

The Relationship between Language Learning Anxiety and English Language Speaking Performance among Pre-Diploma Students at A Public University in Malaysia

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Abstract

Language learning anxiety has been known to have a serious effect not only on students' language performance but also on second language learning processes. This study aims at investigating the relationship between English Language Anxiety and English language speaking performance among pre-diploma students at a public university in Malaysia. The objectives of the study are to investigate the students' language anxiety levels and explore the major causes of anxiety among them as they make a transition from secondary to tertiary education. The participants of the study will be 120 pre-diploma students enrolled in Proficiency Level English as a second language course at UiTM Perak. The data was collected through the distribution of questionnaires adapted from Horwitz'(1989) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) which consists of 33 statements. Pearson Correlation was used to determine the relationship between students' anxiety level based on the results of FLCAS and the students' performance on the 'speaking' component of their formative assessment.

Keywords: Language Anxiety, Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), Language Apprehension

Introduction

Pre-Diploma programme in UiTM, a public university in Malaysia is the university's initiative in providing a special academic path for Malaysian Certificate of Education (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia, SPM) holders who do not meet the basic requirement to pursue their studies at diploma level. It is a six-month remedial programme to strengthen the students' basic skills where they have to go through intensive classes on core subjects such as English and Mathematics and other subjects depending on whether they intend to pursue their studies in the field of science or commerce. Upon success completion of the six-month programme, these students will be eligible to enrol into diploma level programmes at the university. English for pre-diploma is a beginner-level proficiency English course. The course is a remedial course which covers the four language skills; reading, listening, speaking and writing.

As expected, many of the students who enrol in the course lack confidence especially in expressing themselves in English mostly due to their lack of proficiency despite having 11 years of exposure to English during their primary and secondary schools. They are often in a state of distress and anxious when having to perform in front of the class whether during practice or assessments.

Researchers on second and foreign language (ESL/EFL) learning have pointed out that language anxiety is one of the factors which deters second language learners from acquiring the target language efficiently, especially speaking skill (Ab Rashid et al., 2017; Badrasawi et al., 2020) and language anxiety has also been known to have adverse effects on language performance (Zeng, 2010). Therefore, the study was conducted to determine whether there is a relationship between English Language Anxiety and English language speaking performance among the pre-diploma students and explore the major causes of anxiety among them as they make the transition from secondary to tertiary education.

The research objectives of the study were:

- RO1: To determine the relationship between language anxiety and speaking performance among pre-diploma students.
- RO2: To identify the major cause of English language anxiety among the pre-diploma students.

Based on the study objectives, two research questions were formulated which were:

- RQ1: What is the relationship between English language anxiety and speaking performance among the pre-diploma students?
- RQ2: What is the major cause of English language anxiety among the pre-diploma students?

Literature Review

Language educators have been informed by abundant literature on second and foreign language (ESL/EFL) learning that language anxiety is one of the factors which deters second language learners from acquiring the target language efficiently, especially speaking skill (Ab Rashid et al., 2017; Badrasawi et al., 2020; Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012; Zhang & Rahimi, 2014). Language anxiety which has been defined by Horwitz (1989) as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p. 128) is known to have debilitating effects on second language learners, which consequently affects their performance. MacIntyre (1999) further describes language anxiety as a feeling of stress, nervousness, emotional reaction, and worry that are associated to second/ foreign language learning. Horwitz et al. (1989) have identified three main categories of anxiety which adversely affect the second and foreign language learning which are communication apprehension (CA), test anxiety (TA) and fear of negative evaluation (FNE). Communication apprehension (CA) refers to fear of using the target language in front of other people. Lack of proficiency especially among beginner students can lead to anxiety and self-consciousness when asked to speak in L2 in public. Next, test anxiety (TA) refers to fear of failure or performing badly in examination. Finally, fear of negative evaluation (FNE) is related to learners’ worry about peoples’ negative judgement or evaluations. FNE may cause anxious students to avoid interacting in L2, which consequently prevents them from cultivating their oral communication skills (Arnaiz & Guillén, 2012).

Many studies investigating language anxiety utilizing Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by Horwitz et al (1986) have been documented by researchers from Malaysia and other countries. The following are some of the previous studies which have utilized FLCAS to investigate the relationship between anxiety and achievement (Ali & Fei, 2017; Balakrishnan et al., 2020; Dordinejad & Ahmadabad, 2014; Karatas et al., 2016; Marcos-Llinas & Juan-Garau, 2009) and to determine the participants' anxiety levels as well as the main factors which contribute to language classroom anxiety (Amengual-Pizarro, 2018; Gupang et al, 2017; Mobarak, 2020; Sadighi & Dastpak, 2017).

