

Profiling English Language Learning Anxiety of Selected Rural Area Secondary School Students in Kedah: A Case Study

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Abstract

This study investigated the phenomena of English Language Learning Anxiety among six secondary school students in Baling, the rural area of Kedah in Malaysia. It studied the relationship between two anxiety English language skills, listening and speaking, and their correlations. A quantitative survey was administered to 866 rural secondary school students using a composite questionnaire that adapted multiple language learning anxiety scales, mainly the Foreign Language Anxiety Scale, English Language Listening Anxiety, and English Language Speaking Anxiety. Descriptive analysis and Pearson Correlation analysis were utilized to extract the required information regarding the English language learning anxiety among secondary school students in Kedah. The result showed the students in all six schools experience moderate levels of anxiety in learning the English language inside the classroom. A positive and significant relationship was also discovered between English listening anxiety and English speaking anxiety from the data collected. These findings point to the fact that language learning anxiety occurs inside the classroom, even in rural area secondary schools in Kedah, and it is debilitating to the student's acquisition of the English language. The correlation of anxiety between the two language skills paves the way to simultaneously formulating methods to solve the problem. This research aims to provide additional information to the existing literature by focusing on rural secondary schools, which need more coverage regarding English language anxiety.

Keywords: Anxiety, English Speaking, Rural Area

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Introduction

It is undeniable that English is the most widespread and significant language globally. Consequently, English is the second language in Malaysia, serving as a unifying tool among the country's diverse ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious groups. Within the Malaysian education system, English is a compulsory subject for all students, designed to produce graduates proficient in effective communication in English. Education in Malaysia recognizes the significance of the English language (Azirah, 2004; Thirusanku & Yunus, 2012). As a result, English serves as the second language (L2) for Malaysians, given that Malaysia is among the Asian countries that implement bilingual education (Ali, 2000; Darmi & Albion, 2013). However, challenges hinder students from achieving high proficiency in spoken English. Consequently, the nuances of the English language are evident in the speech of Malaysians, who are exposed to English throughout their primary and secondary education, accumulating eleven years of learning English as a mandatory subject in public schools (Yamat et al., 2014).

The decline in English proficiency among Malaysians has drawn increased attention to the factors contributing to this issue despite 11 years of formal English education in national schools (Musa et al., 2012). This deterioration is particularly concerning as it adversely affects the employability of graduates, who are often rejected for positions due to their insufficient English language skills (Ali, 2000; Hashim, 2004; Ratnawati, 2004) despite achieving high Grade Point Averages in their university studies (Guan, 2016). Previous research on second language anxiety focused more on the tertiary level. Moreover, study in this field is fairly tiny in Malaysia. In the present study, however, the researcher would like to focus on Form 1, 2 and 4 students' English language anxiety. Thus, this research aims to investigate the level of anxiety in English as a second language among secondary school students in selected schools in rural Kedah, Malaysia, to find a correlation between listening anxiety and speaking anxiety in the English language and to see the relationship between listening and speaking anxiety among Form 1, 2 and 4 students in selected rural schools of Kedah.

Anxiety and Language Learning

In Malaysia, where Bahasa Melayu is the national language, and English is widely used as a second language, students often face unique challenges in language acquisition that can lead to anxiety. Numerous studies had been conducted focusing on the language anxiety level among students, particularly in speaking (Miskam & Saidalvi, 2018; Kayaoglu & Saglamel, 2013). The English language requirement as a compulsory subject to pass in Malaysia's education system shows the importance of mastering the language.

The Ministry of Education has made many efforts to improve students' English. Back in 2002, the government re-introduced the teaching and learning of Science and Mathematics in English; later, they introduced MBMMBI; focusing on upholding the Malay language and strengthening their command of English and in 2009, a program to improve students' English proficiency as the second language in Malaysia (Miskam & Saidalvi, 2018; Rokiah @ Rozita Ahmad et al., 2012). However, Malaysian graduates still struggle to master English, especially when using the language for communication. In 2011, the Education Blueprint underwent a significant shift to ensure Malaysian graduates are equipped with fluent communication skills upon graduating (Malaysian Educational Blueprint, 2011).

Among the factors that triggered this situation is anxiety. Anxiety leads to poor communication in the English language among graduates. According to Brown (1994), language anxiety influences language learning. Brown added that when a learner acquires a second language, a complex process, the learner becomes anxious. Speaking covers many processes involving pronunciation, pronunciation, word recognition, meaning, and grammar rules. This process can overwhelm learners (Khusnia, 2016).

