

## Exploring Language Anxiety among Primary School Students

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the anxiety level of primary students based on three subscales, communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and general anxiety. The questionnaire used in this study was adapted from the Foreign Language Class Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz for mean and percentages using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Version 18. The 140 primary students participated in this study and they were divided into two groups; beginner and intermediate. The results indicate that beginners had moderate anxiety while intermediate had low anxiety.

**Key words:** Anxiety, communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, general, primary students

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### INTRODUCTION

Language teaching involves the basic approaches, techniques and methods used in the classroom (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Language teaching methods make language learning easier, faster and more effective. Nevertheless, these approaches and techniques can cause failures in language teaching when they are incorrectly applied. Some teachers are not aware of the contributing factors of anxiety using methods such as making students speak forcefully or evaluating them in front of the classes without taking into consideration the need to create a non-threatening atmosphere for learning. Worde (2003) asserted that language teachers should provide a safe and welcoming classroom environment that students can feel relaxed, so that they are happy to learn. Ohata (2005) and Price (1991) agreed that teachers play an important roles in determining how teaching takes place in language classes. Their chosen approaches, techniques and methods determine how students react throughout the learning process. Teachers should always bear in mind that students come from different backgrounds and certain techniques need to be reformed to suit to their needs (Young, 1991) as some students view learning a second language as difficult (Hinkel, 2005; Aida, 1994) mentioned that anxiety could impede learning. According to Horwitz (2001) anxiety leads to frustration and discomfort in the classroom, making language learning a traumatic experience for some students. English has become an important language to master in Malaysia due to its importance. However, too much emphasize being placed on English proficiency negatively impacts on students. When nervous, students have poor performance and negative experiences. The negative

effect of anxiety impedes learning. Since, anxiety is a cause of students difficulties in language learning, it is believed that anxiety causes undeveloped language proficiency. Some students avoid developing language skills because of the anxiety they experience. Studies have been conducted to identify the factors that contribute to uneasiness among students in language learning environments. In recent years, there has been increased awareness of problems in language learning regarding anxiety and the damaging effects it has on students in Malaysia. Anxiety must be fully addressed to avoid negative educational outcomes, especially at the primary level which is examination oriented. Indirectly, anxiety affects students as it causes them to avoid participating in classroom activities. Since, anxiety hinders performance and achievement (Brown, 1987), it deserves further investigations. Due to the transformation of education system in Malaysia being aware of anxiety levels among primary students aids counteracting its effects. There are only a small number of studies conducted in Malaysia regarding anxiety among primary students. Due to its severe effects, anxiety should be taken seriously. Understanding anxiety is vital in facilitating the learning process. This study investigates the anxiety level of primary school students based on communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and general feelings of anxiety.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

#### Ease of use

**Participant:** This study had 140 participants who were 11 years old, year 5 students in Sekolah Kebangsaan Taman Perling, Johor which is a primary school in an

**Table 1: Distribution of participants**

Academic performance	Frequency	Percentage
Beginner	70	50
Intermediate	70	50
Total	140	100

**Table 2: Range for anxiety level**

Level	Mean
Low	From 1.00-2.33
Moderate	From 2.34-3.67
High	From 3.68-4.00

urban community in the Southern part of Malaysia. The participants were grouped into beginner and intermediate. The selection of participants was based on convenient sampling as this school practices streaming classes where pupils are grouped according to examination results. Participant distribution is shown in Table 1.

