

The Significant Difference in Language Anxiety Based on Gender in English Language Classroom at Politeknik Hulu Terengganu

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Abstract

Many research studies have attempted to provide explanations for why certain Malaysian students consistently fail to meet the learning objectives of English as a Second Language (ESL). The presence of anxiety is a significant obstacle to the difficulties faced when learning the English language. Concerning this, the present study aims to find out the foreign language anxiety level of the students based on gender and to investigate any significant difference in language anxiety based on gender in the English language classroom. To achieve this purpose, a quantitative study was conducted among 123 Politeknik Hulu Terengganu students. A structured questionnaire based on the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) was used to gather responses. Data analysis on the FLCAS items was analysed using SPSS 22.0. The data were analysed using an independent sample T-Test, and the descriptive statistics for FLCAS were based on mean and standard deviation. The findings revealed that both males and females have a moderate level of second language anxiety, and the most recent study found that female students were markedly more anxious than their male counterparts. Thus, there was a significant difference between the learners' language anxiety based on gender. The findings from this study provide pedagogical implications for ESL practitioners and could potentially assist educators in improving their teaching and learning process to enhance students' performance. The outcomes of this study are expected to have significant educational consequences for instructors teaching English as a second language at the polytechnic.

Key Words: second language learning; anxiety; gender differences

1. Introduction

Acquiring English language is crucial in producing a well-trained technical workforce to meet the Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR 4.0) demands. Graduates need to have the necessary skills to adapt to the constantly evolving job market and advancing technology. Many employers expect employees to possess both technical and generic skills in order to enhance a company's productivity.

However, learning English as a second language may be difficult because of anxiety. In 1993, Gardner and MacIntyre defined second language anxiety as the fear or unease experienced by a learner when they are required to use their second or foreign language. Therefore, it plays a significant role in the process of learning a foreign language and is typically examined in conjunction with other personal factors of the learner (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993).

The issue of whether gender plays a role in language learning is increasingly being raised due to the consistent hindrance of anxiety on learners' ability to acquire a second language. According to McLean and Anderson (2009), females exhibit higher levels of fear and are more likely to develop anxiety than males. According to the study conducted by Dewaele, Petrides and Furnham in 2008, gender has become a significant factor in sociolinguistic and sociopsychological research, serving as a predominant explanatory variable. In polytechnic, male students tend to dominate discussions, and female students need more encouragement to participate in discussions in English class. Consequently, male students outperform their female counterparts in presentation and group discussions.

Thus, the objectives of this study are to find out the foreign language anxiety level of the students based on gender and to investigate any significant difference in language anxiety based on gender in the English language classroom. Concerning the historical background and the

current problem as discussed, the following research questions were formulated to achieve the objectives of this study.

- i. What are the second language anxiety levels of the students based on gender?
- ii. Is there any statistically significant difference in the level of second language anxiety based on gender?

Therefore, based on the research questions, this null hypothesis was formed:

H₀₁. There is no significant difference between the learners' language anxiety based on gender in the English language classroom.

2. Theoretical Framework

The present study adapted Horwitz et al.'s (1986) theoretical framework to determine male and female students' foreign language learning anxiety.

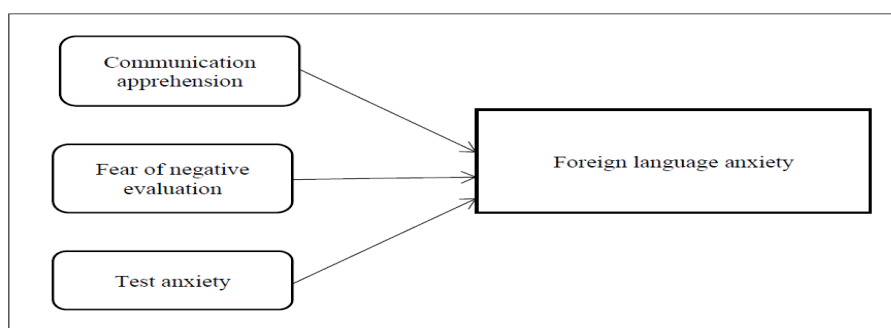


Figure 1: Model of theoretical framework on foreign language anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Gender can influence the three domains contributing to foreign language anxiety which are communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety in several ways. For communication apprehension, studies often show that females may experience higher communication apprehension in foreign language contexts due to greater emotional sensitivity or fear of making mistakes. However, some research suggests males may avoid speaking altogether, masking their anxiety, which can make it less observable but still impactful.

