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English Language Anxiety and Information Avoidance: A Study of Undergraduate Students in Nigerian University Libraries

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ABSTRACT

Research on foreign language anxiety has mostly been conducted in the classroom, while studies on library anxiety have paid little attention to the language of library services. This qualitative study therefore investigated how English language anxiety relates to the information seeking of undergraduates in Nigerian university libraries, drawing on the foreign language anxiety framework and the theory of investment. Through purposive sampling, 28 undergraduates whose first language was a Nigerian indigenous language and who had used the library that year, and 8 academic librarians, were selected from three federal universities in southern Nigeria. Their semi-structured interviews were analysed through a six-phase codebook thematic analysis, with two researchers coding independently. The study distinguishes the deliberate ignoring of available and useful information (information avoidance) from avoiding librarians while seeking information elsewhere. Four themes emerged: linguistic self doubt and reluctance to seek help, code switching as a coping mechanism, negotiation of identity in English-dominant library spaces, and the librarian as a linguistic gatekeeper. Participants linked anxiety over English to not seeking support from librarians and, sometimes, to purposely restricting their use of helpful library resources. The results rest on self-reported data from three universities in one region and cannot be generalised to all Nigerian students. The study extends language anxiety and investment theory to the library, treating language as a dimension of library anxiety. It points to multilingual communication policies, training for librarians in responding to code switching, user education that normalises help seeking, and virtual reference and peer support via text.

INTRODUCTION

Language is not just a tool for communication; in multilingual societies it is also an important marker of identity, social belonging and access to education (García & Wei, 2014). This relationship between language and identity is especially significant in educational settings where competence in a dominant language, frequently a colonial inheritance, shapes students' ability to navigate institutional spaces and to access knowledge resources. In Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, English is the language of instruction in higher education, although it is a second language for the great majority of the population, who speak one or more of the country's more than 500 indigenous languages as their first language (Adegbija, 2004; Simpson & Oyètádé, 2008).

The academic library, a core institution for the creation and dissemination of knowledge in universities, offers an important case for examining the relationship between language anxiety and information behaviour (Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 2004). Although the library is meant to enable access to information for everyone, the language practices embedded in it, from cataloguing to reference interactions, can be a barrier for students who lack confidence in their English. This study examines the influence of English language anxiety on the information seeking behaviour of undergraduate students in Nigerian university libraries, focusing on the negotiations of identity that take place when students interact with library spaces where English is the dominant language (Norton, 2013).

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do undergraduate students in Nigerian universities perceive their English language proficiency in relation to library use?
2. What is the relationship between English language anxiety and information seeking practices, including avoidance of interpersonal help and, in some cases, information avoidance of particular library resources, in academic libraries?
3. How do students negotiate their linguistic identities when seeking information in English-dominant library environments?
4. What role do librarians play in either mitigating or exacerbating language anxiety among library users?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Nigerian Linguistic Context

Nigeria is linguistically diverse, with an estimated 450 to 550 languages spoken within its borders (Eberhard *et al.*, 2023). These languages belong to several major families, including Niger Congo, Afro Asiatic and Nilo Saharan. Among the indigenous languages, three, namely Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, are major languages, each with tens of millions of speakers (Simpson & Oyètádé, 2008).

English was introduced into Nigeria through British colonial administration from the nineteenth century onwards and has developed into a localised variety known

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as Nigerian English (Gut, 2008). After independence in 1960, English was retained as the official language and as the medium of instruction in secondary and tertiary education, driven by pragmatic arguments of ethnic neutrality and international communication (Adegbija, 2004). This language policy has created a complex diglossia in which English is used for formal and educational purposes and the indigenous languages in the domestic and community spheres (Igboanusi, 2008).

Nigerian Pidgin English, a contact language with an English lexical base and its own grammar, is an important lingua franca, especially among young people and in informal settings (Faraclas, 1996). It serves as a bridge language in multilingual contexts and has gained increasing acceptance in the media, advertising and popular culture. In formal education, however, it is still stigmatised, and Standard British or American English is privileged (Igboanusi, 2008).

