel step)	Head & Eisenberg (2010)
c3	Sustained avoidance → slower development of proficiency (long term, tentative; not stated as a proposition)	Inferential rationale drawn from Bandura (1997); no direct evidence
m	Selected resources are hypothesised to moderate b1 and b2 (P5b and P5a, respectively); other moderators, including any moderation of b3, remain exploratory	Kuhlthau (2004); ACRL (2016)

Note: Arrows indicate hypothesised directions of influence to be tested empirically, not demonstrated causal effects; ↔ indicates an association without a proposed direction. Figure 1 shows these pathways in summary form between blocks; the specific links are those listed here.

matters in practice: skills training alone may not change the behaviour of anxious students, while attention to anxiety may release skills that students already have.

Moderating Resources

Five resources are proposed to weaken the link between anxiety and avoidance. They fall into two groups.

Resources that address anxiety directly. Approachable librarians who are visibly welcoming, initiate contact and respond to imperfect English without judgement are expected to reduce communication apprehension and library anxiety; Mellon (1986) recommended that library instruction acknowledge students' anxiety and present the library as a place where not knowing is normal. Peer and tutor support, offered in less evaluative settings than the reference desk, can model persistence, provided it encourages rather than replaces the use of scholarly sources.

Resources that build skills and lower demands. Information literacy integrated with English instruction allows students to learn to find and use sources in the same setting in which they develop academic English; the ACRL (2016) framework places emphasis on dispositions such as persistence and tolerance of ambiguity, and Igbokwe and Nwanekezie (2026) show how library and English department staff can share such teaching. Reading strategy instruction gives students a sense of control over difficult texts (Igbokwe & Nwanekezie, 2025b), which may make a challenge appraisal more likely than a threat appraisal. Plain language library guides lower the language demands of the library itself.

Propositions

The model generates seven propositions that can be tested empirically. They are chosen as testable priorities rather than as an exhaustive set covering every arrow in the model: paths a2 and a3 are supporting pathways that inform the model but are not separately proposed, and path c3 is an inferential, long-term expectation. Each proposition specifies the constructs involved and the expected direction of the relationship, and identifies the pathways in Table 1 that it tests.

P1a (path a1): Among undergraduates, a larger gap between English proficiency and the demands of

academic sources is positively associated with English reading anxiety, partly through more frequent threat appraisals of reading tasks.

P1b (path a4): English language anxiety is positively associated with library anxiety, and this association is more pronounced among students who perceive the library's services as having low language accessibility. Perceived language accessibility can be measured with items on the availability of plain-language guides, written or online help, tolerance of Nigerian Pidgin or indigenous languages at service points, and the perceived English-language demands of library systems. Because most Nigerian university libraries operate mainly in English, the test relies not on a contrast between English-only and multilingual libraries but on variation in students' perceptions within and across libraries, and on comparisons between libraries that differ in such provisions. Because anxious students may perceive services as less accessible than they are, perceived accessibility should be combined with independent indicators, such as documented availability of plain-language guides and multilingual assistance at each library, and the possibility of common-method bias should be acknowledged where both anxiety and perceived accessibility are self reported.

P2 (path b1): English reading anxiety is positively associated with avoidance of scholarly English sources, after controlling for English proficiency and information literacy skill.

P3 (paths b2 and b3): Communication apprehension in English and library anxiety each make an independent, additive contribution to avoidance of help from librarians. Communication apprehension is also expected to be associated with avoidance of help from lecturers, but library anxiety is not proposed to contribute to that outcome, which should therefore be measured and analysed separately.

P4 (paths c1 and c2): The relationship between English language anxiety and the quality of students' academic writing is partially mediated through two routes. The first is sequential: anxiety is associated with source avoidance and anxiety-driven substitution, which are associated with shallow information use, which in turn is associated with weaker writing. The second is parallel: help avoidance is associated with weaker writing directly, because students who avoid help lose the guidance that librarians and lecturers give on sources and on writing. Shallow information use can be assessed through citation analysis of the assignment, recording the number, type and scholarly quality of the sources cited, together with self-report items on how deeply the sources were read. Writing quality should be assessed with a common rubric applied to the same assignment. The analysis should control for English proficiency, information literacy skill and baseline writing ability (for example, a diagnostic writing task or a previous essay grade), and, where feasible, for discipline and assignment demands, by sampling students who complete the same assignment or by including course as a grouping factor. Because cross-sectional data cannot establish causal mediation, P4 should be tested with a design that respects temporal order: anxiety measured at the beginning of a semester, avoidance during the weeks in which the assignment is prepared, shallow information use from the sources cited in the submitted work, and writing quality from the final grade on the same assignment.

P5a (moderation of b2): The perceived approachability of librarians weakens the positive association between communication apprehension and help avoidance. Perceived approachability is an individual-level moderator, measured by asking students how welcoming and patient they find librarians. It is distinct from actual staff practices, such as training in responding to imperfect English or documented service standards, which are library-level characteristics. These can be recorded independently and tested as a separate, library-level moderator in multilevel analyses, so that students' perceptions are not confused with what staff actually do.