Ali and Fei (2017) conducted a study to investigate foreign language classroom anxiety among 50 Iraqi postgraduate students in three Malaysian Universities namely UKM (25), UPM (16) and UM (9). The relationship between the level of anxiety (FLCAS scores) and academic achievement (the participants' Grade Point Average or GPA) was determined using Pearson's correlation. It was found that there was a significant negative correlation between the level of communication apprehension (CA) and GPA ($r=-0.562$, $P<0.01$). In addition, there was also a significant negative correlation between test anxiety (TA) and GPA ($r=-0.469$, $P=0.000$). Based on the statistical analysis it can be inferred that the higher the level of anxiety, the more likely the students would receive low grades and vice-versa.

In a study on English language anxiety by Balakrishnan et al. (2020) which was conducted among 125 first semester diploma students in a Malaysian public technical university (UTeM), it was concluded that the majority of the students experienced a moderate level of English language classroom anxiety. Pearson's correlation result showed $r = -.360$ ($p < 0.05$) which indicates that there was a significant negative relationship between the participants' FLCAS scores and their English language grades in Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) examination.

Dordinejad and Ahmadabad (2014) investigated the relationship between foreign language classroom anxiety and English language achievement among 400 high school students in Iran. Their anxiety was determined using FLCAS and the participants' achievement was based on their scores in their final English test. The result of Pearson's correlation showed $r=-.472$ ($p < 0.01$) which indicates that foreign language classroom anxiety was significantly and negatively correlated with English language performance.

However, there were also several studies which concluded that there is no significant relationship between foreign language speaking anxiety and students' proficiency levels. Marcos-Llinas and Juan-Garau (2009) conducted a study to determine the relationship between Spanish language anxiety and course achievement among different proficiency levels; advanced, intermediate and beginner. It was found that advanced learners showed higher level of anxiety compared to intermediate and beginner level learners. It was also found that participants with high anxiety level did not necessarily score poorly compared to those with low anxiety as concluded by some previous studies. Majority of the participants experienced medium level of language anxiety with no significant effect on course achievement.

Similar finding was reported by Karatas et al (2016) who conducted a study among 320 male and 168 female English preparatory students at Istanbul Technical University. The results from a T-test and one way ANOVA showed that there was no significant relationship between foreign language speaking anxiety and the students' proficiency levels and it was noticed that

the students' level of language speaking anxiety did not have any effects on the students' proficiency.

In addition to investigating the relationship between language anxiety and performance, past studies have also been conducted to determine the factors which contribute to language anxiety among L2 learners. Gupang et al (2017) conducted a study among 100 undergraduates in Pakistani university and found that test anxiety (TA) was the main contributing factor to English language classroom anxiety followed by communication apprehension (CA) and finally fear of negative evaluation (FNE).

Next, a study among 67 third and fourth-year students at the University of the Balearic Islands (UIB) in Spain was conducted by Amengual-Pizarro (2018) to determine their level of foreign language anxiety and to identify the contributing factors to the problem. The findings revealed that most students suffered from average to high anxiety levels. Communication apprehension (CA) was found to be the main source of participants' foreign language anxiety followed by fear of negative evaluation (FNE) and test anxiety (TA).

Another study investigating L2 learners' language anxiety was conducted by Sadighi and Dastpak (2017) among 154 students (74 females and 80 males) from several English language institutes in Iran. Unlike previously discussed studies which utilized the whole FLCAS (33 questions), the researchers only used part of FLCAS which measures communication apprehension (CA) consisting of 11 questions to determine the main factors which deter them from speaking in L2 during their language classes. It was found that the three most significant causes of students' anxiety were 'fear of committing mistakes', 'fear of being negatively evaluated', and 'limited knowledge of vocabulary'. Similarly, Mobarak (2020) had utilised only part of FLCAS to determine major causes of foreign language speaking anxiety among 25 Bangladeshi University students. It was revealed that the participants in the study attributed foreign language speaking anxiety to fear of communication, poor language proficiency, low self-esteem and lack of confidence, fear of perceptions of others, error correction and fear of negative evaluation.

