

# A Study on the Correlation between Perceived Culturally Responsive Teaching Experience and English Language Anxiety Levels among University Students in Selected Public and Private Universities in Klang Valley, Malaysia

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v14-i2/25315> DOI:10.6007/IJARPED/v14-i2/25315

*Published Online:* 10 June 2025

## Abstract

The university classroom in Malaysia is increasingly multicultural and globalized. English is the language of instruction for most universities as well as an integral communication tool among university students. The English language hosts a few number of issues, including English language anxiety, which can negatively affect students' English language performance. Culturally responsive teaching offers a potential solution to the problem as its dimensions can possibly interact with the anxiety in learning and using the English language. 120 undergraduates studying in two universities with a significant population of international students were administered a questionnaire measuring perceived culturally responsive teaching and English language anxiety. The result indicated no correlation between the two measured phenomena, necessitating a probe into either improving the definition of the variables or using a more suitable instrument to measure relevant experiences in regards to both variables.

**Keywords:** English Language Learning, English Language Anxiety, Culturally Responsive Teaching, Multicultural Classroom, Higher Education

## Introduction

English language has been used widely in Malaysia due its historical background in Malaysia prior to its independence. The British colonial occupation was imprinted in the status of English among local people as English was continually used in formal settings especially in government administrations and education (Subramaniam, 2007; Ali, 2000; Stevenson, 1975; Wong & Thambyrajah, 1991). Most tertiary education institutes in Malaysia have adopted English as the medium of instruction, as it tries to promote itself as being relevant globally, in line with achieving the higher education ministry's ambition of making Malaysia as a regional education hub (Cheng, Mahmood & Yeap, 2013). : "The issue of graduates' incompetence in

English has been a critical concern at the tertiary level for the past decade, prompting efforts to enhance language acquisition." (Sukri, Yunus & Rahman, 2017; Azirah 2004; Ali, 2000, Saltana & Rosli, 2016). Over the past decades, one of the greatest challenges facing the English classroom teachers has been the rapidly changing ethnic composition of student populations. The latest statistics found on the number of international students studying in both public and private universities in Malaysia is around 87, 000 (Project Atlas Malaysia, 2016) comprising mainly of Asian students. From this phenomenon, it is apparent that multicultural classrooms will be one of the major and prominent features of Malaysian tertiary education, for both private and public sector. With the arrival of these multicultural classrooms, traditional method of teaching the English language might render ineffective, as these students will bring with them a different level of proficiency as well as exposure to the English language.

Rosniah Mustaffa, Idris Aman, Seong and Noorizah (2011) reported that the teaching of English in Malaysia is still teacher-oriented "where teachers used mostly questioning, informing, instructing, accepting, modelling and correcting" discourses (p. 638). This shows lack of social practices that encourage classrooms with new instructional space that "authenticate, integrate, and connect the classroom literacy practices to the practices of the students' language and cultural knowledge to become tools for learning" (Gutierrez, Baquendano-Lopez & Turner, 1997, p. 373). Gutierrez et al. (1997) also suggested that students, if encouraged and asked to use their socio-cultural knowledge, their potential in language learning can be maximized. Consequently, instructors might not be aware of these difference in culture which can be debilitating for the learners' experience in the classroom. This is because culture can be used as the students' "funds of knowledge" to make sense of their classroom learning (Moje et. al., 2004). This study explores the role of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) in mitigating English language anxiety in Malaysian tertiary classrooms. It aims to determine whether CRT strategies influence students' anxiety levels and how cultural diversity shapes language learning experiences." (Gay, 2000; Gay 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culture becomes a significant component of a student's lived reality, and this becomes a potential platform for meaningful learning to happen inside the classroom (Krasnoff, 2016).