English Language Anxiety Among School Students in Malaysia

Research conducted by Lian and Budin in 2014 revealed that Malaysian Form 4 students have a moderate level of English language anxiety and significant differences between genders in English language anxiety. A study by Nasir and colleagues. (2023) found that the level of English language anxiety among Malaysian Siamese students attending national and national type-secondary schools is low. A study by Idrus and Hamid (2021) examined 311 non-examination students and indicated students in rural area secondary schools experience moderate to high levels of anxiety inside the English language classroom. In addition, a study by Kamaruddin in 2009 involving 120 secondary school students found that in terms of the manifestation of anxiety, participants showed both physical and psychological signs of anxiety. Some symptoms were stutter, palpitation, shaky, trembling, shortness of breath, and restlessness. Some psychological symptoms were avoiding volunteering and being demotivated to complete the given tasks. A study by Chin (2020) consisting of 10 Form 2 students of the respective school who have been identified as students who possess language learning anxiety revealed that the factors of language learning anxiety in ESL classrooms are language barrier, low self-confidence, and fear of negative evaluation. A study by Tachinamutu and Shah 2018 involving 100 lower secondary students from a national school indicated that English learning anxiety impacted learning motivation differently depending on proficiency level.

English Language Anxiety

Second/Foreign Language Anxiety (SLA/FLA) is a significant issue in the English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) field and has been widely researched over the past decade. The concept was pioneered by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), who developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), a functional tool for measuring learners' anxiety levels in language classrooms. The FLCAS has since become a standard instrument in ESL/EFL research, and its reliability is well-established. Horwitz and colleagues (1986) defined anxiety as feelings of apprehension, nervousness, worry, or tension experienced by learners, which activate the nervous system. This definition is distinct from Test Anxiety, which Sapp (1993) described as anxiety arising from intense emotions that affect both the emotional and physiological state of the learner. The distinction is important because test anxiety occurs in any situation where a learner's knowledge and performance are evaluated. In contrast, Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety, as defined by Horwitz and colleagues (1986), generally arises within the context of a second/foreign language classroom, which is non-native to the learners. McIntyre and Gardner (1994) further elucidated the relationship between anxiety and language learning using Tobias' (1986) cognitive model, which posits that anxiety inhibits language learning by interfering with both language input and output.

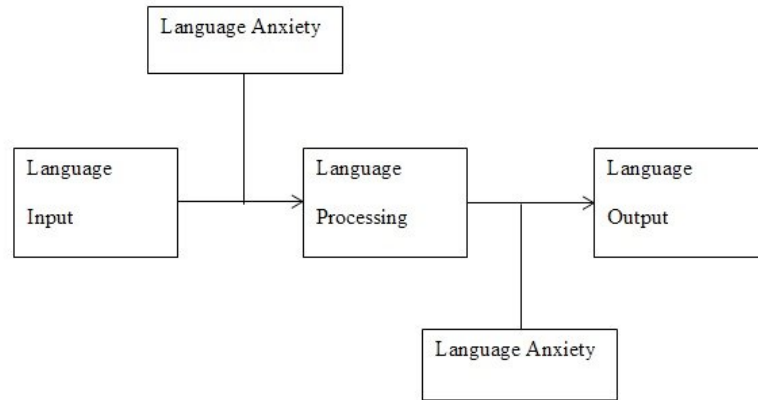


Figure 1: Intrusion of Language Anxiety in the Language Learning Process

Anxiety interferes with both the language input and output of learners in second/foreign language classrooms, in contrast to test anxiety, which occurs only during the performance evaluation of any subject matter. McIntyre and Gardner (1993) further reinforced this understanding by demonstrating how anxiety disrupts the language learning process, affecting both input and output in the classroom. This interference may also be present during listening (input) and speaking (output) activities in rural secondary schools in Kedah.