Based on the review of related literature, it was obvious that the three different types of anxiety classified by Horwitz et al. (1986) are inter-related. Communication apprehension (CA) may be caused by fear of negative evaluation (FNE). L2 learners are often afraid of being judged by their peers and teachers which consequently caused them to avoid from speaking in the target language. In addition, test-anxiety (TA) is prevalent among L2 learners whose failure in the subject is detrimental to their overall academic performance. Thus, L2 learners who come from examination-oriented education system would probably have higher test-anxiety compared to those who come from education system which is more relaxed.

Research Methodology

The current study employed purposeful sampling where 103 pre-diploma students were chosen from three intact groups A, B and C, consisting of 36, 33 and 34 students respectively. They were Pre-diploma in Commerce students from UiTM Seri Iskandar campus. The participants had enrolled in proficiency English course at the university as part of the requirement for the pre-diploma programme.

The Research Instrument

The study had utilised the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) as a research instrument for data collection. FLCAS is a self-report questionnaire developed by Horwitz et al (1986), to assess students' anxiety levels in the classroom context. The FLCAS consists of 33 items, each measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree.' For positively worded items, 'strongly agree' receives 5 points, and 'strongly disagree' receives 1 point. Nevertheless, there are 9 items (2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 18, 22, 28, and 32) in the questionnaire which are negatively worded which require them to be inversely scored. It can be inferred that the respondents who obtain high scores in FLCAS experience high level of language anxiety in his/her English language classrooms. The total scores range from 33 to 165. FLCAS was used to measure three types of anxieties associated with learning the foreign language. The different types of anxiety are communication apprehension (CA) which is measured by 11 items in the questionnaire (items 1, 4, 9, 14, 15, 18, 24, 27, 29, 30 and 32), test anxiety (TA) which is determined by 15 items (items 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 16, 17, 20, 21, 22, 25, 26 and 28) and fear of negative evaluation (FNE) which is based on the scores of 7 items (items 2, 7, 13, 19, 23, 31 and 33). FLCAS developed by Horwitz (1986) has an internal reliability coefficient of 0.93 and has been widely accepted by other language researchers to be a highly reliable and valid instrument to measure students' foreign language anxiety level. Additionally, it has been validated by other researchers such as (Aida, 1994; Paneerselvam and Yamat, 2021).

Data Collection

The study was conducted during September to December 2021 semester. The participants responded to the questionnaire (FLCAS) which was distributed online by the researcher. The FLCAS score is derived for each respondent by adding up his or her ratings on the thirty-three items. Based on the scores, the respondents were placed in one of three anxiety groups: low, moderate, or high anxiety level. The 25th and 75th percentiles of the FLCAS scores were used as cut-off points for the three anxiety groups as proposed by (Cheng, 2005). The students' speaking performance was determined based on their scores for the speaking component of their formative assessment which consists of role play and individual presentation.

Data Analysis and Findings

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of the respondents' FLCAS and the Speaking Test scores. The full marks for FLCAS and the speaking test are 165 and 100 respectively.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
FLCAS (165)	109.5	111	108	17.99	45	152
SP. TEST (100)	73.9	75	75	10.59	25	90

The mean scores for FLCAS and Speaking Test are 109.5 and 73.9 respectively while the standard deviations are 17.99 and 10.59 respectively. Table 2 also indicates that the median and mode for FLCAS are 111 and 108 respectively while the median and mode for the Speaking Test are both 75. The maximum and minimum scores for FLCAS are 45 and 152

respectively while the maximum and minimum scores for the Speaking Test are 25 and 90 respectively.

To address the first research question (RQ1) which was “*What is the relationship between English language anxiety and speaking performance among the pre-diploma students?*”, a null hypothesis was developed as follows:

H0: There is no relationship between language anxiety and students’ speaking performance. To determine whether there exists any relationship between the two variables, Pearson’s correlations statistical analysis was utilised. Table 3 shows the summary of Pearson’s correlation results.

Table 3
Results of Pearson’s Correlation

		Anxiety	Test score
Anxiety	Pearson’s Correlation (r)	1	-0.263*
	Significance (p)		0.007
	N	103	103
Test score	Pearson’s Correlation (r)	-0.263*	1
	Significance (p)	0.007	
	N	103	103

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.*

Based on Table 3, since the probability value obtained from the statistical analysis (0.007) is less than the predetermined alpha value of 0.05, the null hypothesis was rejected. There exists adequate evidence to show that $p < 0$. Thus, it can be inferred that there is a significant weak negative linear relationship ($r = -0.263$) between language anxiety and speaking performance. Although the relationship is weak, it can be inferred that anxiety is inversely correlated to performance.