Given the increasing emphasis on effective language acquisition, researchers have turned their attention to the role of language learning anxiety. The classroom setting is particularly relevant, as it serves as the primary space for second language engagement (Ratnawati, 2004, Pandian, 2008). Anxiety can appear in a form of a mental block preventing or interrupting language acquisition or learning in their second language classroom (Horwitz et al., 1986). Unlike test anxiety, which occurs during an evaluated performance of any subjects (Sapp, 1995), language anxiety manifests specifically during language classroom and language lesson (Horwitz et al., 1986). Multiple studies has indicated that language learning anxiety disrupts learning of students inside the classroom and their cognitive functions which hinders language learning (Horwitz et al., 1989, McIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Krashen, 1982). Flavel's cognitive model (1989) demonstrated the metacognitive processes a student experience when learning, and is proven crucial for better learning for students.

The interest of the study henceforth are the teachers culturally responsive in designing lessons and teaching the students from different backgrounds? This question arises due to

the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP) that emphasizes on transforming Malaysia as the international hub of higher education (Ministry of Education, 2015). This will inevitably bring an influx of students from different cultural background, as more students will be coming from abroad. As mentioned by Syed Zamberi Ahmad et al. (2015), the students in the international university branches in Malaysia are both locals and international, the non-native speakers of English, with the percentages of the international students form a significant composition of the institution's demography. Exposure to a multicultural classroom might have equipped the instructors with culturally responsive pedagogies to adapt to the nature of the diverse classroom. Subsequently, the instructor's classroom will then be quantitatively measured for levels of English language anxiety to examine the classroom with a culturally responsive instructor experience a lower level of English language anxiety compared to a normal English language classroom as in a Malaysian tertiary education institute. The research questions for this study are:

- 1) What is the level of anxiety and culturally responsive teaching within the culturally diverse classrooms in the two tertiary education institutes studied?
- 2) Is there any distinguishable relationship between the anxiety levels and perceived culturally responsive classroom in the two tertiary education institutes studied?

Therefore, the study hopes to solve the problem of English language anxiety through the Culturally Responsive Teaching lenses, by examining the English language anxiety in a culturally responsive Malaysian university classrooms, where the features and the factors of the application for culturally responsive classroom will be identified through qualitative measures, before its English language anxiety levels are determined using both semi-structured interview questions as well as the use of questionnaire.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a cross-sectional survey design, using two validated questionnaires to measure English Language Anxiety (ELA) and Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). A total of 120 undergraduate students from two tertiary institutions in Selangor participated. The adapted Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and a modified Culturally Responsive Teaching Self-Efficacy (CRTSE) scale were administered to capture students' perceptions of classroom experiences. The ELA was measured using an adapted version of Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1988 Foreign Language Anxiety Classroom Scale consisting of 31 items and the Culturally Responsive Teaching level of the lecturers was measured using an adapted and abbreviated version of Culturally Responsive Teaching Self-Efficacy by Siwatu (2006a) which initially measured pre-service teachers' self-efficacy in using CRT in their lesson. The questionnaire has 40 items which were abbreviated into 15 items where the items were slightly altered to reflect the students' perspective of the CRT experience practiced by the lecturers. The adapted questionnaire was piloted to 50 students in a tertiary education institutes through Google Form, and the results of the validity tests were as follows;

Table 1

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.898	.908	15

The result showed acceptable value of internal reliability for the adapted 15-items CRTSE from the pilot which indicated suitability for administration to the sample of the study. The sample consisted of 120 undergraduate students from two tertiary education institutes in Selangor. The two institutes consisted of a significant population of international students which produced a culturally diverse classroom. The students undertook compulsory English courses in the last two semesters where all students regardless of their program will join, which meant the international and local students would be enrolled in one classroom. The analysis utilized was descriptive statistics to determine level of ELA and CRT experienced by the students inside the classroom, and the Pearson's Correlation analysis for any correlation between ELA and CRT.

### The Findings

The results of the survey will be addressed in two subheadings in relation to the two research questions previously stated.