Entering the English-dominated environment of Nigerian universities can be linguistically and psychologically challenging for students, especially those from rural areas and from schools with limited English instruction. The pressure to perform academically in English while negotiating multilingual identities creates conditions favourable to the development of language anxiety (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Horwitz *et al.*, 1986). In this context, Nigerian university libraries are an important setting in which to examine the relationship between language anxiety and information behaviour.

Foreign Language Anxiety and Second Language Learning

Foreign language anxiety has been recognised as a major affective factor in second language acquisition since Horwitz *et al.* (1986) showed that it is a situation-specific form of anxiety rather than a general anxiety trait. Horwitz *et al.* (1986) described foreign language anxiety as having three related components: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety.

Subsequent research has extended the concept to reading anxiety (Saito *et al.*, 1999), writing anxiety (Cheng, 2004) and listening anxiety (Elkhafaifi, 2005). MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) proposed a process model of language anxiety, which holds that anxiety can affect cognitive processing at each of the three stages of input, processing and output in language learning. Language anxiety has also been documented among university students in multilingual African settings where English is the medium of instruction but not the first language of most students. For instance, Ige (2025) studied second language anxiety among multilingual first-year university students in South Africa and found that fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension contributed to reluctance to speak and withdrawal from engagement. This research has taken place predominantly in the classroom, and little has been done to investigate how language anxiety is expressed in other academic settings, such as the library (Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 2004).

Emotion has also been shown to influence information seeking more broadly. Igbokwe and Nwanekezie (2025) demonstrated, in a model of English language teachers' information seeking for professional development in Nigerian universities, that feelings such as uncertainty, frustration and confidence influence whether an information seeker persists, changes strategy or withdraws. Language anxiety can be seen as one source of such feelings when the information environment operates in a second language.

Language Identity and Investment in Second Language Learning

Norton's (2000, 2013) concept of investment offers a useful lens for examining how language learners' identities are involved in their engagement with target language communities. Unlike the psychological construct of motivation, investment recognises that language learners have complex social histories and multiple desires that shape their relationship with the target language (Norton, 2000). At the heart of Norton's framework is the notion of imagined communities, that is, communities with which learners identify and whose practices and values they wish to adopt (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Norton, 2001).

Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment adds ideology as a further layer of mediation between identity and investment. Dominant ideologies about language, such as notions of native speaker superiority and standard language ideologies, may position some learners as legitimate speakers and others as marginal ones (Darvin & Norton, 2015). These ideological aspects are especially relevant in postcolonial settings such as Nigeria, where the colonial past and global capitalism have given English considerable symbolic value (Pennycook, 2017).

Information Avoidance and Library Anxiety

Information avoidance refers to deliberately not seeking or exposing oneself to information, even when it is freely available and potentially useful (Sweeny *et al.*, 2010). Case *et al.* (2005) identified a number of reasons for information avoidance, including anxiety, cognitive overload and concerns about social judgement. It is important to distinguish information avoidance from related but distinct behaviours, such as avoidance of interpersonal assistance and the adoption of alternative approaches to information seeking. A student can still obtain information effectively without talking to librarians, by searching independently or using electronic resources. However, if anxiety leads students to give up particular library searches, to narrow research topics so as to exclude potentially relevant scholarly sources, or to avoid systematically certain library resources that they think will require linguistic performance, such behaviour can be regarded as information avoidance of those resources in the stricter sense (Sweeny *et al.*, 2010).

Library anxiety, a term introduced by Mellon (1986), refers to the uncomfortable feelings students may experience

when they use or think about using the library. Later studies elaborated the concept and identified dimensions such as barriers with staff, affective barriers, comfort with the library, knowledge of the library and mechanical barriers (Bostick, 1992; Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 2004). Jiao and Onwuegbuzie (1997) identified student characteristics related to library anxiety, while Onwuegbuzie and Jiao (2000) linked library anxiety to academic procrastination. The role of language proficiency in library anxiety has received little attention, and multilingual contexts have been largely overlooked. Recent empirical studies have begun to fill this gap. 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 the major causes. Ebiefung (2025) investigated xenoglossophobia, the anxiety associated with speaking a foreign language, among African graduate students and found that accent-related anxieties affected their information seeking when they interacted with librarians. The intersection of language anxiety and information behaviour in academic libraries nevertheless remains a significant gap, which this study addresses.