**Instrument and analysis:** The questionnaire used in this study was adapted from the Foreign Language Class Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz (1983, 2001) and consists of 33 items with subscales for communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and general feeling of anxiety. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section A covers student's background information and Section B includes the anxiety subscales. A 4-point Likert scale was used with following options 4-strongly agree, 3-agree, 2-disagree and 1-strongly disagree. Another scale which is 'Undecided' was discarded in order to avoid confusion due to the young age of the participants. This is similar to studies conducted by Azizi and Hartika (2007) and Rajab (1996) who also discard the 'Undecided' scale in order to obtain more reliable data. The data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Version 18 to find the mean and low, moderate and high frequency levels. Low frequency indicates low-level anxiety and high frequency indicates high-level anxiety. The anxiety range is shown in Table 2.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**The anxiety level based on communication apprehension:** According to the mean score in Table 3, the anxiety level for communication apprehension among beginner students was moderate ( $m = 2.86$ ) and for intermediate students was low ( $m = 2.10$ ). These findings show that beginner students have slightly higher anxiety levels than intermediate students. This might be because beginner students feel uncomfortable in communicating in English with their peers compared to intermediate students. These

**Table 3: Anxiety level based on academic performance**

Anxiety factors	Academic performance	Mean
Communication apprehension	Beginner	2.86-moderate
	Intermediate	2.10-low
Fear of negative evaluation	Beginner	2.94-moderate
	Intermediate	2.12-low
General feeling of anxiety	Beginner	2.31-low
	Intermediate	2.11-low

findings indicate that beginner students are self-conscious when speaking in English in front of others. This is seen in the results of the questionnaire in which a majority of students (41%) agreed with the statements it embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English language class (Table 4). Communication apprehension means students are apprehensive when using English because they worry that they are not clearly communicating. Beginner students in this study suffer from this as English is not their native language and they have a lack of exposure to English use in an authentic environment. In contrast, intermediate students experienced lower anxiety towards learning English as they feel more confident in communicating using English. Higher levels in education is usually associated with lower anxiety. This is supported by Wang (2008) study on speaking anxiety among Chinese EFL students. Wang's results demonstrated that <50% of beginner student's high levels of speaking anxiety and one of the primary causes of this anxiety are personality factors. It is possible that beginner students in this study also have personality problems or lower confidence levels. Several other studies support this conclusion. One of them is Liu (2007) whose findings from a case study in a Chinese university show that when students were singled out for presentations, they were very anxious and could not perform well in the target language. When students suffer from anxiety, they become tense and are not be able to perform their best when they are required to display their competence in a second language in front of others. Daly (1991) highlighted that students are more likely to become seriously worried and avoid any communication in language classes due to their communication apprehension. This is consistent with McCroskey (1982) who suggested that when a person feels apprehensive towards communication, they intentionally elude the situations whenever possible where communication is necessary. It can be concluded that high anxiety levels lead to poor performance. These findings reveal a connection between communication apprehension and language proficiency. Students in language classes may experience moderate levels of anxiety due to their lack of language skills. However, student's anxiety decrease as they become proficient in the target language.

Table 4: Selected items on communicative apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and general of anxiety

Statements	Distribution on responses					Mean
	SA (%)	A (%)	DA (%)	SD (%)	Mean	
It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English language class	13, 9.0	57, 41.0	53, 38.0	17, 12.0	2.52	0.82
I am afraid that the students will laugh at me when I speak using English language	14, 10.0	71, 51.0	40, 28.0	15, 11.0	2.40	0.81
It would not bother me at all to take more English language	17, 12.0	52, 37.0	49, 35.0	22, 16.0	2.54	0.90
I do not understand why some people get so upset over English language classes	24, 17.0	82, 59.0	27, 19.0	75.0	2.12	0.74
I would probably feel comfortable using English language with other native speakers	16, 11.0	76, 54.0	40, 29.0	86.0	2.28	0.74

