

# Understanding Second Language Anxiety: Feedback from ESL Learners in TVET

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**Abstract** Anxiety in language classrooms has been acknowledged by local scholars as detrimental to Malaysian learners' English proficiency. Part of the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions' mission is to provide immediate workforce of holistic and great communicators. However, language learning anxiety lent support to the poor English performance among learners and is misaligned with the vision by the government as stipulated in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015–2025 (Higher Education). The blueprint was developed in 2013 to keep the education system in line with the global trends to help prepare Malaysian youth to survive in the rapidly-changing future. One of highlights is the government's aspiration for high bilingual proficiency among the people. Thus, understanding the types of anxiety in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms is pertinent to customised efforts for pedagogical intervention. Adapting the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), the current study aims to investigate the factors of learning anxiety in ESL classrooms among 236 respondents from various TVET institutions from the Southern states of Malaysia. The questionnaire was distributed online with the items reflective of three types of anxiety in ESL classrooms: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Findings of the study indicated that the respondents suffered from anxiety across the components which confirm the perpetual concern by educators over the reasons why most Malaysian learners still grapple with English proficiency despite years of learning it in formal settings. The study also revealed interesting insights from a psychological perspective by reporting constant anxiety about speaking and presenting in the presence of an audience as well as anxiety when receiving negative feedback from teachers and peers. Implications of the study for practice, subsequent research, and policy are presented with some recommendations for future research to mitigate language anxiety in ESL

classrooms.

**Keywords** Anxiety, Communication Apprehension, Test Anxiety, Fear of Negative Evaluation, TVET

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## 1. Introduction

Language learners experience varying degrees of language anxiety when forced to express themselves in front of others which is quite a common phenomenon, generally among less competent non-native speakers. According to Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) [1], learners may enjoy speaking in a target language and be strongly motivated to do so, but they may experience anxiety when speaking in public that obstructs successful performance in a language classroom. Spielberg et al. (1983) [2] describe anxiety as the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an increased activity in the autonomic nervous system. Learners did not start language learning with anxiety; instead, they develop attitudes and feelings toward learning a new language after exposure to target language situations (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1989) [3]. Tuncer and Doğan (2015) [4] argue that negative experiences may lead to a second or foreign language anxiety of learners. As these negative experiences prevail, anxiety will arise constantly and will subsequently result in poor performance and anxious learning.

Part of the mission of Technical and Vocational, Educational and Training (TVET) institutions has been to become immediate workforce providers. This aim aligns with Malaysian Higher Education institutions that are accountable for preparing job-ready graduates who possess holistic outcomes as described in the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013–2025) (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015) [5]. However, the demands of industries require

learners to attain certain skills, especially communication skills. This demand is among the major issues for TVET educators who are tasked to prepare their graduates for employability (Abdullah & Majid, 2013; Sada et al., 2015; Sulaiman & Ambotang, 2017) [6-8]. Furthermore, TVET institutions' low academic requirements for admission reflect the general differences in academic background between TVET and university students, which indicates that poor command of English is critical among TVET learners (Ismail & Abiddin, 2014) [9].

Anxiety is among the factors that contribute to TVET learners' low proficiency in English language (Tati et al., 2016) [10]. Learners' level of anxiety might vary accordingly, and they might be anxious due to their incompetence with the unfamiliar language that they are required to learn. The situation thus leads to poor language performance. By applying the model of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) of Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) [1], this study aims to identify the factors that contribute to learners' second language classroom anxiety.

### 1.1. Literature Review

As defined by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) [1], foreign language anxiety is based on three factors related to performance anxiety within academic and social contexts. These factors are 1) communication apprehension (CA), 2) test anxiety, and 3) fear of negative evaluation. McCroskey (1977) [11] stated that the construct of CA is relevant to foreign language anxiety due to its emphasis on interpersonal interactions. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) [1] defined CA as a type of shyness that comes with communicating with other people, and this situation is characterized by anxiety. Gordon and Sarason (1955) [12] support the definition of test anxiety as a type of performance anxiety resulting from fear of failure. Fear of negative evaluation is not limited to test-taking situations but may occur in any social or evaluative situations, such as job interviews and speaking in a foreign language class (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986) [1].