Academic Libraries in Nigerian Higher Education

University libraries in Nigeria operate in a challenging environment of scarce funding, inadequate facilities and a rapidly growing student population (Ifidon & Ifidon, 2007). Library collections are primarily in English (Okiy, 2005), and students' use of library resources is uneven even within a single institution (Nwanekezie & Igbokwe, 2022). Reference librarians are intermediaries and must communicate effectively. When these interactions take place in English, which may not be the first language of either party, miscommunication and anxiety can result (Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 2004). Studies of academic libraries in Nigeria have given most attention to collections, information literacy and digital resources, with very little attention to the sociolinguistic aspects of the user experience. International guidance, however, recognises that libraries serving linguistically diverse communities should provide services in the languages of their users and should value linguistic diversity (IFLA, 2008). Within Nigeria, Igbokwe and Nwanekezie (2026) have proposed collaboration between the university library and the Department of English, in which librarians take charge of the work on sources and English lecturers take charge of the work on language, as one institutional route through which language barriers in library use could be addressed.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

The study used a qualitative research design to gain insight into the lived experiences of undergraduate students regarding English language anxiety and information seeking behaviour in university libraries. An interpretative phenomenological approach (Smith *et al.*, 2009) guided the design of the interviews and the initial reading of the transcripts, so that participants' meaning making remained the focal point. This orientation was combined with a codebook-oriented thematic analysis that followed the six phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006) and incorporated independent coding and intercoder agreement checks. The analytical position can therefore be described as a reliability-oriented thematic analysis rather than a purely reflexive one. Agreement statistics are reported because the study aimed to produce a stable codebook shared by two coders and to report the prevalence of themes within this sample transparently; they are not presented as a mandatory component of Braun and Clarke's approach.

Research Sites and Context

The study was carried out at three federal universities in southern Nigeria: the University of Uyo (Akwa Ibom State, South South geopolitical zone), the Federal University of Technology Owerri (FUTO, Imo State, South East) and the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN, Enugu State, South East). These institutions were chosen because they represent different institutional types (comprehensive and specialised technology universities) and serve students from a range of linguistic backgrounds. The South East sites are predominantly Igbo speaking, whereas the University of Uyo serves a population that includes Ibibio, Annang and other South South language speakers in addition to Igbo students. No claim of linguistic homogeneity is made; this regional and linguistic diversity was intentionally included in the sampling framework. Library services at all three institutions are conducted mostly in English.

Participants and Sampling

The participants formed two groups: undergraduate students and academic librarians. Students were recruited through purposive sampling, which targeted students who were current undergraduates at one of the three sites, had at least one Nigerian indigenous language as their first language, and had used the university library at least once during the current academic year. Recruitment took place through library notice boards, announcements in selected courses and snowball sampling through initial participants. Nine or ten students were recruited from each university (University of Uyo: 10; FUTO: 9; UNN: 9). The final student sample comprised 28 students (16 female, 12 male) from Years 1 to 4 and from a range of disciplines, including the humanities, sciences, social sciences and engineering.

Eight academic librarians (University of Uyo: 2; FUTO: 3; UNN: 3) were interviewed to obtain professional perspectives. Their library experience ranged from 3 to 22 years, and they included reference, user education and circulation staff. Sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation. Saturation was judged to have been

reached when further interviews produced no new codes or themes that significantly changed the codebook; this was documented in the audit trail after the 24th student interview and confirmed by the last four student interviews and the librarian interviews.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted from February to June 2024. Student interviews lasted 45 to 75 minutes and librarian interviews 30 to 50 minutes. Interviews took place in locations chosen by the participants, usually quiet spaces in or near the library. Student protocols covered language background and self assessment of English proficiency, patterns of library use, experiences of asking librarians for help, preferences for information sources, experiences with English-language databases and strategies for coping with language-related difficulties. Librarian protocols addressed their observations of students' language use, communication strategies, perceived barriers and suggestions for improving services.

