

Investigating the Relationship between English Language Anxiety and the Achievement of School based Oral English Test among Malaysian Form Four Students

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to identify the levels of the English language anxiety experienced by Form Four students in two selected schools. It was also to find out the extent of the relationship between students' English language anxiety and their achievement in school based oral English tests; and the difference between genders in English language anxiety. A survey was administered to 200 Form Four students (aged 15-16) of two secondary schools. The questionnaire reflected three components of English language anxiety, namely: (a) communication apprehension, (b) fear of negative evaluation, and (c) test anxiety. Descriptive analysis, independent sample t- test and correlation test were used in the study. The results of this study revealed that students have a moderate level of English language anxiety and significant difference between genders in English language anxiety.

Keywords: *English language anxiety; communication apprehension; fear of negative evaluation; test anxiety; Form Four students*

Introduction

It is undeniable that English is the most common and the most important language in the world. Therefore, English serves as the second language in Malaysia. It works as one of the tools that unify the Malaysian people of different ethnicities, languages, cultures and religions. In our education system, English is made a compulsory subject to all students. The education system has been designed to

produce students who are able to communicate effectively in English. But there are still problems which disrupt students to excel with high grades in spoken language.

Background of study

One of the important problems that cause students not to perform well in spoken English is language anxiety. Several researchers had investigated the relationship between anxiety and English language learning which demonstrate the presence of foreign language anxiety among learners (Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; P. D. MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Young, 1991). Further, most researches focus on average learners such as school and college students, revealed that the consistent moderate negative correlation between language anxiety and language achievement (Horwitz, 2001). The correlation studies showed that high language anxiety is related to low achievement in language learning. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), in a study involving college students learning French, found that high anxiety students experienced difficulty in expressing their views and tended to underestimate their own abilities. Zhao (2007) made a similar observation with high school students in China. He found that anxiety concerning English class affected students' achievement in English. There are also studies that revealed a negative correlation between anxiety and ability in basic language skills, particularly the skills of speaking and listening. According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1991), high anxiety students performed worse than low anxiety students in these skills.

Previous research of second language anxiety focused more on tertiary level. Moreover, study in this field is fairly small in Malaysia. On the present study however, the researcher would like to focus on Form Four students' English language anxiety. Hence, this study aims to examine the relationship between language anxiety and School Based Oral English Language achievement, focusing specifically on Form Four students in zone Larut Matang and Selama, Perak State, Malaysian.

English speaking ability among Malaysian students in School Based Oral English Test will help to develop students' oral competence in line with the learning objectives stated in the English Language Syllabus for Malaysian Secondary Schools (Malaysian Examination Syndicate, 2002). However, one of the cause that contribute to students' low achievement in the School Based Oral English Test is second language anxiety. It was further supported by Siti Noorhayati (2007). Based on her study found that secondary schools' students did experience a considerable amount of speaking anxiety in the areas of communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test taking. Based on Wong (2012) showed that a large number of the students (68.4%) experienced moderate levels of language anxiety while 14.1% of them experienced high levels of language anxiety and the remaining 17.5% experienced low levels of language anxiety.

Besides, this study aimed to advance research in this area through investigating the levels of language anxiety in gender in secondary school level. Previous researches

(Baxter, 1999; Pappamihiel, 2001; Selami Aydin, 2008) had found that female students are usually more anxious than males in English classes. Whereas, Pappamihiel (2001) found that while there was no gender difference in ESL classes, Mexican middle school girls were significantly more anxious about using English in their mainstream classes. The study showed that female students were more worried about English language tests than males were. However, Hussain, Shahid, & Zaman (2011) revealed that girls showed less anxiety in English language class, because they had more positive attitude towards English.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study are:

- I. to determine the students' levels of English language anxiety.
- II. to investigate the relationship between students' level of English language anxiety and their school based oral English test achievement.
- III. to identify the difference in between male and female students' levels of English language anxiety.

The research questions to facilitate the study are as follows:

- I. What are the levels of students' English language anxiety?
- II. What is the relationship between students' level of English language anxiety and their school based oral English test achievement?
- III. What is the difference between male and female students' level of English language anxiety?

Significance of the study

The findings of this study provided some insights to language teaching. Firstly, English language teachers would be more aware of the second language skills in which their students feel anxious. When they are more aware of language anxiety, they will be more prepared in conducting second language activities in the classroom and more sensitive when dealing with their students. Besides, they can identify ways to create an environment which is conducive for second language learning.

