

# **Language Classroom Anxiety: A Comparative Study of ESL Learners**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Malaysia decided use English as the medium of instruction at university level beginning 2002 and much debate has surfaced since then. English has also increased in importance in the People's Republic of China (PRC) since the nation joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) and implemented an Open Door Policy. This study compares perceived second language anxiety and attempts to identify significant differences in the level of anxiety of male and female ESL university students at Stamford College, Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia and from the PRC Malaysia. It also attempts to identify the factors that could contribute to language classroom anxiety. Although the study did not control for factors that may influence language apprehension, the results suggest that nearly half of the total number of respondents are anxious about learning the English language. The English Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (ELCAS) with 32 items was constructed and used for the purpose of the study which was adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz et al. 1986). Findings show that gender is of slight significance but nationality is an important variable in identifying the anxiety level with the various factors that may contribute to English language classroom anxiety.*

## **Introduction**

The role and status of English language in Malaysia was drastically reduced during the post independence period, putting Bahasa Melayu in a position of paramount importance (Gill, 2005). Since education is linked to upward social mobility, the education system has to provide methods

of teaching and learning that enable students to function in more than one language. This would give them the opportunity for equal access to education as well as economic opportunities (Gaudart, 2003). Thus, Malaysia introduced the use of English as a medium of instruction at university level in 2002. This move which was envisioned by Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the then Prime Minister of Malaysia, has provoked much debate. Realization of the deteriorating performance in English among students both at school and university level all over Malaysia has brought about policy changes in the national education curriculum. The government's move to introduce the use of English in schools and universities for the teaching of certain subjects has triggered many conflicting views and concerns. Despite these concerns, the government English implemented as the medium of instruction at matriculation level in 2004 and university level in 2005 (*The Star*, May 11, 2002). Apprehension about whether students and teachers are able to perform according to the expected international standards has resulted in a call for changes to teaching methods in Malaysian classrooms. In addition, concerns over students' well being and performance were much debated with the change of language policy. This is because concern about second language learning anxiety has been extensively acknowledged for its noteworthy impact on the language learners (Ohata, 2005).

The importance of English has been acknowledged widely in the Asian region particularly the People's Republic of China (PRC) since it joined the World Trade Organization (WTO). In addition English attained new heights of popularity in the PRC when the 'Olympic Games' was scheduled to be held Beijing in 2008. Policy makers, educationists and individuals in China find that English is therefore compellingly linked to continued economic growth (Bolton, 2002).

In China, however, Lam (2002) reported that motivation for learning English at national and individual levels has improved, and educational support is also reportedly better. This has existed at least since 1978, when national efforts to promote English intensified. To meet the current expanding demands of English, more teachers need to be trained, and more financial aids for better learning materials as well as better facilities need to be allocated. In its move towards modernization, China regards the study of English as "necessary for acquiring technological expertise and for fostering international trade" (Adamson & Morris, 1997, p. 3). Citing Ross (1992), the two researchers highlighted that English has become "the barometer of modernization" (p. 4) for technological transfer from Western nations.

## **Anxiety in Second Language Learning**

Researchers have studied the effects of anxiety on second language learning since the 1970s. Anxiety can exist during the input, processing and output stages of language learning. The complexity in researching language anxiety has been influenced by sometimes contradictory evidence from instruments applied in different languages, measuring different types of anxiety, language skills, level of learning, and teaching methodology (Onwuegbuzie, Bailey and Daley, 2000).

Despite various advances in teaching methods and techniques, apprehension continues to exist second language classrooms in universities.. Researchers have confirmed that language anxiety exists and affects second language learning (MacIntyre, 1995; Daly, 1991; Horwitz, 1986). Anxiety plays an important affective role in second language acquisition. However, it has complex relationships with other affective variables such as self-esteem, inhibition, and risk-taking, all of which can be difficult to measure. Several researchers have shown that anxiety can impede second language production and achievement (Cheng, Horwitz & Schallert, 1999; Von Worde, 1998; MacIntyre, 1995; MacIntyre & Gardner 1991, 1994; Young, 1991; Horwitz, Hrowitz & Cope, 1986). It is believed that half of all language learners experience some level of anxiety (Campbell & Ortiz, 1991).

MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) state that anxiety creates a variety of potentially occurring problems to students of foreign languages because “it can interfere with the acquisition, retention, and production of the new language” (p. 86). Results obtained by Casado and Dereshiwsky (2001) prove that second language anxiety exists regardless of learners’ level of progress. They added that language learning anxiety experienced by university students at the beginning as well as the preceding level ‘does not necessarily decline or diminish’. (pp. 86).

Differences in beliefs about anxiety may have influenced the results of some investigations of the role of anxiety in language learning. However, the inability of the trait and state approaches to satisfactorily obtain and demonstrate the essence of second language anxiety which have been commonly used by many researches lead to research in the situation specific language environment (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991).

The affective factors which contribute to anxiety in language learning include the attributes of trait anxiety, state anxiety and situation specific anxiety. Second language learners are usually conscious about how others

judge them in any given or ordinary situation. They also experience apprehension when communicating in the target language in various circumstances. Another important factor is the apprehension of performing well in tests in the second language.

### **Anxiety and Learning Anxiety**

Anxiety has been hypothesized as an individual's response to a perceived threat or perceived inability to handle challenging situations (Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990). It is described as a "cognitive-affective response characterized by physiological arousal, indicative of sympathetic nervous system activation and apprehension regarding a potentially negative outcome that the individual perceives as impending" (Leary 1982, p. 99). Additionally, Sewell et al. (1983) view anxiety as a major personality dimension, characterized as one of the "big two" (A-State and A-Trait anxiety) in the personality domain measured in their research (p. 60). Anxiety and self-degradation have been recognized as the causes which may lead to poor performance in a given task of relevant skills and behaviours (Sarason et al. 1990).

Warr and Downing (2000) suggested that a feeling of anxiety about one's performance is likely to have much greater influence in significant, irregular learning activities by adults than in habitual, constant school and college activities. In an interview with Dr. Edgar H. Schein in Harvard Business Review, Diane Coutu (2002) reported that, Schein identifies "learning anxiety as stemming from the fear of failure, of looking stupid, of having to change". He also added that "learning only takes place when 'survival anxiety' is greater than learning anxiety. The next sub-topic will review how anxiety in different individual leads to language learning.

### **Affective Variables in Language Learning**

Learners' affective states are considered to be of extreme importance in measuring and identifying individual differences in learning outcomes (Ellis, 1994). Ellis considered that learners' affective states have the tendency to be unstable. These states not only affect overall progress but also learners' feedback to specific learning activities performed daily or even during specific timing given to complete certain activities (p. 483).

The role of emotional variables in foreign language teaching and learning has been studied extensively for the last three decades by several authors, such as Scovel (1978), Shumman (1975, 1998), Krashen (1985) and MacIntyre and Gardner (1991, 1992 and 1994) (see Onwuegbuzie, Bailey & Daley, 2000). Anxiety is one of the many affective variables among other intrinsic learner variables. Therefore, a review of affect in language learning is needed to further discuss language anxiety. In reviewing Wenden's work, Ellis (1994) highlighted that learners have been shown to be strongly influenced by their affective states (p. 477-478). Some second language learners appear to be apprehensive at the start of learning a second language while others show confidence in starting to learn a second language.

The 'Input Hypothesis' proposed by Krashen (1980), refers to affective filters that impede comprehensible input. Krashen's 'Input Hypothesis' postulated that learners would be able to acquire the target language when the affective filters are low. However, when the filters are high, learners would have difficulty utilizing the input and this would hamper acquisition. Therefore, the 'Affective Filter Hypothesis' represents Krashen's implication that several affective variables play a facilitative, but it may not necessarily lead to second language acquisition (p. 38). These variables comprise motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety that might affect a person's attitude towards learning. These factors have been hypothesized to be partially responsible for the rate of language acquisition.