To determine the level of anxiety experienced by the respondents, they were assigned into three anxiety groups (low, moderate and high) based on their FLCAS scores. The 25th and 75th percentiles of the FLCAS scores were used as cut-off points for the three anxiety groups as proposed by (Cheng, 2005). The 25th and 75th percentile for the FLCAS data set for this study are 102 and 121 respectively. Table 3 shows the score range for each anxiety level and the number of respondents who fall under each category.

Table 4
The number of participants which fall under each category

Score Range	Anxiety Level (AL)	Number	Percent (%)
33-102	Low Anxiety (L)	26	25.2
103-111	Moderate Anxiety (M)	50	48.5
112-165	High Anxiety (H)	27	26.2

Table 4 shows that most respondents experienced moderate anxiety level (48.5%), while 25.2 percent and 26.2 percent experienced low and moderate level of anxiety respectively.

To address the second research question (RQ2) for the study which was, “What is the major cause of English language anxiety among the pre-diploma students?”, the respondents scores from each anxiety category were analysed. Under communication apprehension (CA), test anxiety (TA) and fear of negative evaluation, there are 11, 15 and 7 items respectively. The respondents’ rating for each item on the three different categories were added up separately and then averaged. The anxiety levels for each category were determined using the 25th and 75th percentile of the average scores. The 25th and 75th percentile for the average scores in the category of communication apprehension (CA) were 3.20 and 3.50 respectively. Table 5 shows the anxiety scale for communication apprehension.

Table 5

Anxiety Scale for Communication Apprehension

FLCAS Score Range	Anxiety Level (AL)	Number
1 - 3.20	Low (L)	3
3.21 - 3.49	Moderate (M)	5
3.50 - 5.00	High (H)	3

As mentioned in the previous section, communication apprehension scores were based on items 1, 4, 9, 14, 15, 18, 24, 27, 29, 30 and 32 on the FLCAS. Table 6 shows the average score or mean (M), anxiety level (AL) and rank of each item. Out of the eleven items measuring communication apprehension, three (3) were rated by the respondents as contributing to high anxiety level while five (5) items contributed to moderate anxiety level and another three (3) contributed to low anxiety. Item 9 which is a statement; ***I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class***, was rated the highest with an average score of 4.00 out of 5. Item 32 which is negatively worded and was inversely scored with a statement; ***I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of English***, was rated the lowest with an average score of 2.92 out of 5. The average score for the eleven (11) items under communication apprehension is 3.36.

Table 6

Anxiety Level for Items under Communication Apprehension

Item	Communication Apprehension	Mean	AL	Rank
1	I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in English.	3.33	M	6
4	It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in English.	3.42	M	5
9	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class.	4.00	H	1
14	I would not be nervous speaking English with native speakers.	3.17	L	10
15	I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.	3.21	M	8
18	I feel confident when I speak in my English class.	3.22	M	7
24	I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students.	3.47	M	4
27	I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English class.	3.50	H	3
29	I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says.	3.56	H	2
30	I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak English.	3.19	L	9
32	I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of English.	2.92	L	11
Average Score		3.36		

The next category of language anxiety is test anxiety (TA). The 25th and 75th percentile for the average scores in this category were 2.44 and 3.29 respectively. Table 7 shows the anxiety scale for test anxiety.

Table 7

Anxiety Scale for Test Anxiety

FLCAS Score Range	Anxiety Level (AL)	Number
1 – 2.75	Low	4
2.76 - 3.57	Moderate	7
3.58 - 5.00	High	4

The respondents rated four (4) out of the fifteen (15) items under test anxiety as contributing to high anxiety level while seven (7) and four (4) items contributed to moderate and low anxiety level respectively. The items in the FLCAS measuring test anxiety were items 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 16, 17, 20, 21, 22, 25, 26 and 28. Table 8 shows the average scores of each item. Item 10 which is a statement; ***I worry about the consequences of failing my English class,*** was rated the highest with an average score of 4.17 out of 5. Item 17 with a statement; ***I often feel like not attending my English class,*** was rated the lowest with an average score of 2.09 out of 5. The average score for the fifteen (15) items under test anxiety is 2.74.