Besides helping language teachers, this study would help students to improve their learning styles. They would be aware of such socio-psychological constraints like thoughts of failure, deprecating thoughts, or low self-esteem. Through this awareness, they can develop their social and personal well-beings in their future university life and working environment where English language is a vital skill to survive. This study would also assist the Centre for Languages in the planning of English language teaching in the college. It can develop more comprehensive language programmes and more practical teaching materials. Besides, classroom procedures can be improved that promote language learning. All in all, understanding the nature of language anxiety can help teachers, students, and hopefully the college.

Anxiety and language learning

Horwitz and his colleagues (1986) define foreign language anxiety as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process. They also found that foreign language anxiety can be related to these three components as follows:

- a. **Communication apprehension** is characterized by fear and anxiety in communicating with people, such as difficulty in speaking in public, listening or learning a spoken utterance are all manifestations of communication apprehension. This type of anxiety in learning a second language is derived from the learners' personal knowledge that they will have difficulty understanding others and making themselves understood. Learners suffering from communication apprehension choose to keep silent in their English classes. One of the most studied topics in the field of speech communication is the tendency on the part of some people to avoid, and even, fear, communicating orally (Daly 1991: 3). Horwitz et al. (1986: 128) define communication apprehension (CA) as "*a type of shyness characterized by fear or anxiety about communicating with people*".
- b. **Test anxiety** is a type of performance anxiety which is caused by fear of failing a test. Test anxious students often put unrealistic demands on themselves. Test anxiety is considered to be one of the most important aspects of negative motivation which will affect learning. This type of fear is defined as an unpleasant feeling or emotional state that has both physiological and behavioral concomitants and that is experienced by the anxious learner when taking formal test or other evaluative situations.
- c. **Fear of negative evaluation** is an extension of the third component (*test anxiety*) of second /foreign language anxiety because it is not limited to test-taking situations; rather, it may occur in any social, evaluative situation, such as interviewing for a job or speaking in second/foreign language class (Horwitz et al., 1986: 127). It is also broader in the sense that it pertains not only to the teacher's evaluation of the students but also to the perceived reaction of other students as well (Shams, 2006: 10).

The following figure showed the study's first component, language anxiety together with the sub-variables that constitute the component.

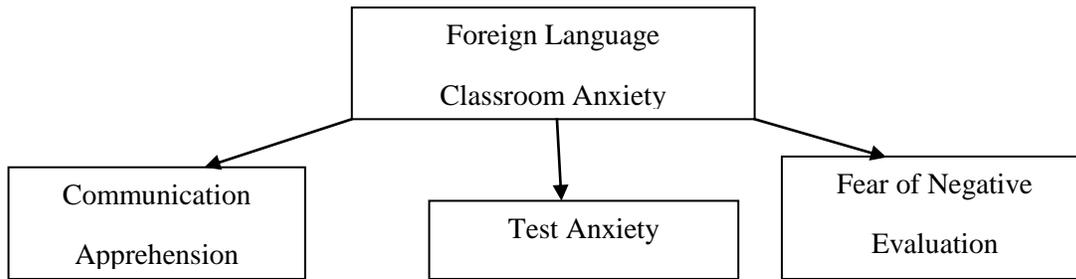


Figure 1: Horwitz's Conceptual Framework of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety

Methodology

This study utilized the quantitative research methodology. The research method used in this study was a survey.

Instrumentation

A set of questionnaire was adapted from the Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by Horwitz et.al (1983). The FLCAS consists of 33 statements with significant part-whole correlations with the total scale, aiming to assess communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation associated with language anxiety. Each item on the FLCAS is rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). Total scores of the scale range from 33 to 165. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. Section one solicits demographic information of the students' school, class, gender and age. Section two focuses on information on students' anxiety towards speaking in English, fear of negative evaluation and finally focuses on students' anxiety towards taking a speaking test in English.

Sampling

The study was carried out on 200 participants from two schools in zone Larut Matang and Selama, Perak State, Malaysia. Random sampling method was used to select the participants. The students consisted approximate of males and females. The students are Form Four (aged 15-16) students from both schools.