Participants were given the choice of being interviewed in English, Nigerian Pidgin or a local indigenous language (mainly Igbo or Ibibio). All interviews began in English, and 18 of the student participants code switched into Pidgin or indigenous languages at some point during the interview. These instances of code switching in the research interview are distinct from the coded theme "Code Switching as a Coping Mechanism", which captures accounts of code switching as a strategy for obtaining information in the library. Code-switched sections were noted, translated where necessary and treated as data. Translation quality was assured through back translation of key excerpts by a bilingual research assistant and review by the principal researcher, who has a good command of English, Igbo and Nigerian Pidgin.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed through a codebook-oriented thematic analysis that followed the six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) while remaining informed by the phenomenological focus. The phases were: (1) familiarisation through repeated reading; (2) independent generation of initial codes by two researchers; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes against the full dataset; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) writing the report. Coding was both inductive, grounded in the data, and deductive, based on the foreign language anxiety and investment frameworks. To secure a common and consistent codebook, intercoder agreement was tested on a sample of transcripts (approximately 20%), yielding a Cohen's kappa of 0.81, and discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached. This statistic is reported to indicate coding consistency within the reliability-oriented approach adopted here; it is not claimed to be a requirement of reflexive thematic analysis. An audit trail recorded the decisions made during analysis.

Member checking was conducted with eight participants. Peer debriefing sessions were used to test assumptions, and negative cases were actively sought. The researcher's reflexivity notes addressed the principal researcher's position as a multilingual Nigerian academic familiar with both Igbo and South South linguistic contexts, which facilitated rapport but required continual attention to avoid overinterpreting shared cultural knowledge.

Ethical Considerations

Before data collection, ethical approval was granted by the research ethics committees of all three participating universities: the University of Nigeria Research Ethics Committee (ref. UNN/REC/2023/112, approved December 2023), the Federal University of Technology Owerri Research Ethics Committee (ref. FUTO/REC/2024/007, approved January 2024) and the University of Uyo Ethics Committee (ref. UNIUYO/EC/2024/015, approved January 2024). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants after they had received detailed information about the purpose, procedures, risks and benefits of the study. Pseudonyms are used throughout, and participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time. Interview records and analysis notes are kept in anonymised form and are available for verification by the journal if required.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Analysis of the interview data identified four key themes related to English language anxiety and library information practices: (1) linguistic self doubt and reluctance to seek help, (2) code switching as a coping mechanism, (3) identity negotiation in English-dominant library spaces, and (4) librarians as linguistic gatekeepers. These themes were not confined to particular individuals or locations but emerged across a number of participants and sites. Table 1 summarises the themes, subthemes, their presence in this sample and illustrative evidence. The counts describe the students in this study and are not used to estimate prevalence in the population.

Theme 1: Linguistic Self Doubt and Reluctance to Seek Help

The relationship between students' perceptions of their English and their willingness to seek assistance from librarians was the most pervasive theme. Many participants described high levels of anxiety about approaching the reference desk because of difficulty in expressing their information needs in English, reflecting the communication apprehension component of foreign language anxiety (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986).

When I want to go and ask the librarian something, I will be thinking, 'How will I say this thing in correct English?' Sometimes I know what I'm looking for, but finding the right words in English to explain it is the problem. So many times I just don't ask. I will spend hours looking by myself even if I could finish faster with their help. (Chidinma, University of Uyo, Year 2)