Table 8

Anxiety Level for Items under Test Anxiety

Item	Test Anxiety	Mean	AL	Rank
3	I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in English class	3.51	M	5
5	It wouldn't bother me at all to take more English classes.	2.27	L	14
6	During English class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.	2.67	L	13
8	I am usually at ease during tests in my English class.	3.09	M	7
10	I worry about the consequences of failing my English class.	4.17	H	1
11	I don't understand why people get so upset over English class.	2.87	M	10
12	In English class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.	3.64	H	4
16	Even if I am well prepared or English class, I feel anxious about it.	3.86	H	3
17	I often feel like not attending my English class.	2.09	L	15
20	I can feel my heart pounding when I am going to be called on in my English class.	3.97	H	2
21	The more I study for an English test the more confused I get.	2.68	L	12
22	I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for English class.	2.82	M	11
25	English class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.	3.23	M	6
26	I feel more tense and nervous in my English class than in my other classes.	3.07	M	8
28	When I'm about to start my English class, I feel very sure and relaxed.	2.94	M	9
Average Score		2.74		

The third category of language anxiety, is fear of negative evaluation (FNE) which is measured by items 2, 7, 13, 19, 23, 31 and 33 in the FLCAS. The 25th and 75th percentile for the average scores in this category were 3.27 and 4.12 respectively. Table 9 shows the anxiety scale for fear of negative evaluation.

Table 9

Anxiety Scale for Fear for Negative Evaluation

FLCAS Score Range	Anxiety Level (AL)	Number
1 – 3.27	Low	2
3.28 – 4.11	Moderate	2
4.12 - 5.00	High	3

Table 9 indicates that two (2) out of the seven items measuring fear of negative evaluation were rated by the respondents as contributing to high anxiety level while another two (2) and three (3) items contributed to moderate and low anxiety level respectively.

Table 10 shows the average scores of each item. Item 23 which is a statement; ***I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do***, was rated the highest with an average score of 4.22 out of 5. Item 17 with a statement; ***I am afraid that my English teacher is ready***

to correct every mistake I make, was rated the lowest with an average score of 2.78 out of 5. The average score for the seven (7) items under fear of negative evaluation is 3.66.

Table 10

The Average Score of Each Item

Item	Fear of Negative Evaluation	Mean	AL	Rank
2	I don't worry about making mistakes in English classes.	3.17	L	6
7	I keep thinking that the other students are better at English than I am.	4.18	H	2
13	It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class.	3.36	M	5
19	I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make	2.78	L	7
23	I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do.	4.22	H	1
31	I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English	3.83	H	4
33	I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	4.06	M	3
		3.66		

Discussion and Conclusion

The first research question of the study is 'What is the relationship between English language anxiety and speaking performance among the pre-diploma students? Based on the findings, it can be concluded that there is a significant negative relationship between language anxiety and speaking performance ($r = -0.263$) which implies that the more anxious the students, the poorer their speaking performance would be, which further affirms the findings of many previous studies (Ali & Fei, 2017; Balakrishnan et al., 2020; Cheng et al., 1999; Dordinejad & Ahmadabad, 2014; Saito & Samimy 1996; Sellers, 2000). These studies all reported that high levels of anxiety could have adverse effects on students' overall FL performance and also for specific language skills.

Next, the second research question is 'What is the major cause of English language anxiety among the pre-diploma students?' Based on the findings it can be concluded that the main cause of anxiety among this group of respondents is fear for negative evaluation (FNE) with the average score of 3.66 followed by communication apprehension (CA) and test anxiety (TA) with the average scores of 3.36 and 2.74 respectively. As mentioned before, the three categories of language anxiety opined by Horwitz et al. (1986) are not clear-cut but are inter-related. Since the respondents to this study were young adults between the age of 18 to 20 years old, they were extremely conscious of their peers' and lecturers' impressions of them. Among the sources of fear of negative evaluation include negative judgments by others, disapproval by others, making mistakes, and leaving unfavourable impressions on others.

Implication and Future Research

The findings of the study add to the body of literature related to language anxiety among tertiary learners from a country which education system is relatively exam-oriented. As proposed by Horwitz (2016), FLCAS measure should be investigated in different cultures because a different factor structure might be discovered among learners from different

cultural and educational background as well as proficiency level. The findings of the study also have some pedagogical implication. Knowing that language anxiety may have debilitating effects on language learners, language educators should employ teaching methodology which promotes a supportive, friendly and low-stress language learning environment. Owing to the fact that the study was conducted among pre-diploma students who were new to tertiary education and were still adapting to university life as a whole, it may have some influence on the respondents' anxiety level. Thus, for future research it would be worthwhile to determine whether other factors such as gender, motivation or learning style have any influence on ESL/EFL learners' anxiety. Finally, since anxiety is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, it is proposed that in the future a longitudinal study should be conducted to give us better insights.

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