**Anxiety level based on fear of negative evaluation:** This study's findings indicate that the mean score of beginner group was 2.94 which shows moderate anxiety unlike the intermediate group who had low anxiety with a mean of 2.12 (Table 3). The results specified that beginner students in language classes were afraid of receiving negative feedback from classmates and teachers. This leads to students becoming afraid to make mistakes and lose face in front of their classmates and teachers. As stated by Price (1991), evaluation from others in classroom environments from teachers and peers causes language students to feel uncomfortable in class. The feeling of being watched by others makes students feel insecure and causes them to be unable to perform in the classroom. This is supported by the results of this study which showed that 51% of the students stated that I am afraid that the students will laugh at me when I speak using English language (Table 4). Beginner students were apprehensive about how their classmates evaluate them and worried that they would make mistakes in the classroom. The results show that there are language barriers between the two groups, as less proficient students were more fearful of making mistakes compared to more proficient students. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) stated that fear of negative evaluation is closely related to communication apprehension. Students with a fear of negative evaluation are worried that others might not understand them in a second language. In addition, Jones (2004) strongly agreed that students feel anxious of making mistakes in front of the class. Ely (1986) further supported that when anxiety levels are high among students, they reduce their participation in the classroom to lessen their exposure to criticism. Even in small groups, students feel anxious for fear of negative evaluations from their peers, resulting in them becoming quiet and reticent (Ohata, 2005). Students try to avoid challenging situations in a language class since fear of negative evaluation revolves around error corrections (Worde, 203). Fear of negative evaluation affects students by threatening their self-confidence. The fear of evaluation makes them feel intimidated, especially when others speak better than they do. This is because speaking activities in language classes unconsciously promote an environment of proficiency evaluation. As a result, students feel that they are constantly embarrassing themselves and causing them

to even make mistakes on questions that they know the answer to Price (1991). According to Cheng (2002), there is a significant difference in anxiety levels between intermediate and beginner groups. He reported that pupils from beginner groups had higher levels of anxiety compared to intermediate groups. He also said that test and time pressures increase student anxiety. Beginner groups are more sensitive than intermediate groups during testing which corresponds to the findings of this study. However, a study by Vogel and Collins (2006) demonstrated that students with high anxiety and students with low anxiety showed lower academic performance. Moreover, students with moderate levels of anxiety performed the best which contradicts the findings of this study.

**General feeling of anxiety:** The results of this study show that all students, irrespective of academic performance have low anxiety levels (Table 3). The findings indicated low anxiety levels among both beginner and intermediate groups. The results revealed that both groups mostly disagreed with negative statements with regards to general feelings of anxiety pertaining to language class, test evaluation, experiences or emotions. For example, statements like it would not bother me at all to take more English language classes (37%) I do not understand why some people get so upset over English language classes (59%) and I would probably feel comfortable using English language with other native speakers (54%, Table 4) did not bother participants at all. Price (1991) supports the results of this study as she claimed evaluations greatly effects participant behaviour. Evaluations in language classes are important for determining self-esteem. Price further stressed that experience contributed to general anxiety levels. Price's study found that anxiety manifested based on things experienced in language classes. Those who had negative experiences in previous language classes were likely to develop anxiety as soon as they entered the classroom. Therefore, experiences is important for determining first impressions during language learning. As a result, students who have positive attitudes towards language classrooms would generate lower anxiety. In accordance with the results of this study, low anxiety levels indicated that both groups experienced good first impressions for

language learning which stabilized their anxiety levels. Similarly, most students in this study have been exposed to English since primary one when they were 7 years old and most of them live in urban areas. Some participants came from high socio-economic status families and were exposed to English through tuition classes and English use at home. These pupils had more opportunities to practice English, instigating lower anxiety levels. Second language students at the beginner level have lower proficiency levels, resulting in higher levels of anxiety. However, these high anxiety levels declined as proficiency increased (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993). This may be because most students in Malaysia are enrolled in extra tuition classes after school hours to increase academic performance.

### CONCLUSION

Based on this study, students from beginner groups showed moderate feelings of anxiety while students from intermediate groups experienced low feelings of anxiety towards language learning in the classroom. There was a great emphasis on anxiety among students due to English proficiency. The findings indicate that as student's become more proficient, they become less anxious. Therefore, students should be taught to identify suitable learning strategies to overcome nervousness to improve performance. Teachers need to guide students to develop their own learning preferences and strategies to reduce student anxiety levels and improve academic performance.

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