Data collection

Researcher got the convenient schedule of the teachers as to the administration of the questionnaire to the target participants. The participants were given 30-35 minutes to accomplish the questionnaire. Once all the data have been completed, the questionnaires were classified, tallied and tabulated. The students' English teachers were referred to identify their latest achievement of school based oral English test achievement.

Data analysis

The data were collected from their answers in the questionnaire. The overall analysis of the data was collected using the frequency count and the percentages of each answer where then calculated. The data obtained were analyzed using SPSS version 20.0 Windows and were represented in the form of descriptive statistics which include percentages and mean.

The classification of English language anxiety level referred to the category as Table 1.

Table 1: Students' mean level of English language anxiety

Language Anxiety	Mean
Low	1.00-2.33
Moderate	2.34-3.66
High	3.67-5.00

According to Baharuddin (2009), students are categorized into 3 levels of anxiety. Table 1 showed mean 1.00-2.33 (low language anxiety LLA), mean 2.34-3.66 (moderate language anxiety MLA) and mean 3.67-5.00 (high anxiety level HLA).

Results and Discussion

Table 2: Students' level of English language anxiety

Language Anxiety Variable	Mean	Level
Communication Apprehension	3.15	moderate
Fear Negative Evaluation	3.07	moderate
Test Anxiety	2.57	moderate
Overall Language Anxiety	2.93	moderate

As showed in the Table 2, communication apprehension ranked the highest ($m=3.15$), followed by fear negative evaluation ($m=3.07$) and test anxiety ($m=2.57$). Communication apprehension, fear negative evaluation and test anxiety are all categorized in moderate language anxiety level.

Basically according to the items, the students will be facing fear and anxiety in communicating with people. Difficulty in speaking in public, listening or learning a spoken utterance is all manifestations of communication apprehension. This type of anxiety in learning a second language is derived from the learners' personal knowledge that they will have difficulty understanding others and making themselves understood. Learners suffering from communication apprehension choose to keep silent in their English classes.

Fear negative evaluation ranked second ($m =3.07$). The students faced problems like nervousness when questioned, they were embarrassed to volunteer answers,

and felt that other students spoke better English. They were upset when they could not understand what the teacher corrected and often feared being laughed at by their peers. Generally they felt they were being judged and cast in poor light by teacher and peers.

While test anxiety ranked the lowest ($m = 2.57$). While test normally generate some anxious moments associated with the likelihood of not doing well, the absence of an audience helps to ease the tension. Statements indicate of test anxiety were, "I worry about the consequences of failing my English class" ($m=3.55$) and "I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in English class" ($m = 3.1$).

From the findings, the overall mean of 2.93 indicated that the students who participated in this study are experiencing language anxiety in learning the second language. Meanwhile, there are moderate correlation between the two variables namely English language anxiety and oral English test achievement. The correlation is at 0.360. The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 showed the relationship between the subjects' language anxiety and oral English test achievement. The result showed that there was positive correlated ($r=.360$), $p<0.01$. The correlation index indicated that there was a moderate significant relationship between language anxiety and language achievement. It explains that as the level of anxiety increases, the English language achievement may also increase. Thus, this finding reveals positive significant correlation between English language anxiety and English language achievement.

Table 3: Correlation English Language anxiety and oral English test achievement

		Language Anxiety	Language Achievement
Language Anxiety	Pearson Correlation	1	.360**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	200	200
Language Achievement	Pearson Correlation	.360**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	200	200

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4 revealed the difference between male and female in language anxiety.

Table 4: Difference between male and female in language anxiety

Test Value = 0.5						
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Gender	43.072	199	.000	1.27500	1.2166	1.3334

The result of the t-test indicated in Table 4 revealed that there was significant difference between male and female subjects as showed by the overall significant value $t(199) = 43.07, p < .05$. Independent samples *t*-test revealed that overall, there were significant difference in boys' and girls' language anxiety ($p < .05$). Boys' mean language anxiety score ($M = 3.07$) was higher than that of girls ($M = 3.02$) (refer Table 5). In communication apprehension, girls' mean scores were higher than boys while in fear of negative evaluation, boys' mean scores were higher than girls. Lastly, in test anxiety, boys scores higher mean than the girls. These findings suggest that generally, boys were more anxious than girls in English class.

Table 5 showed the difference between male and female in language anxiety based on communication apprehensible, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety.