As for fear of negative evaluation, females tend to report higher fear of negative evaluation, potentially due to stronger social and interpersonal awareness. They may worry more about how others perceive their language performance. Males, in contrast, may be more concerned with performance outcomes or ego threats but express this fear differently or less overtly.

Research has shown that females are generally more prone to test anxiety, especially in academic settings, including foreign language testing. Males might experience test anxiety as well but may underreport it due to societal expectations of confidence and control.

In summary, gender may influence both the experience and expression of these three components, with females often showing higher reported levels of anxiety, while males might display different coping mechanisms or underreport emotional factors due to social norms.

3. Methodology

In order to determine if gender has a significant impact on foreign language anxiety, the data from the FLCAS survey questionnaire was analyzed. Therefore, a quantitative descriptive approach was employed in this study since it is considered the most convenient approach to analyze the anxiety level. The data underwent statistical analysis using inferential statistics.

The independent-samples t-test was used to compare the average scores of male and female respondents in order to ascertain if there is a noteworthy disparity between the mean scores of the two groups. The null hypothesis (H_0) was tested using the independent-samples t-test.

3.1 Population

The population involved students from diploma programmes which were Diploma in Tourism Management and Diploma in Accountancy, studying at Politeknik Hulu Terengganu who shared the same characteristics. Besides that, their range of ages is from 17 years to 25 years. The total number of students was 181. Of the students' total number, 61 students were from Diploma in Accountancy, and 120 students were from Diploma in Tourism Management. Students from Diploma in Tourism Management made the majority because tourism is the niche area at Politeknik Hulu Terengganu.

3.2 Survey Sampling

The sampling technique that was used was the stratified random sampling technique. In this technique, each member of the population had equal opportunity of being selected as a subject. The technique was started by dividing the respondents into the same programmes and semester of study. Then random samples were taken from each group.

3.3 Sampling of sample size

The researcher used the Table of Determination of Sample Size of a Known Population by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) to determine the sample size. Based on the table, the sample size (S) required for the study is 123 since the population (N) is 181.

3.4 Measuring Instrument

Foreign Language Learning Anxiety Scale by Horwitz (1986) is the most familiar tool employed for determining foreign language anxiety in the classroom setting. So it was adapted to this study. The item statements adapted from the FLCAS were modified to be more specific to suit this research's context. For example, the words 'foreign language' in the FLCAS was substituted by 'English language' and 'language teacher' to 'English lecturer.' Then the arrangement of the questions also was made according to the categories which were communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. Then the instruments were translated to Malay language.

4. Pilot Test

Before the survey was distributed to respondents, it was piloted on thirty (30) students who were not included as respondents of this study. Since some items were negatively worded, the score for these items in FLCAS was reversely coded. The nine items were numbers 4, 6, 11, 12, 20, 22, 24, 27, and 31. Table 1 shows the result for Cronbach's Alpha (α) coefficient for FLCAS.

Table 1: Cronbach's Alpha (α) coefficient for FLCAS

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.938	.934	33

For high internal consistency, the score should be over .7. In this case, the alpha value (α) = .94, which showed the reliable questionnaire based on Pallant (2007). Internal consistency reliability of the 33 items in the FLCAS as measured by Cronbach's alpha value (α) was 0.94. This indicated that FLCAS had high internal consistency that is considered a reliable instrument to measure foreign language anxiety.

5. Results and Discussions

Data analysis started with the coding of data and was completed by interpreting the results obtained using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science). The data collected was analysed through descriptive and inferential statistics.