Methodology

According to statistics from Pejabat Pendidikan Daerah (PPD) Baling, there are 78 schools in Baling district, 62 primary and 16 secondary schools. This investigation utilized stratified random sampling to answer the research questions. Stratified random sampling ensures that each subgroup of a given population is adequately represented within the whole sample population of a research study. A total of 900 questionnaires were distributed to six different schools in three different rural area districts in Baling, which is a considerable sample size and representative of the population (N=6282) with a 5% margin of error and 95% confidence level as calculated by Raosoft.com, an online sample calculator. Only 866 questionnaires were collected at the end of the data collection stage. Therefore, this method seemed appropriate to the purpose of the study. The sample of this study is secondary school students who are not involved in any national exam in their year of study from five different schools in Baling, a rural area in the state of Kedah, Malaysia. The six schools selected had the highest and lowest achievement of English subjects in their National Malaysian Certificate of Education, a national examination for all fifth-form secondary school students in Malaysia. The students were not involved in the national examination, which included Forms One, Two, and Four (aged 13, 14, and 16, respectively). This ensured the sample was not affected by test anxiety, a different form of anxiety (Sapp, 1992) from Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety. The instrument employed in this study was a questionnaire based on two separate linguistic anxiety scales adopted and adapted from English Language Listening Anxiety, Kimura (2008) and English Language Speaking Anxiety, adapted from Mak (2011). A total of two sections were provided in the questionnaire: the Listening Section with 12 items and the Speaking Section with six items. The composite questionnaire was in dual language to ensure intelligibility, and items were evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale. A pilot research was done on 144 students from SMK Teloi Kanan to determine the questionnaire's validity and reliability. The Cronbach Alpha analysis yielded a value of 0.86, which is considered acceptable in social science research. According to Baharuddin (2009), students are categorized into three levels of anxiety. Table 1 shows a mean of 1.00-2.33 (low

language anxiety LLA), a mean of 2.34-3.66 (moderate language anxiety MLA), and a mean of 3.67-5.00 (high anxiety level HLA).

Table 1: Students' Mean Level of English Language Anxiety

Language Anxiety	Mean
Low	1.00 – 2.33
Moderate	2.34 – 3.66
High	3.67 – 5.00

The data collected were analyzed using SPSS, and the sum score for each response was calculated. The scores will be calculated according to their respective language skills, listening and speaking skills, and then categorized into three categories: low anxiety, moderate anxiety, and high anxiety. Descriptive statistics were computed to determine the Standard Deviation (SD) and mean scores of each section's responses to sort the highest and lowest mean score items for analysis. To determine the relationship between listening anxiety and speaking anxiety across different forms, a Pearson product-moment correlation was computed, and the result is as shown in the Findings.

Findings

Results of English Language Anxiety Among Form 1, 2 and 4 Students

The data was gathered and tabulated. Table 1 summarises the results of the level of English language anxiety in terms of listening among Form 1, 2 and 4 in rural area secondary schools students in Kedah and their corresponding anxiety levels as low, medium, or high. Table 2 reflects the level of English Language Anxiety in Terms of Speaking Among Form 1, 2 and 4 students.

Table 2: Level of English Language Anxiety in Terms of Listening Among Form 1, 2 and 4 Students

Class	n	SD	Mean	Levels of Listening Anxiety Skills
Form 1	200	0.56	2.92	Moderate
Form 2	257	0.48	2.84	Moderate
Form 4	225	0.53	2.89	Moderate
Overall	682	0.04	2.88	Moderate

Table 3: Level of English Language Anxiety in Terms of Speaking Among Form 1, 2 and 4

Class	n	SD	Mean	Levels of Speaking Anxiety Skills
Form 1	200	0.49	3.03	Moderate
Form 2	257	0.43	2.96	Moderate
Form 4	225	0.47	2.49	Low
Overall	682	0.03	2.98	Moderate

Correlation Analysis Between Listening and Speaking Anxiety Among Form 1, 2 and 4 Students

A Pearson product-moment correlation was run to determine the relationship between listening anxiety and speaking anxiety across different forms, with the results shown in Table 3. There was a moderate, positive correlation between listening anxiety and speaking anxiety with Form 1, which was statistically significant ($r=.500$, $n=200$, $p=.001$).

Similar scenario to Form 2, where students exhibited a moderately significant correlation between listening and speaking anxiety ($r=.403$, $n=257$, $p=.001$). Form 5 also showed a moderate correlation between listening anxiety and speaking anxiety ($r=.488$, $n=225$, $p=.001$), which further supports the findings in Form 1 and 2.

Table 4: Pearson Correlation Analysis of Speaking Anxiety and Listening Anxiety Across Different Forms

Class	Variables	Speaking Anxiety	Listening Anxiety
Form 1	Speaking Anxiety	1.00 (200)	
	Listening Anxiety	.500** (200)	1.00 (200)
Form 2	Speaking Anxiety	1.00 (257)	
	Listening Anxiety	.403** (257)	1.00 (257)
Form 4	Speaking Anxiety	1.00 (225)	
	Listening Anxiety	.488** (225)	1.00 (225)

Note: ** $p < .001$.

