

## THE ROLE OF GENDER IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING ANXIETY AMONG TERTIARY STUDENTS

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### Abstract

Anxiety is one of the crucial factors that influence second language learning. The feeling of stress, anxiety and worry while engaging in a target language could hamper students' learning regardless of gender. In relation to this, this study aimed to examine the role of gender in second language learning among tertiary students in Malaysia. Data analysis on the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) items were analysed using SPSS 22. Descriptive analysis, Independent Sample T-test and Pearson Correlation were used in the study. The findings revealed that male students were slightly more anxious than female students. The study also indicated that there was no significant relationship between gender and language learning anxiety. However, anxiety factors such as fear of negative evaluation and communication speech apprehension were significantly related to gender.

**Keywords:** second language learning; anxiety; gender differences;

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

English is a second language as stipulated in Malaysia's educational policies. It is a major language of law as well as an important language of education, government, business and the media (Yamat, Fisher & Rich, 2014). English is a compulsory subject in primary and secondary schools. It is also a pre-requisite subject to enter university. Though years have passed since the implementation of English language in school, researches have shown Malaysian students' shaky grasp of the English language. Numerous studies have attempted to explain why Malaysian students have constantly failed to achieve a reasonable competency level in English (Azmi & Maniam, 2013). One of the major issues of English language learning difficulties is the emergence of anxiety (Darmi & Albion, 2012; Rafek, Ramlli & Hasni, 2015).

The issue of anxiety in language learning has been extensively studied for its substantial impacts on language learners. Language anxiety is defined as "a distinctive complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986). It is always associated with subjective

feeling of tension, uneasiness, nervousness, apprehension, disappointment, self-doubt and fear (Scovels, 1978). This indicates that learners may encounter different level of learning anxiety based on different factors such as age, knowledge of the language, personality and behaviors of individual language learners in unique language learning environments (Horwitz et al, 1986).

As anxiety in language learning consistently hinders learners from learning or acquiring second or foreign language, the question about whether gender is one of the factors that affect language learning is on the rise. According to Dewaele, Petrides and Furnham (2008), gender has emerged as a primary explanatory variable in sociolinguistic and sociopsychological research. Several studies (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Huang, 2004) highlighted that gender plays a substantial role in language anxiety and learners' motivation. Researchers have revealed that males and females do have differences in language learning (Baxter, 1999; Pappamihiel, 2001). Male students have generally been found to be more adept than females in language learning (Wong, 2009) and female students are usually more anxious than males in English classes (Rezazadeh & Tavakoli, 2009). In this regard, males and females experience and process their feeling differently because "males and females have somewhat different patterns of lateralization, with males being more left hemisphere dominant than females" (Banich, 1997, p. 306-312). In view of the gender differences as one of the crucial factors that affect language learning anxiety, this study seeks to examine the role of gender in second language learning among tertiary students in Malaysia. Based on the objective, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What is the level of anxiety towards language learning between male and female students?
2. What is the level of anxiety towards the four factors of anxiety between male and female students?

Is there any relationship between gender and language anxiety?

## **2.0 BACKGROUND/LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Language Anxiety and its Factors**

Language anxiety has been regarded as an essential affective variable in the language learning process. A considerable amount of literature has been published on language anxiety over the past three decades. Language anxiety is attributable to different factors. Horwitz et al (1986) were the first to treat foreign language anxiety as a separate and distinct phenomenon particular to language learning. They had identified three factors of foreign language anxiety in the language classroom, namely communication apprehension, fear of evaluation and test anxiety. According to Horwitz et al (1986), communication apprehension is "a type of shyness characterized as fear of, or anxiety about, communicating with people" (p.127). An example of this is when students have difficulty in understanding the teacher's instruction. Fear of negative evaluation is "the apprehension about other's evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations". An example of this is when students are afraid of correction and making mistakes and test anxiety is "the type of performance anxiety resulting from a fear of failure in an academic evaluating setting" (Horwitz, et al, 1986, p.127) An example for this is when students are afraid of failing the class.