#### *Level of Anxiety and Culturally Responsive Teaching inside the English Classroom*

The English language anxiety levels in the participants from both universities was measured by the adapted 31-item Foreign Language Anxiety Classroom scale. The mean score for the questionnaire was 2.82, indicating a medium to low level of anxiety inside the English language classroom. The mean for the adapted CRTSE is 3.72, indicating a medium amount of CRT experienced by the students inside their English classroom in the two universities. Table 2 below illustrates the results:

Table 2

#### *Mean scores for ELA and CRT*

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Mean for ELA	2.8218	.80185	119
Mean for CRT	3.7165	.69997	119

#### *Correlation between English Language Anxiety and Perceived Culturally Responsive Teaching*

The Pearson Correlation analysis was conducted using the scores from both FLCAS and CRTSE. The results indicated weak to no correlation between the two sets of scores where  $r = 0.14$ . Table 3 below detailed the result of the analysis

Table 3

#### *Correlation Analysis of The Two Variables*

		MEANELA	MEANCRT
MEANELA	Pearson Correlation	1	.141
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.126
	N	119	119
MEANCRT	Pearson Correlation	.141	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.126	
	N	119	119

## Discussion

The results from the descriptives indicated a medium to low level of English language anxiety inside the English classroom in both universities. English is the language of instruction for most universities in Malaysia, therefore the English language might be more familiar to the students which consequently can reduce any feeling of apprehension due to unfamiliarity with the language and its use. Given the nature of both institutes, students might be familiar with the English language in multiple ways. Primarily, both universities required students to obtain certain level of English proficiency before enrolling in their major program. Subsequently, each semester, or at least the first few semesters of their studies, they are required to enrol in English proficiency subjects in accordance to their program structure. Therefore, the students might expect to be enrolled in English classroom as a part of their major programs. These English proficiency classrooms are attended by all students, including the international students. Another factor could be the international students' presence in the campus.

Both institutes compose of a significant percentage of international students where they would need to communicate to socialize or to complete assignments. The students, local and international, will need to use a shared language to communicate, and in both universities, English the medium of instruction. English in the universities is important not only as tools of academic tasks, but also for socialization (Himawati, 2018). Therefore, the frequent use of English during and after the classroom among the students might facilitate their familiarity towards the language which can reduce the apprehension, as lack of exposure to oral English are a cause for English language anxiety (Mentari, Abid & Bay, 2023).

The studied sample also experience exposure of English even outside of their English classroom as a part of their normal life. Media consumption through Netflix, Youtube and Spotify which are widely available in English might became supplementary to their English daily input (Dvorghets & Shaturnaya, 2015) where some students has been reported obtaining good English proficiency through media consumption (Richards, 2015). Another reason could be more matured language learners will employ different language strategies to cope with the anxieties (Sahari, Johari & Morni, 2016) which could lower their level of English language anxiety inside the English language classroom in the university.

There could also be a possibility of the use of CRT which is student-centered also aided in the medium to low level of anxiety students experienced, as Yang Dong et al (2019) found in their study. The freedom to interpret and understand the given material allowed the students to feel more involved in the learning which might have reduced their reading anxiety. Student-centered learning is commonly practiced in university setting (Khathoon, 2019) so this could also explain the reason for the medium to low level of English language anxiety experienced by the students. CRT also used student's cultural background knowledge to teach the English language (Taylor&Sobel, 2011; Wages, 2015) and the use of Funds of Knowledge (Moll, Amanti & Gonzalez, 2005) has been found to be effective in improving academic performance even in STEM school students where science and mathematics could be difficult to grasp (Verdin, Goodwin & Capobianco, 2016). Larotta and Serrano (2011) found FOK effective even for Spanish adult learners learning the English language. The classroom environment which is made familiar to the students by using their background knowledge seemed to be effective in facilitating learning, and CRT can provide this familiarity to the students.

However, the correlation analysis demonstrated no significant correlation between the two scores of ELA and CRT, where  $r=.114$ , despite the descriptive analysis indicating possible interaction between the two components. The anxiety experienced by the students or the lack of it might not be attributed to the presence or absence of culturally responsive teaching, rather might be due to aforementioned acculturation of the English language outside of the classroom. Although CRT could provide a familiar and positive social-emotional learning environment, it might not directly influence an English classroom in the university studied.