Table 1: Summary of Themes, Subthemes and Evidence

Theme	Subthemes	Prevalence (this sample)	Illustrative evidence
Linguistic self doubt and reluctance to seek help	Fear of imperfect English; fear of being judged unintelligent; narrowing topics or abandoning searches to avoid help	22 of 28 students	Chidinma (Y2): "finding the right words in English… I just don't ask." Amara (Y1): changed topic to avoid the librarian's desk.
Code switching as coping	Facilitating communication; solidarity; variable librarian responses	15 of 28 students	Nneka (Y3): switched to Pidgin and was helped. Kelechi (Y2): corrected, and subsequently avoided librarians.
Identity negotiation	Performing an educated identity; timing visits to avoid interaction; preference for electronic resources	18 of 28 students	Tochukwu (Y4): "like wearing a mask." Ugochi (Y3): prefers e-resources because "nobody is watching."
Librarians as linguistic gatekeepers	Awareness of student anxiety; informal accommodations; insistence on Standard English; absence of policy	All 8 librarians; varied attitudes	Mrs. Okonkwo: observes nervousness. Mr. Eze: accepts Pidgin informally. Mrs. Abiodun: "library cannot lower its standards."

Note: Prevalence figures describe this sample only. The count of 15 of 28 for Theme 2 refers to coded accounts of code switching as a library coping strategy, not to the 18 students who code switched during the research interviews themselves.

Many participants said they would rather struggle on their own than risk embarrassment. Emeka (FUTO, Year 3) described avoiding the librarian and using only Google for his work on renewable energy systems because "the way some of these librarians will be looking at you when you don't speak grammar well… can make someone feel small."

Participants' worries reflected wider social attitudes that equate Standard English with intelligence. Obinna (UNN, Year 4) stated: "In Nigeria, if you cannot speak English well, people will think you are not educated, that you are not intelligent… In the library, I feel this thing strongly."

The consequences included spending excessive time searching alone, using less appropriate sources and, in some cases, narrowing research topics or abandoning specific library searches. Amara (University of Uyo, Year 1) changed her term paper topic to one she could research without a librarian's help because she was "avoiding the librarian's desk." A more direct example of abandoning a specific library search came from Chioma (UNN, Year 3):

I needed materials on environmental pollution for my project. I went to the library twice and even found the shelf, but each time I stood there and then left without taking any book or asking for help. I kept thinking, what if the librarian asks me something I cannot answer in good English? So I just abandoned the search and used whatever I could find on my phone. (Chioma, UNN, Year 3)

Chioma's account shows deliberate avoidance of a particular library search and of the potentially useful print resources she had found, because of anxiety about interacting in English. She was not, however, cut off from information altogether; she obtained other information on her phone. This distinction is significant: her behaviour is not total avoidance of information but avoidance of particular library resources (Sweeny *et al.*, 2010).

Theme 2: Code Switching as a Coping Mechanism

While many participants avoided interaction, others reported code switching between English, Nigerian Pidgin and indigenous languages as a strategy for obtaining information in the library (García & Wei, 2014). Fifteen of the 28 students gave coded accounts of code switching in this way. (This figure is distinct from the 18 students who code switched during the research interviews themselves.) When English words were lacking, code switching served as a means of communication, signalled solidarity and reduced formality.

I was looking for materials about traditional medicine in Igbo culture. I was trying to explain to the librarian, but my English was forming somehow. Then I saw she was looking at me like she understood my struggle, and I just switched to Pidgin. I said, 'Abeg, I dey find book wey talk about our people medicine.' She laughed small and helped me. That time, Pidgin saved me. (Nneka, UNN, Year 3)

Code switching was not always well received. Kelechi (FUTO, Year 2) reported: "One time I asked a question in Pidgin… and the librarian corrected me. She said, 'Speak English, we are in an academic environment.' That made me feel very bad. Since that day, I don't talk to librarians unless it is very necessary."

Responses differed from one librarian to another. Some students commented that certain librarians were more tolerant of Pidgin, while others demanded Standard English. There was no clear pattern across the sample by age or experience; the differences seemed to be more individual than generational.

Theme 3: Identity Negotiation in English-Dominant Library Spaces

Participants' accounts revealed complex negotiations between the multilingual world of everyday life and a library dominated by English (Norton, 2000, 2013). For many, the library was an aspirational space associated with academic success, but also the place where they felt their language skills were most exposed.