Young (1991) identified six potential factors of language anxiety. The six factors are 1) personal and interpersonal anxieties, 2) learner beliefs about language learning, 3) instructor beliefs about language teaching, 4) instructor-learner interactions, 5) classroom procedures, and 6) language testing. Young (1992) further reported other factors which also contribute to students' language anxiety. The additional factors include students' own coping skills, motivation, attention, self-concept, the specific teaching methodology learner experiences and cultural factors.

## 2.2 Language Anxiety and Gender

Gender has been regarded as a contributing factor for differences in language leaning anxiety. As mentioned by Wicks-Nelson and Israel (2006), female students feel more anxious than male due to many factors such as confidence and proficiency, security and superiority. This is supported by Öztürk and Gürbüz's (2013) study that involved 255 female and 158 male intermediate students in a Turkish University. The results of the study showed significant differences between genders in terms of speaking anxiety levels. Female students demonstrated a moderate level of anxiety whereas male students experienced speaking anxiety at a low level. Female students also tended to be more anxious than male students while speaking English and this could have originated from females' fear of negative evaluation in a higher level. Along the same lines, Park and French (2013) conducted a study to examine gender differences in language anxiety which included 948 university students learning English in Korea. The results indicated that females experienced higher anxiety levels compared to males. A recent research of Tercan and Dikilitas (2015) conducted in Turkish also reported that female students experienced higher anxiety levels in more aspects of speaking compared to males, in English as a foreign language (EFL) context.

Contrary to the aforementioned studies, Awan, Azher, Anwar, and Naz (2010) reported that male undergraduates are more anxious than females among 149 undergraduates from the University of Sargodha in Pakistan. The result shows that female undergraduates are more confident and have greater ability to learn a new language and cope with the feelings of anxiety and nervousness. However, male students are more inclined to hesitate and feel anxious in the language classroom. Similarly, Kitano (2001) investigated gender differences in language anxiety among 212 students from two U.S. universities who were enrolled in Japanese courses. It was reported that male students tend to be more anxious while learning a second language and males are more apprehensive in speaking as they perceive their speech to be less competent than females. In the same vein, Tsai (2013) examined gender differences in language anxiety among 256 high school students in Taiwan. The results also showed that male students had higher degree of foreign language classroom anxiety and test anxiety than female students.

Yet, another stream of studies failed to find significant gender differences in language anxiety. Piechurska-Kuciel (2012) found no support for gender differences among 621 participants in secondary school in Poland. The results revealed that males and females do not vary in their levels of language anxiety. Gaibani and FadilElmenfi's (2014) findings indicated that gender has positive relationship with the public speaking anxiety; however, there is no significant impact of gender on public speaking anxiety. Their findings are in accordance with Matsuda and Gobel (2004) who found that gender does not have a significant effect on the overall anxiety. In the same pursuit, Dewaele and Ip (2013) also did not find significant gender differences among 73 secondary school Chinese students in Hong Kong.

In the Malaysian context, Rafek, Ramly, and Hasni (2014) investigated the level of learners' fear of evaluation among tertiary students in a public university who enrolled for English language classes. Their study which involved 22 males and 34 females indicated that males responded negatively during evaluation. They were more anxious than females when they sat for the five types of tests throughout the semester which included aspects of speaking, listening, grammar, reading and writing. This might due to the fact that male students do not want to look 'stupid' especially in front of the opposite gender and they want to 'maintain face'. They further investigated the anxiety level of learners' communicative apprehension in terms of gender among 25 males and 30 females in one of the public universities in Malaysia. Their findings revealed that female students experienced higher anxiety level as compared to male students. The differences could be due to the factors of confidence, security and superiority. On the contrary, Siew (2014) reported that there is no significant difference in ESL speaking anxiety between 88 male and 149 female tertiary students at a Malaysian university.

Taken together, the role of gender in language anxiety research has yielded conflicting results. Even though some of the language anxiety researches have not been shown to be gender-dependent (Dewaele & Ip, 2013), the impact of gender has been proved to be a significant factor in the language learning process as gender “denotes special attributes and characteristics of males and females and thus can be inferred that gender is learned through the process of socialization” (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2012, p. 231). Therefore, whether English as second language (ESL) students learning English will gain or counteract the learning efficiency due to their gender differences has become a significant issue of ESL instruction.