Table 5: Difference between male and female in language anxiety based on three components

Variable	Gender	Mean
Communication apprehensible	Male	3.04
	Female	3.07
Fear of negative evaluation	Male	3.14
	Female	3.09
Test anxiety	Male	3.05
	Female	2.92
Overall	Male	3.07
	Female	3.02

These findings suggest that a majority of students experienced moderate feelings of anxiety when communicating in English with other people. In the real language use situation, it is normal for second language learners to feel some anxiety. As stated by Khairi and Nurul Lina (2010), moderate feelings of anxiety in second language learning might help students to create the desire to learn, to motivate and to get the students realize that they have to work harder in order to acquire the target language. On the other hand, if students experience low level of anxiety, they may be so relaxed that they do not really learn or acquire any new things and as a result, the process of language acquisition will not be successful. For students who experience high anxiety, they may perceive a second language learning situation as threatening to them and may respond to this threatening situation by showing poor learning performance.

The most significant finding of the research is that the students showed a high score in two of the traits of second language anxiety which are fear of communication apprehension and negative evaluation. Ohata (2005) found that learners feared taking tests, because test-taking situations would make them anxious about the negative consequences of getting a bad grade. This would lead to other psychological stresses, such as the fear of losing self-confidence or feeling inferior to others. It reflects the biggest dilemma faced by most second language learners in

Malaysia as a whole. The fact that students are more worried about failing the exam would probably halt the output process which is essential in the process of language acquisition. Rather than focusing on ways to polish and enhance their language, the students would dwell on unrealistic expectations in which they are to produce a flawless language. These kinds of negative traits would surely bring in how they behave and respond in second language classroom that consequently debilitate the learning.

The findings showed that there was significant difference between the genders in language anxiety. The independent samples *t*-test revealed that overall; there were significant difference in boys' and girls' language anxiety ($p < .05$). Boys' mean language anxiety score ($M = 3.07$) was higher than that of girls ($M = 3.02$). The findings concur with Hussain, Shahid, & Zaman (2011) study, revealed that girls showed less anxiety in English language class, because they had more positive attitude towards English. Similarly, Awan, Azher, Anwar, and Naz (2010) found that female students were less anxious in English classroom as compared to males with a significant *t*-test of mean difference ($t=2.520$, $p= .013$). Their study revealed that female undergraduates were better in dealing with language encounters.

Conclusion

The findings showed that a large number of the students (93.5%) experienced moderate levels of English language anxiety while very few (6.5 %) of them experienced low levels of language anxiety. On the other hand, the correlation index indicated that there was a moderate significant relationship between language anxiety and oral English test achievement. Further, the study noticed that there was significant difference between genders in language anxiety. The results of the current study would help language teachers in several ways as regard their teaching of second language in their classes.

First, language teachers have to realize that their students are experiencing anxiety in their classes. They must be able to understand the nature of their students' language anxieties. It may vary from one learner to another so it is pertinent that teachers be made aware of what language anxieties their students may be suffering from. As such, they may be able to design lesson and prepare activities and learning materials that will be best address the strategies that can be effectively utilized by these types of learners to cope with their respective language anxieties. Second, English language teachers should have learning activities where these students are given more guidance on how to talk or write about themselves, their family, their interests and their culture. Teachers should also try to create a non-threatening, relaxed learning environment in which students can take risks and make mistakes without fear of embarrassment. English teachers should create learning environments with a definite potential for success through setting attainable goals and reasonable challenges for HLA students. Opportunities for success and celebrating success will enhance their self-confidence (Bandura, 1993).

Third, Schools should adopt innovative approaches to minimize apprehension and maximize student achievement. The most important thing is, in order to increase the level of efficiency in the English language, they need to practice. Practice will make perfect. Practice speaking with friends or family, or even text messaging them in English which will also help to increase the level of proficiency in English thus indirectly, it will improve the level of second language anxiety. Four, teachers can help students by providing more opportunities for them to interact in safe groups in which they feel comfortable. In addition, teachers must make a conscious effort to ensure that these students have the opportunity to participate in class, not just the ones who take the initiative. Wait-times should also be lengthened to ensure that these students have enough time to respond without interruption.

The findings presented in this paper are limited to the students of the school involved in this study. A replication of this study involving students from schools in other parts of Malaysia would provide further support for the generalizability of the findings.

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