#### 1.1.1. Communication Apprehension

According to McCroskey, Daly, and Sorensen (1976) [13], in Beatty and Pascual-Ferrá (2015, pg. 1) [14], communication apprehension (CA) refers to the predisposition to avoid communication, if possible, or a suffering from anxiety reactions when communication is inevitable. Saberirad et al. (2016) [15] identified the use of English as foreign language (EFL) textbooks toward Iranian learners' willingness to communicate, CA, and self-perceived communication competence. They discovered that increasing the fear of communication decreased the willingness to communicate. This relationship showed the negative correlation between

learners' willingness to communicate and their CA. Noor et al. (2015) [16] discovered that most undergraduate students from public universities in Malaysia experience a high level of CA when learning English. Furthermore, Aeni et al. (2017) [17] indicated that learners were generally apprehensive during EFL oral communication. Their research concluded that learners showed the highest apprehension for public speaking, and learners with high apprehension displayed more anxiety symptoms than those with moderate and low level of communication apprehension. These findings are consistent with Rafek et al. (2014) [18] that found a negative relationship between speaking performance and CA, as speaking has been proven the most stressful task.

#### 1.1.2. Test Anxiety

Highly test-anxious learners divide their attention between self- and task-relevant variables during task performance; however, low-test-anxious learners fully focused their attention on the task (Wine, 1971) [19]. In addition, highly test-anxious learners typically performed more poorly on tests than low-test anxious learners, especially when the tests are administered under stressful, evaluative conditions. Moreover, new language learners are more anxious than those who are more familiar with the test-taking process in academic environment according to Dordi Nejad et al. (2011) [20]. They discovered that test anxiety negatively affects Iranian university students' academic performance. In addition, Brady, Hard, and Gross (2018) [21] tested first year students' test anxiety and discovered that they experienced a strong sense of test anxiety and are less certain to perform well.

Nonetheless, Cakici (2016) [22] found no link between learners' test anxiety and their language achievement. Teachers in the EFL classroom should be responsible for reducing test-taking and language learning anxiety among the learners in a classroom setting (Cakici, 2016) [22]. However, Thomas, Cassidy, and Heller (2017) [23] revealed that cognitive test anxiety and use of emotion-focused coping strategies were significant predictors of students' long-term academic outcomes. Their results informed that test anxiety influences long-term academic outcomes and highlighted the importance of developing an intervention model that could support learners' emotional regulations to mediate learners' test anxiety. Zwettler et al. (2018) [24] investigated learners' social identification with test anxiety but discovered the negative relation between learners' test anxiety and their social identification. They argued that learners with test anxiety might fear negative evaluations from their peers due to insufficient grades.

#### 1.1.3. Fear of Negative Evaluation

Continual evaluation by the only fluent speaker, who is the teacher, in any second and/or foreign language classroom can make the learners acutely sensitive to the

evaluations of their peers (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986) [1]. A study of anxiety among high school students in China by Zhao (2007) [25] determined that fear of negative evaluation was the most prominent cause of anxiety. Meanwhile, Yamat and Bidabadi (2012) [26] discovered that freshmen students feared being negatively evaluated and suffered anxiety in learning a new language. This finding is supported by Amiri and Ghonsooly (2015) [27] who ranked the factors of language anxiety among freshmen medical students and revealed that fear of negative evaluation ranked first among the components of FLCAS. According to Gopang, Bughio, and Pathan (2018) [28], however, fear of negative evaluation ranked second among the anxiety factors. Their paper suggested that teachers should avoid constant negative evaluation on learners' performance to increase learners' confidence.

Moreover, Akkar and Ahouari-Idri (2015) [29] revealed that fear of negative evaluation is a source of hindrance in language learning. They discovered that most participants believed that fear of negative evaluation detrimentally affected their oral performance. However, they learned that more confident learners slowly overcome their fear of negative evaluation as they learned to speak better English. They concluded the seriousness of the issue, which many EFL/ESL researchers have yet to address. In addition, Tzoannopoulou (2016) [30] indicated that learners were characterized by their strong evaluation apprehension and that the sources of their fear included receiving negative judgements, disapproval, making mistakes, and leaving unfavorable impression on others.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This investigation adopted a quantitative design using survey questionnaire to answer the research question. A

total of 236 respondents from various TVET institutions participated in the survey. The respondents came from various TVET backgrounds, such as Polytechnics, Community Colleges, and GIATMARA all over the Southern State of Malaysia. The respondents were between 18 to 21 years old. Over 200 of the respondents spoke Bahasa Melayu as a first language at home, whereas the others spoke English and other languages (e.g. Mandarin, Tamil, Cantonese, and Minangkabau). The respondents were chosen via purposive sampling from the pool of students who had enrolled in the Communicative English module during their first semester with a minimum grade C.