To answer the first research question, the descriptive data, as shown in Table 2, revealed both male and female have a moderate level of second language anxiety.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for FLCAS based on Gender

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety	Male	25	84.80	16.90	Medium
	Female	97	101.70	17.83	Medium

However, despite experiencing the same level of language anxiety, female students are found to experience higher anxiety level ($M = 101.70$, $SD = 17.83$) than male students ($M = 84.80$, $SD = 16.90$) in the overall foreign language classroom anxiety. Hwa (2017) explained that different learners, both male, and females, have different levels of anxiety. Even though this study involved more female students than male students. The data were analysed using an independent sample T-Test and the descriptive statistics for FLCAS based on mean and standard deviation. Therefore, there was no issue raised if the data could be skewed towards females.

An interesting discovery from this research was that women reported higher levels of anxiety than men, contributing to the conflicting results of previous studies. The results of this study are similar to several previous studies that have tried to establish if there is a noticeable difference between genders in different situations (Abu-Rabia, 2004; Gerencheal, 2016; Hwa, 2017; Jain & Kaur, 2013), which revealed that language anxiety among males is lower than females.

At first glance, the moderate level of anxiety may appear to be acceptable. Nonetheless, this may deter students from articulating their thoughts in English, impact their desire to communicate, and impede the growth of their communicative skills in the future.

In addressing the second research question, which considered the gender variable, the goal was to determine if there is a significant difference in foreign language anxiety based on gender. The data from the FLCAS survey questionnaire was subjected to inferential statistical analysis. The independent-samples t-test was used to compare the means of two groups in order to assess whether there is a notable difference between the average scores of male and female participants. To test the null hypothesis (H_0), the independent-samples t-test was employed. Table 3 shows the findings.

Table 3: T-Test Results for FLCAS and Gender

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances					t-test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Differe nce	95% Interval Difference	Confidence of the	
								Lower	Upper	
Equal variances assumed	.606	.438	-4.270	120	.000	-16.901	3.958	-24.737	- 9.065	
Equal variances not assumed			- 4.408	38.933	.000	-16.901	3.834	-24.657	- 9.145	

According to Griffith (2010), if the Levene's test has a high significance, then the assumption of equal variance is valid. It is greater than 0.05. Since the Sig. value is .438. The first line was used. This refers to equal variance assumed. To find out the significant difference between gender and foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCAS), Sig. 2 tailed was referred. It shows that the value is 0. This means a statistically significant difference in the mean scores on the gender and FLCAS because of the value in the Sig. (2-tailed) was less than .05. As a result, the H_0 was rejected. The latest study demonstrated that female students showed significantly higher levels of anxiety compared to male students in the English language classroom.

In addition, The results from Table 3 indicated that female students exhibited statistically higher levels of anxiety compared to male students, as demonstrated by the significant test ($t = 4.270$, $p = 0.00$). The data provided sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis ($p < 0.01$). Therefore, there was strong evidence to reject the hypothesis, which corroborates a significant difference between the learners' language anxiety based on gender in the English language classroom among polytechnic students.

The relationship between the genders of foreign language learners' anxiety is still in debate. For example, a study conducted by Aida (1994) found that there was no significant gender difference found in language anxiety. Besides that, Matsuda and Gobel (2004) found in their study that no significant effect of gender as an independent variable on the anxiety of the students as a whole. Bashosh & Rastegar, (2013) also found no significant relationship between the two factors of gender and classroom anxiety. In their study, Kho and Ting (2023) also discovered a significant difference between male and female students in terms of their communication apprehension.

However, typically, this area of research focuses on the various learning approaches that male and female language learners employ when learning a foreign language. Males and females got different learning strategies. For instance, "males are more interested in the challenge, while for females the feeling of achievement is more important" (Story & Sullivan, 1986 as cited in Abu-Rabia, 2004, p.719). Due to males' interest in challenging tasks and activities, males were less anxious in the English language class. In contrast, females who are aware of their feelings of achievement concern more about their performance in class, including their achievement in tests and speaking. Of course, when they are aware of their achievement, this leads to fear of negative evaluations from lecturers and friends.