When I enter the library, it's like I become a different person. Outside, with my friends, I speak Igbo, Pidgin, anyhow. But in the library, I have to perform this educated person who speaks proper English. It's exhausting sometimes, like wearing a mask. But at the same time, I want to be that person… So there is this conflict inside me. (Tochukwu, University of Uyo, Year 4)

Some participants deliberately came to the library early in the morning or late in the day to minimise interaction. Adaeze (UNN, Year 2) described this as "my secret time in the library." Electronic resources offered an alternative that did not require spoken English:

I prefer using the e-library resources, the online databases. There, nobody is watching me or listening to my English. I can take my time to search, use the dictionary if I don't understand something, and nobody will know. It feels safer… (Ugochi, FUTO, Year 3)

These preferences are alternative information seeking strategies rather than information avoidance, because students continued to obtain information, often successfully, while avoiding face-to-face linguistic performance. However, when students restricted themselves exclusively to resources that could be used without any interaction, they sometimes missed potentially more relevant print collections or specialised databases that required brief consultation.

Theme 4: Librarians as Linguistic Gatekeepers

The librarian interviews provided complementary perspectives. Most librarians expressed commitment to helping students, but their accounts showed a range of awareness of language barriers (Mellon, 1986; Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 2004).

You can see it in their faces, some students come to the desk looking very nervous, like they're afraid to talk. Sometimes they start a sentence and then stop, saying 'sorry' and trying again. I think for some of them, it's about the English. They're not confident. But we're trained to speak English in the library, and the system is in English, so what can we do? (Mrs. Okonkwo, UNN, 18 years' experience)

Some librarians reported speaking more slowly, using simpler words or accepting Pidgin. Mr. Eze (FUTO, 7 years' experience) observed that such practices "depend on the individual librarian. Some of my colleagues will insist on proper English. There's no policy about it."

Others regarded English proficiency as an expected competency: "If you are admitted to a federal university, you should be able to communicate in English… If students have problems with English, they should take courses to improve themselves. The library cannot lower its standards." (Mrs. Abiodun, University of Uyo, 15 years' experience). This spectrum of perspectives, from accommodation to gatekeeping, is consistent with the varied experiences reported by students.

Discussion

Language Anxiety Beyond The Classroom

The results indicate that English language anxiety affects the way some undergraduates seek information and engage with university library services in the Nigerian contexts studied. As Horwitz *et al.* (1986) found, participants described communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation when thinking about communicating with librarians, and the reference desk was a site of particular concern. This extends the study of foreign language anxiety beyond the classroom and is in line with recent studies of second language anxiety in multilingual African higher education (Ige, 2025) and with reports from college students learning English as a second language elsewhere, who describe anxiety about speaking alongside difficulties with vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar (Vergara-Burgos, 2025). Classroom studies have examined anxiety mainly as an influence on language performance; the present results indicate that the same anxiety can also affect how students obtain the information on which their learning in every subject depends. In this sense, language anxiety is not only a problem for language teaching but also a condition of access to academic knowledge.

Linguistic Anxiety as a Dimension of Library Anxiety

The results connect with the literature on library anxiety (Adeeko & Adetimirin, 2023; Bostick, 1992; Mellon, 1986; Shimray *et al.*, 2025), revealing linguistic anxiety as an under-researched dimension, especially in multilingual environments. The "barriers with staff" dimension takes on a new meaning when concerns about language are part of the picture. Students who hesitated at the reference desk did not say that librarians were unhelpful in general; they said that they feared how their English would be heard and judged. This implies that in multilingual institutions, barriers with staff may be partly linguistic, and that measures of library anxiety developed in English-speaking environments may not capture this source of discomfort unless they are adapted.