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) [1] Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was adapted for use in the present study. The items were translated to enhance respondents' comprehension of the study (Subasi, 2010) [31] and were categorized into a 5-point Likert scale with 5 being strongly agree, 4 – agree, 3 – neither agree nor disagree, 2 – disagree, and 1 being strongly disagree. The term "foreign language" was changed to "second language" to fit the purpose of this study. The respondents answered questions with respect to their background, such as their gender, age, race, and languages used at home.

All 236 respondents answered the survey via Google Form link designed by the main author and sent to other English course lecturers with specific instructions for their students. An online survey was chosen to gather immediate response of students from different locations for its relatively low costs (Teo, 2013) [32]. The link remained active for three days and closed when the number of respondents reached 236. The data collected were analyzed manually and tabulated as indicated in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale

No.	Item	SD %	D %	N %	A %	SA %
1.	I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my English language class.	7.6	19.1	37.3	23.7	12.3
2.	I do not worry about making mistakes in language class.	7.2	25.8	31.4	22.9	12.7
3.	I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class.	11.9	15.3	30.1	28.4	14.4
4.	It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language.	12.3	20.3	30.1	21.2	16.1
5.	It wouldn't bother me at all to take more foreign language classes.	7.6	16.1	33.5	23.3	19.5
6.	During language class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.	17.4	20.3	33.1	19.9	9.3
7.	I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am.	5.1	8.5	27.1	36.4	22.9
8.	I am usually at ease during tests in my language class.	3.0	17.4	41.9	21.6	16.1
9.	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class.	6.8	13.1	30.9	27.5	21.6
10.	I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class.	5.9	5.1	25.0	29.7	34.3
11.	I don't understand why some people get so upset over foreign language classes.	5.1	5.9	39.0	27.5	22.5
12.	In language class, I can get so nervous that I forget things I know.	10.2	14.8	26.3	31.8	16.9
13.	It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class.	12.3	15.7	30.9	28.0	13.1
14.	I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers.	8.5	27.1	42.8	11.0	10.6
15.	I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.	4.7	11.4	34.3	28.8	20.8
16.	Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it	5.5	11.0	35.2	33.1	15.3
17.	I often feel like not going to my language class.	38.6	28.0	20.8	5.5	7.2
18.	I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class.	5.9	25.0	21.1	37.8	10.2
19.	I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	16.5	25.0	9.2	37.4	11.9
20.	I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in language class.	11.4	22.5	25.8	23.7	16.5
21.	The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get.	12.7	22.5	33.1	22.0	9.7
22.	I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for language class.	5.5	18.6	37.7	25.4	12.7
23.	I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do.	3.8	6.8	29.7	30.9	28.8
24.	I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students.	8.1	19.9	31.4	27.1	13.6
25.	Language class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.	9.3	19.5	38.1	20.8	12.3
26.	I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes.	12.3	16.9	39.8	23.7	7.2
27.	I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class.	10.6	21.2	35.6	25.0	7.6
28.	When I am on my way to language class, I feel very relaxed.	1.7	14.4	40.3	30.9	12.7
29.	I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says.	5.9	14.8	36.9	27.5	14.8
30.	I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak a foreign language.	11.4	15.7	38.6	25.0	9.3
31.	I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language.	11.4	18.2	27.5	25.0	17.8
32.	I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language.	7.2	17.4	47.9	18.6	8.9
33.	I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	7.2	11.0	27.5	32.3	22.0

### 3. Findings and Discussions

The present study was designed to identify the factors that contribute to ESL learners' classroom anxiety. The items presented are reflective of communication apprehension, test-anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation in the second language classroom. Table 1 reports the responses to all the FLCAS items. The acronyms are SD for strongly disagree, D for disagree, N for neither agree nor disagree, A for agree, and SA for strongly agree. All the statements are indicative of foreign language anxiety.