Research Hypotheses Testing

Table 5: Simple Linear Regression Analysis: Predicting Speaking Anxiety From Listening Anxiety Across Different Forms

Hypothesis	Variables
Hypothesis 1	There is no significant relationship between listening anxiety and speaking anxiety among Form 1 students.
Hypothesis 2	There is no significant relationship between listening anxiety and speaking anxiety among Form 2 students.
Hypothesis 3	There is no significant relationship between listening anxiety and speaking anxiety among Form 5 students.

Speaking Anxiety					
Class	B	SE	β	t	Sig.
Form 1					
Constant	1.752	.159	-	11.046	<.001
Listening Anxiety	.436	.054	.500	8.126	<.001
Form 2					
Constant	1.941	.147	-	13.200	<.001
Listening Anxiety	.359	.051	.403	7.035	<.001
Form 4					
Constant	1.284	.195	-	6.573	<.001
Listening Anxiety	.549	.066	.488	8.354	<.001

Note: Dependent Variable: Speaking Anxiety.

For Form 1 students, the analysis revealed a statistically significant relationship between listening anxiety and speaking anxiety ($\beta=0.500$, $p<.001$). The coefficient of determination ($R^2=0.250$) suggests that 25% of the variance in speaking anxiety can be explained by listening anxiety. Similarly, Form 2 students displayed a significant positive association between listening anxiety and speaking anxiety ($\beta=0.403$, $p<.001$). The coefficient of determination ($R^2=0.163$) indicates that 16.3% of the variance in speaking anxiety is accounted for by listening anxiety. Form 4 students also exhibited a significant positive relationship between listening anxiety and speaking anxiety ($\beta=0.488$, $p<.001$). The coefficient of determination ($R^2=0.238$) suggests that 23.8% of the variance in speaking anxiety can be explained by listening anxiety.

Across all three forms, the findings suggest that higher levels of listening anxiety are associated with higher levels of speaking anxiety among secondary school students. However, the strength of the relationship varies slightly between forms, with Form 1 demonstrating the highest coefficient of determination ($R^2=0.250$). Consequently, across all forms, null hypotheses are rejected.

Conclusion

Secondary school students in rural areas of Kedah experience anxiety in the classroom, compounded by inadequate facilities, materials, and unsuitable learning conditions. This situation exacerbates the disadvantages faced by these students, even though the federal government allocates the same amount of funding to all schools (Azmi & Sham, 2018). Controlling anxiety levels in English language classrooms within rural secondary schools could enhance students' English learning experiences. This improvement could lead to more effective lessons despite the deficits in facilities, materials, and learning conditions, which are critical for better English language education and an improved learning environment.

The correlation between English listening anxiety and English speaking anxiety suggests that anxiety in a language learner may exist before engaging in a particular language skill, potentially stemming from apprehension in another language-related situation. Reducing anxiety in one language skill may also mitigate anxiety in another, enhancing the learning experience. Teachers can monitor and manage anxiety levels in one class with the understanding that this may reduce anxiety in other language classes, thereby creating more efficient learning environments. Students may perform better in subsequent language lessons by implementing strategies to reduce anxiety in one language skill. However, further research should be conducted across diverse demographics and samples to enhance the validity of these findings and to establish a solid foundation for experimental studies on the interrelationship between anxiety in different language skills. English proficiency levels in Malaysia are declining, and recent studies have highlighted the impact of affective components on language learning, noting that these can be either debilitating or facilitative. While the debilitating effects of anxiety have been extensively explored, with numerous studies presenting similar findings, there are exceptions where anxiety has been shown to facilitate language learning. Anxiety in Malaysian classrooms has been documented at both secondary and tertiary levels. However, there has been a lack of research on rural students in a developed state like Kedah. This study addresses this gap by investigating language anxiety among secondary school students in rural Kedah, thereby contributing to the broader understanding of language anxiety in Malaysia. As research on this phenomenon increases, greater focus can be directed toward addressing English language proficiency issues in Malaysia. Consequently, more efforts can be devoted to integrating the affective component of the classroom into pedagogical practices.

However, further research should be conducted, especially among secondary school students, to obtain a better understanding of the extent of English language anxiety inhibiting the English language classroom in Malaysian schools, which could play a part in contributing to the declining English proficiency among Malaysians.

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