Avoidance of Help and Avoidance of Resources

Importantly, the behaviours documented include not only avoidance of interpersonal assistance but, in some instances, avoidance of particular library resources. When students narrowed their research topics or gave up library searches because of the linguistic demands of library use, they knowingly limited their exposure to potentially valuable scholarly materials (Sweeny *et al.*, 2010). Chioma's example of leaving the library without taking the materials she had found, and then using information retrieved on

her phone, is a first-hand example of avoidance of a specific library search and its resources. It does not show total avoidance of information, since she continued to search through another channel. This distinction is maintained throughout the analysis: digital and phone-based searching are treated as alternative information seeking strategies rather than as information avoidance. Ebiefung's (2025) findings on xenoglossophobia among African graduate students also reinforce the view that language anxiety can shape everyday interactions with information and with librarians.

The distinction matters in practice. If students avoid librarians but still obtain good information elsewhere, the issue is mainly one of comfort and efficiency. If, however, avoidance leads students to give up print collections or specialised databases they need, as in some of the cases reported here, it affects the quality of their academic work. The results also echo the role of emotion in information seeking described by Igbokwe and Nwanekezie (2025), in which uncertainty and loss of confidence can lead information seekers to withdraw rather than persist. In this study, the emotion was anxiety about English, and the withdrawal took the form of avoiding interaction or narrowing the search.

Identity and Investment

Norton's (2000, 2013) framework of investment sheds light on students' complicated relationship with English and the library. Students invested in English as a means of academic success and of joining the imagined community of educated professionals, yet felt anxious when they perceived their English as inadequate (Norton, 2001). Tochukwu's description of "wearing a mask" illustrates the performance of identity under the influence of language ideologies (Darvin & Norton, 2015). The preference for electronic resources suggests that digital environments may offer alternative identity positions that reduce performance anxiety, which has implications for the design of virtual reference and online library services. At the same time, the library was a place where students wanted to belong and yet felt they might be exposed as not belonging, which helps to explain why avoidance coexisted with continued use of the library.

Code Switching and Translanguaging

Code switching can be understood through the concept of translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014). Students achieved their information seeking goals by drawing on their full linguistic repertoires, much as teachers and students in a Philippine university switched between English and Filipino to clarify, explain and build rapport in class (Lavadia *et al.*, 2025). The varied responses of librarians show that translanguaging remains contested in formal spaces. When a librarian responded warmly to Pidgin, the encounter succeeded; when a librarian corrected the student, the student withdrew from further interaction. Consistent institutional policies and professional development would be needed to support multilingual approaches. Recent conceptual work on decolonising information literacy instruction through translanguaging (Yu & Matteson, 2025) offers practical avenues for libraries seeking to validate students' full linguistic repertoires.

Librarians as Gatekeepers

The role of librarians as linguistic gatekeepers has implications for professional practice. In the absence of institutional policies, individual attitudes can either alleviate or intensify student anxiety (Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 2004). The view of some librarians that English proficiency is an expected competency reflects language ideologies that treat indigenous languages and Pidgin as deficiencies rather than resources. Such views are understandable in institutions where English is the official medium, and they may be held with the aim of maintaining academic standards. The results indicate, however, that insistence on Standard English at the moment of seeking help may discourage the very students who most need help. Policy and training that address these ideologies may help to reduce barriers and promote equal access to information.

CONCLUSION

This study indicates that English language anxiety affects how some undergraduates in the Nigerian university libraries studied seek information. For some, it took the form of avoiding interpersonal help and deliberately limiting their exposure to particular library resources, behaviours consistent with information avoidance (Sweeny *et al.*, 2010), as students experienced the library as a space in which their linguistic identities were evaluated (Norton, 2013). Libraries that accept students' whole linguistic repertoire could help to ensure equal access to information (García & Wei, 2014; IFLA, 2008). Five directions follow from the findings, as implications rather than tested interventions: explicit policies that accept translanguaging at service points (Yu & Matteson, 2025); user education that presents help seeking as normal; text-based virtual reference; peer assistance from trained students of similar language backgrounds; and joint teaching by libraries and English departments (Igbokwe & Nwanekezie, 2026). The study was limited to three federal universities in southern Nigeria, relied on self-reported data, and cannot support claims about prevalence or causation. Larger quantitative studies, comparisons across regions and intervention studies are needed. Ethical approval records and interview materials are available to the journal on request.

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