P5b (moderation of b1): Information literacy instruction integrated with English courses weakens the positive association between English reading anxiety and source avoidance. Integrated instruction is treated as a course-level condition rather than an individual characteristic. Variation in exposure can be established by comparing course sections or student cohorts that receive integrated instruction with those that take the standard use of English course, with students nested in sections in a multilevel model; the number of integrated sessions each student attends can serve as a secondary, individual-level measure of exposure. P5b concerns a weaker association between anxiety and avoidance, and so differs from the intervention hypothesis below, which concerns a reduction in anxiety itself.

In addition, the model suggests a hypothesis for intervention research that is not yet supported by evidence: students who receive instruction in metacognitive reading strategies are expected to report lower English reading anxiety, and to make greater use of scholarly sources, than a comparable group who do not, over the course of an academic semester.

Plausible indicators exist for each construct. English reading anxiety can be measured with an adapted version of the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (Saito *et al.*, 1999), communication apprehension with items adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986), and library anxiety with an established library anxiety scale (Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 2004). Threat appraisal and self-efficacy can be measured with task-specific items. Avoidance can be measured with self-report items on avoiding scholarly sources and help, and with items on the reasons for choosing alternative sources, which allow anxiety-driven substitution to be distinguished from convenience. Records such as citation analysis of assignments and reference desk contacts can supplement these measures, but they are only proxies for behaviour and cannot by themselves show that avoidance was motivated by anxiety. Writing quality can be assessed

with rubrics. Propositions P1a, P1b, P2, P3, P5a and P5b can be examined with survey data and structural equation modelling; P4 requires data collected at more than one point in time; and the intervention hypothesis requires a design comparing students who receive reading strategy instruction with a comparison group, before and after the instruction.

Illustrative Application of the Model

The following hypothetical case illustrates how the model may be applied. It is a constructed example, not a report of data. Consider a second-year student who must write a term paper that requires at least five journal articles. The student finds articles through the library database but, on opening the first, meets a dense abstract full of unfamiliar terms. Appraising the task as beyond their ability, the student experiences rising reading anxiety, attention shifts from the text to the worry of not understanding it, and the student closes the article. Instead of asking the librarian, who the student fears will notice their difficulty, the student searches the internet for a simpler summary, borrows a classmate's notes and delays the paper until the night before it is due. The finished paper relies on two web pages and the lecture notes, and its references are incomplete. If the student receives a low grade, the belief that academic sources are beyond them may be reinforced.

The model helps to identify the points at which such a sequence might be interrupted. A librarian who had visited the class and invited questions might have lowered communication apprehension. Instruction in how to read an abstract and skim an article might have led the student to appraise the task as a challenge rather than a threat. A plain language guide to the database might have reduced library anxiety. Integrated assignments, in which the English lecturer and the librarian jointly taught students to find and summarise articles, might have made the task familiar before it was graded.

Contribution of the Model to Existing Theory

The model seeks to address specific gaps in existing theories and proposes relationships that, to the authors' knowledge, those theories do not state explicitly.

Foreign language anxiety theory. Horwitz *et al.* (1986) and Saito *et al.* (1999) located language anxiety mainly in the language classroom and in reading tasks set for language learning. The model extends the concept to the use of a second language for learning other subjects, and specifically to information seeking, and suggests that language anxiety may have consequences beyond language performance, namely the avoidance of academic information and help.

Library anxiety theory. Mellon (1986) and later researchers treated library anxiety mainly as a reaction to the size, complexity and unfamiliarity of the library, and recent studies have begun to note language-related barriers (Ebiefung, 2025; Shimray *et al.*, 2025). The model proposes a specific relationship: library anxiety has independent sources, but where the library operates in a second language it is expected to be positively associated with English language anxiety, and more strongly so where students perceive library services as less accessible in language terms. This moderated association has not, to the authors' knowledge, been examined in settings such as Nigeria.

Information avoidance theory. Sweeny *et al.* (2010) and Golman *et al.* (2017) explain avoidance by the expected emotional cost of information. The model identifies language difficulty as one specific source of that expected cost in academic settings, proposes that avoidance in this context takes the forms of source avoidance, help avoidance and anxiety-driven substitution rather than outright refusal of information, and suggests, as a hypothesis requiring longitudinal testing, that sustained avoidance may slow the development of proficiency.

Finally, the model distinguishes anxiety-driven avoidance from lack of skill, and predicts that interventions which address anxiety may change behaviour in ways that skills training alone may not. This prediction, stated in propositions P5a and P5b and in the intervention hypothesis, is what makes the model useful as a guide to practice.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that English language anxiety may be an important and overlooked contributor to information avoidance among undergraduates in Nigerian university libraries. The Language Anxiety and Information Avoidance Model proposes that the gap between students' English proficiency and the demands of academic sources, together with evaluative library and classroom settings, may be appraised as threatening and give rise to reading anxiety, communication apprehension and library anxiety. These may lead to source avoidance, help avoidance, and anxiety-driven substitution and delay, with costs for the depth of information use and the quality of academic writing. The model connects three bodies of research that developed in parallel and offers seven testable propositions. Researchers should measure language anxiety alongside library anxiety, English proficiency and information literacy skill. Libraries should offer welcoming first contact, train reference staff to respond to imperfect English without judgement and provide plain language guides, while libraries and English departments jointly teach reading strategies through integrated assignments. The model rests on theory and a purposive review rather than new data, much of its evidence comes from outside Nigeria, and the proposed feedback from avoidance to proficiency requires longitudinal evidence.

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