### **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Respondents**

The study involved first year Diploma students who enrolled for English language classes (ELC120: Integrated Language Skills: Listening). The respondents were randomly selected from various faculties such as Faculty of Engineering, Public Administration and Business Management in Universiti Teknologi Mara, Sarawak. The respondents involved in this study comprised 56 male and 93 female students. It is compulsory for all students to enroll for the English classes for the first three semesters in order to fulfil the university course requirement.

#### **3.2 Research Instrument and Data Analysis**

This study utilised quantitative research methodology where the instrument used to collect the data was a questionnaire. The questionnaire was adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) which was developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). FLCAS is based on the analysis of potential sources of anxiety in a language classroom. Numerous research studies had tested and used FLCAS to investigate both foreign language learning anxiety (Matsuda & Gobel, 2001) and second language learning anxiety (Chan, AinNadzimah&Nurkarimah, 2012). Hence, the extensive use of FLCAS shows that it is reliable to measure students’ learning anxiety level in all language learning (Kondo & Young, 2004).

The data obtained from the questionnaire was presented in the form of descriptive statistics which was analysed through SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) version 22. Independent sample t-test was employed to compute the means of two groups for the level of anxiety towards English language learning. Pearson Correlation Sig (2-tailed) was also employed to determine whether there is a significant difference between gender and language learning anxiety.

### **4.0 RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents the results of the study with regard to the level of anxiety towards language learning between male and female students. As can be perceived through the descriptive statistics (Table 1), the comparison of mean scores in terms of gender revealed that male students ( $m=2.21$ ) were more anxious than female students ( $m=2.13$ ) in language learning. However, the result of the t-test explains that there was no significant difference between the male and female students ( $t=1.076$ ,  $p=0.283$ ).

**Table 1 Students' level of anxiety towards language learning between male and female**

Gender	Males		Females		t-value	Pattern of variation
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation		
Overall						
Language Anxiety	2.21	0.455	2.13	0.378	1.076	Male>Female

The findings of this study supported Elaheh Tahernezhad, Fatemeh Behjat, Ali Asghar Kargar's (2014) study that there was no significant difference between male and female students although males scored a slightly higher mean than females. The finding is also consistent with previous studies that displayed non-significant result of language learning anxiety level portrayed by both genders (Dewaele and Ip, 2013; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004; Piechurska-Kuciel, 2012; Siew, 2014). Both male and female students were aware of their own language performance and encountered similar signs of anxiety in the language class regardless of gender (Mahfuzah Rafek, 2009). This finding therefore indicates that difference in gender did not influence the level of anxiety.

To examine the male and female students' level of anxiety towards the four factors of anxiety, t-test was run as shown in Table 2. The comparison in terms of gender reveals that male students scored higher mean for fear of negative evaluation, communication speech apprehension, fear of test and anxiety of English classes. Nevertheless, the result of the t-test as shown in Table 2 explains that gender did not have significant impact on the four factors of language anxiety, except for the fear of negative evaluation ( $t=2.217$ ,  $p=.028$ ) and communication speech apprehension ( $t=2.777$ ,  $p=.006$ ).

**Table 2 Male and female students' level of anxiety towards the four factors of anxiety**

Factors of Anxiety	Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation	t- value	Pattern of variation
Fear of Negative Evaluation	Male	2.80	0.791	2.217*	Male>Female
	Female	2.55	0.650		
Communication Speech Apprehension	Male	2.87	0.581	2.777**	Male>Female
	Female	2.64	0.496		
Fear of Test	Male	3.02	0.489	1.808	Male>Female
	Female	2.87	0.542		
Anxiety of English Classes	Male	3.09	0.371	1.010	Male>Female