Another possible reason might be due to the English language anxiety experienced by the students in the classroom might be already lower due to the aforementioned acculturation to the English language outside of the classroom. The students do not encounter English specifically in their enrolled classroom, as the use of English is not only in the English classroom. The studied sample's campus consisted of a significant population of international student. This might induce opportunities to use English to communicate, whereby students who utilize English frequently will influence their level of familiarity of use as well as exposure to the language outside of the classroom. Students who are exposed and familiar to the language seemed to cope with English language anxiety better than students who are less exposed and unfamiliar to the English language outside of the classroom. Lack of exposure as well as use has been identified as a common reason for English language anxiety among students. Therefore, the studied sample might not experience ELA in general, thus the presence of CRT in the classroom might have not any interaction with the student's English language anxiety as it might already be at a medium to low level prior to the English classroom lesson.

The instruments used might also contribute to the weak to non-correlation of the two variables. The FLCAS generally measured experiences inside the classroom which might not reflect well the anxiety experienced by the students in the studied universities. The instrument was created to measure experiences of students in a foreign language classroom, where the constructs consisted of fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension and test anxiety. Test anxiety might be unrelated to students' specific experience in English language classroom as it is also a component of general anxiety (Tran, 2012) where a student's general anxiety, or the lack of it, might accentuate or minimize the scores of test anxiety items. The curriculum of English subjects in universities studied recently adopted full coursework as its assessment method, which minimized the use of summative tests and more on collaborative learning, as it is viewed more comprehensive in assessing a student's ability (Kniveton, 1996) and better predictor of long-term learning than exams (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Therefore, items relating to test anxiety might be irrelevant and does not respond to the CRT items, as CRT concerns itself mainly on the content material, teaching approaches and pedagogies which responds culturally to the students. Therefore, the language anxiety measurement could be replaced with a more relevant and comprehensive instrument.

### **Conclusion**

The study demonstrated notable findings regarding the level of anxiety in the two Malaysian universities, specifically on English language anxiety and culturally responsive teaching, whereby the studied sample displayed medium to low level of English anxiety, and moderate level of CRT experienced inside their university's English classroom. However, there were no strong and significant relationship between ELA and CRT inside the studied sample's

classroom. Students in both universities comprised of local and international students, and they must enrol in English proficiency courses as required by their program. English is the medium of instruction and for communication between the local and international students. Although the descriptives displayed classrooms with a medium to low anxiety level of English language anxiety also scored medium level of CRT experience inside the English language classroom, the correlation analysis did not demonstrate any correlation between the two components. The English language anxiety experienced by the students in the universities might be medium to low levels due to their age, whereby mature learners have better coping strategies in regards to facing English language anxiety (Latif, 2015). More research will be needed to fully understand the two phenomena's interaction during a classroom as both can emerge as forces which can possibly impact an English language multicultural classroom in a university.

The theoretical implication would be although ELA is an affective phenomenon, its complexity might not fully be addressed by CRT which contained social-emotional elements initially deemed to be appropriate to respond to the anxiety experienced by the university students during English classroom in a multicultural setting. The increasing globalization of English language also might make ELA more uncommon in universities in Malaysia, where English is the medium of instruction, and prior exposure to the English language through mass media, as well as better coping strategies employed among university students on English, might have affected the extent ELA experienced by the students. Practically, instructors should use CRT to navigate through the multicultural university English classroom, even if it might not directly address ELA. This is because the social emotional component could support learning as the literature made evident through its effect in enforcing learning experience of students using their background knowledge. Although CRT has good potential to be effective in a multicultural classroom, its effect on ELA might still need further investigation as the current frame of research and instrumentations needed refinements which could reflect a more modern and globalized multicultural English language classroom.

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