Besides that, the varying results regarding gender differences in foreign language anxiety could be attributed to the societal and cultural perspectives on anxiety. “Females were more anxious than males can be explained by socio-cultural views on anxiety” (Park and French, 2013). The differences in socio-cultural contexts led to varying results in previous studies on anxiety. In this study, females reported more anxious in English language classes because all the respondents are Malays. Malay is a powerful, male-dominated society. For example, in Muslim Malay culture, males are always pointed to as leaders and spokespeople. Besides that, in Malay socio-culture, females’ feelings are more sensitive. They concern with what people think and say about them since females are inculcated with shyness since small. On the other hand, compared to males they do not bother with what people say about them. This is the rationale behind the higher levels of anxiety observed in females as compared to males.

6. Limitations of the Study

Although the study has several implications, there are limitations associated with the study. One of the limitations of this study is that the respondents were from one polytechnic only. Students from Politeknik Hulu Terengganu were chosen to participate in this research. Hence, due to the small number of samples, the results cannot be generalized to all polytechnics in Malaysia. Therefore, the findings obtained from this study cannot be generalised as this group cannot represent the whole population.

Second, this study only examines foreign languages in the classroom but does not investigate the foreign language outside the classroom. Thus, the level of anxiety in the classroom might differ with anxiety out of the classroom.

Third, this study was conducted in one polytechnic in a semi-rural area and may not reflect students of the same age from other locations and backgrounds.

Fourth, the response bias might be a limitation of this study. The respondents may not give honest answers due to the perceived social desirability of the behaviour in question, which can be tied to explicit bias.

Last but not least, this study did not discuss the comparison of FLA between new students and their more experienced seniors. Future research is suggested to fill this gap and determine how long learning English affects FLA.

7. Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the limitations discussed, future studies should be conducted to fill the gaps on the role of out-of-class second language context in language anxiety. In particular, upcoming studies might need to concentrate on examining the disparities between learning English in a classroom setting and outside the classroom, and how these differences can impact anxiety levels among learners with diverse backgrounds and language learning goals.

In future research, the sample size could be increased to encompass students from other Malaysian polytechnics. This would enable ESL practitioners in these institutions to utilize the findings to improve how they address anxiety in their learners.

This study was conducted involving students at a polytechnic from various states all around Malaysia. Therefore, it would be meaningful for researchers to re-examine the relationship between language anxiety, willingness to communicate, and cultural context in Malaysia.

In addition, it would be interesting to find the differences between states with different cultures and lifestyles that may affect students’ anxiety and willingness to communicate. Students in urban areas like Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, and Penang are typically more exposed to English through media, technology, and international schooling, which can lower

communication apprehension. Rural students, particularly in East Malaysia or remote areas, may have fewer opportunities to practice English, leading to greater test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Lifestyle differences in exposure and practice contribute directly to confidence levels in using a foreign language.

Lastly, a suitable qualitative approach to explore the influence of gender on communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety in second language learning is to conduct semi-structured interviews or focus group discussions, allowing for in-depth insights into learners' personal experiences, perceptions, and gender-related challenges in language learning contexts.

8. Conclusion

The study has demonstrated that ESL undergraduates in Malaysia encounter moderate levels of anxiety when speaking. In addition, the hypothesis regarding the gender disparity in ESL speaking anxiety was also confirmed, demonstrating that female students had notably higher levels of anxiety compared to male students. In conclusion, with the research findings obtained, the following research objectives have been achieved:

1. To examine the foreign language anxiety level of the students based on gender, in which both males and females reported having a moderate level of language anxiety. But, female students experience a higher level than male students.
2. To investigate any significant difference in language anxiety based on gender in the English language classroom, in which there is a significant difference between learners' language anxiety based on gender in English language classroom among polytechnic students.

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