The data above shows that male students reacted strongly to negative criticisms from others and were more likely to fear losing their pride or masculinity in front of others in a language classroom. From a social perspective, they could be regarded as preserving their masculinity in front of others since being deemed as less intelligent in front of others due to their lack of competence in language is a negative experience (Rafek et al., 2014). Meanwhile, for the factor of Communication Speech Apprehension, it was found that male respondents felt more anxious when they were required to produce speech or speak in front of others compared to female respondents. This is because they perceived themselves as less competent in learning a new language as well as having low self-confidence towards mastering it (Elaldi, 2016; Kitano, 2001; Yan & Horwitz 2008; Zhang, 2001). In contrast, females have always been perceived as naturally-inclined for language learning (Kobayashi, 2002; Yan & Horwitz, 2008). They are described as being more confident in addition to being more talented in the domain of language learning (Riffat-un-Nisa Awan, Musarrat Azher, Muhammad

Nadeem Anwar & Anjum Naz, 2010; Yan & Horwitz, 2008; Kitano, 2001; Na, 2007). The male respondents viewed themselves as not competent enough to be effective communicators in the target language, therefore they may exhibit their lack of confidence when speaking in front of others and this caused them to feel anxious in committing errors in front of other people when they spoke or were expected to do so (Bracken & Crain, 1994; Elaldi, 2016; Awan et al., 2010; Williams & Andrade, 2008;).

To further examine the relationship between gender and language learning anxiety, Pearson correlation test was run as shown in Table 4. The results indicate that students' language learning anxiety was negatively correlated with gender ( $r = -.088$ ,  $p = .283$ ). The findings of the study also reveal that there was a statistically significant relationship between gender and communication speech apprehension ( $r = -.213$ ,  $p = .006$ ) and fear of negative evaluation ( $r = -.173$ ,  $p = .028$ ).

**Table 3 Correlation between gender and the factors of language learning anxiety**

		Overall Anxiety Level	Fear of Negative Evaluation	Communication Speech Apprehension	Fear of Test	Anxiety of English Classes
Gender	Pearson Correlation	-.088	-.173*	-.213**	-.140	-.081
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.283	.028	.006	.072	.314

\*Significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

\*\*Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The findings of this study are in line with Taghinezhad, Abdollahzadeh and Dastpakand Rezaei's (2014) study that there was no statistically significant relationship between gender and language anxiety. It is also in accordance with the finding of Nahavandi and Mukundan (2013) who examined the effect of gender on Iranian EFL learners' anxiety and found that gender did not affect learners' language anxiety significantly. Nevertheless, there was positive relationship between gender and the two factors, fear of negative evaluation and communication speech apprehension. As mentioned above, males were found to display a higher level of anxiety towards negative evaluation from their surroundings due to being scared of humiliation and losing their pride in front of audiences (Rafek et al., 2014). Furthermore, males were more anxious to speak in front of others because they perceived themselves as naturally lacking competence to perform well in communicative tasks compared to female learners (Bracken & Crain, 1994; Elaldi, 2016; Awan et al., 2010; Williams & Andrade, 2008).

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

The study shows that in general, gender did not directly contribute to language learning anxiety among tertiary students in the context of a local educational institution in Sarawak, Malaysia. There were two main factors of language learning anxiety significantly linked to gender, which were fear of negative evaluation and communication speech apprehension. Anxiety reducing strategies in the language learning process should be studied in-depth so that instructors can apply effective strategies in their daily context and aid students to overcome the feeling of anxiety. Additionally, language instructors have the role of guiding and aiding students' transitions from their position as beginners to proficient language users in their language learning process (Elaldi, 2016). Motivation from the instructor is crucial to lessen the feelings of anxiety among learners. As teachers or instructors, they should create a less threatening environment where learners can learn better and comfortably so that they are willing to participate throughout the learning process (Wu, 2010). The fear of negative evaluation from peers emphasizes the need of instructor's motivation and dedication in ensuring

positive learning time for all learners. It would be beneficial to all parties if further investigation on anxiety combating strategies employed by males and females respondents in their language learning process is carried out, especially in terms of communicative tasks which require learners to produce oral output in front of audiences. The findings of this study could potentially help language instructors to create a low anxiety classroom atmosphere, which in turn can result in better learning outcomes.

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