Respondents who experienced anxiety in learning English as a second language endorsed FLCAS items to be indicative of speech anxiety such as "I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class" (49.1%), "I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students" (40.7), and "I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class" (32.6). They rejected statements such as "I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class" (48%). Horwitz et al. (1986) believed that anxious learners lapsing into deep self-consciousness when instructed to speak the foreign language in public is consistent with CA, whereby the learners fear that they will not entirely understand language input. Anxious learners endorsed statements such as "I get nervous when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language" (37.3) and "I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says" (42.3). This finding concurs with the study by Horwitz et al. (1986) [25] that reports anxious learners' perception as follows: for them to comprehend the target language, they must understand every word that is spoken. These findings are also congruent with those of Rafek et al. (2014), Noor et al. (2015), and Aeni et al. (2017) [18,16,17], which indicate that speaking is the most stressful task in learning a second language.

Anxious learners responded to statements such as "I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class" (64%) and "I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance" (54.3%), which proved that learners have test anxiety. Respondents rejected the statement "I am usually at ease during tests in my language class" with 20.4% disagreeing to the statement, whereas 41.9% of responders were unsure of their feelings. The findings in this study are therefore consistent with previous research. Aligned with the findings from Brady, Hard, and Gross (2018) [21], freshmen language learners (or in this case Communicative English course learners) were more prone to test anxiety than learners who are more familiar with the language tests (Workplace English course). Dordi Nejad et al. (2011) [20] were among the first to discover that new language learners had more anxiety toward tests and tasks than those of higher-level language learners.

Anxious students feared being less competent than other students or being negatively evaluated by the latter. They

reported the following: "I keep thinking that other students are better at languages than I am" (59.3%); "I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do" (59.7 %); "Language class moves so quickly, I worry about getting left behind" (33.1%); "It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class" (41.1%); and "I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language" (42.8%). Thus, they may skip class, over study, or seek refuge in the last row to avoid the humiliation or embarrassment of being called on to speak. This result is consistent with Tzoannopoulou (2016) [31], who indicated that learners' fears include receiving negative judgements, disapproval, making mistakes, and leaving unfavorable impressions on others.

Anxious students are afraid of committing mistakes in the foreign language. They endorsed the statement, "I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make" (49.3%) but disagreed with "I do not worry about making mistakes in language class" (33%). These students seemed to feel constantly tested and perceive every correction as a failure. Fear of negative evaluation has been proven a prominent factor in language anxiety (Amiri & Ghonsooly, 2015; Akkar & Ahouari-Idri, 2015; Gopang, Bughio & Pathan, 2018) [28,30,29]. They believed that constant negative evaluation from teachers and peers could lower learners' confidence and hinder them from improving their English proficiency.

### 4. Conclusions

This study aimed at determining the factors affecting learners' language anxiety and subsequently indicated that the identified factors are aligned with the FLCAS of Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) [1]. The model includes 1) communication apprehension, 2) test anxiety, and 3) fear of negative evaluation. TVET institution learners were affected by language anxiety as shown in the results and are proven to be anxious language learners. Respondents were often anxious about speaking, performing in front of others, and receiving negative feedback from teachers and peers. The following implications suggest how the study has been important to practice, subsequent research, and policy. The findings of this study could steer decisions about pedagogical interventions by ESL teachers in TVET institutions. By realizing the effects of students' reactions and responses in the classroom, teachers could possibly mitigate the ESL learners' anxiety. ESL learners could also rely on the findings to comprehend the causes of their language anxiety by going through the provoking statements of FLCAS. Doing so would enable them to identify their own learning strategies so as to handle their anxieties and subsequently, it results in a greater achievement in the language classroom. In order to investigate the causes of each factor in detail, future studies may include a series of

classroom observation and achievement tests. The presentation of extrinsic rewards to successful oral presenters could also be studied if it can become a trigger to help increase ESL learners' achievement. Moreover, participation from TVET institution administration such as the Department of Polytechnic and Community Colleges (JPPKK), *Majlis Amanah Rakyat* (MARA) and the National Youth Training Institute (IKBN) may help to materialize solutions to manage language learning anxiety among learners through adequate enforcement of policies.

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