It is Brown's view (1994) that learning a second language or foreign language is a complex task and is associated with human anxiety. This form of anxiety is connected to feelings of 'uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, and apprehension'. An example of a situation that could be anxiety provoking is speaking the second language in public, especially to the native speakers. Language learners would sometimes experience severe anxiety when they become speechless or lost for words in an unforeseen situation. Learners would often perceive this as a hindrance in learning and consider it as a failure.

Adult language learners are particularly anxious about how they are judged by others (Kristmanson, 1994). In China, for example, Kristmanson identified that adult language learners are very cautious and would avoid making unacceptable mistakes in their performance. A particular learner reported that, any production of errors would be 'a public display of ignorance' and, is an apparent instance of 'losing face'.

Kristmanson further added that, this is an apparent indication that the inability of adult ESL learners to speak the language unwaveringly is due to their fear of producing mistakes, or fear of ‘losing face’. Therefore, affective factors can certainly play a large role in influencing the ongoing language learning experience of language learners.

## **Language Learning Anxiety**

Foreign language anxiety is ‘a complex psychological construct’ and it is not easy to give it an accurate definition. This is possibly due to the obscure hierarchy of the prevailing variables as distinguished by Trylong (1987). This part of the review will therefore focus on language learning anxiety, which according to Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, is experienced by at least one student out of ten (1991: p. 32).

In the process of acquiring a second language, learners often assess their own developing abilities (MacIntyre, Noels and Clement, 1997, p. 266). In reviewing work done by MacIntyre and Gardner (1989), the three researchers reported that highly anxious learners would suffer a painful and de-motivating experience when they have to confront their perceived second language limitations. Therefore, MacIntyre, Noels and Clements (1997) suggested that if given the appropriate, specific assessment tools, learners should be able to accurately rate their own abilities.

Foreign or second language learners experience language anxiety and this may cause prospective problems and interfere with the acquisition, retention and production of the target language (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991. Ellis (1994) believes that it is best not to perceive the presence or absence of anxiety in language learning as an essential condition to the success of learning a second language. Rather, Ellis suggested that anxiety should be conceived as a variable that has different effects on different learners.

Anxiety is considered to hinder language learners’ ability to process language input and disrupts acquisition (Krashen, 1985a, 1985b; MacIntyre et al. 1997). Krashen holds the view that if anxiety impairs cognitive function, students who are anxious may learn less and also may not be able to demonstrate what they have learned. Therefore, they may experience even more failure, which in turn escalates their anxiety.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) suggested a developmental process that demonstrates how initial anxiety increases with time based on a review of some studies of children, teenagers and adults. According to the two researchers, knowledge of previous frustrations and failures leads to greater anxiety. This would then further promote interference of cognitive processing. Teenagers often develop feelings of self-consciousness due to this experience. MacIntyre and Gardner further indicated that language learning anxiety is weakest for children, but strongest for teenagers and adults. In her review of Crookall and Oxford's work (1991), Worde (2003) highlights that problems in relation to self-esteem, self-confidence, and risk-taking ability occur if language learners experience extreme language anxiety and this will eventually debilitate proficiency in the second language.

## **Measuring Anxiety**

Extensive scales have been developed by researchers to evaluate various types of anxiety in language learning. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) produced a literature reviewing some early methods used to measure anxiety in the study of language learning. Horwitz et. al. (ed. Horwitz & Young, 1991) developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) in 1986 based on the 1983 study done on 'Support Group for Foreign Language Learning' students at the beginning of their language classes at the University of Texas. The FLCAS demonstrated an internal reliability, reaching an alpha coefficient of .93 with all items producing significant corrected item-total scale correlations. In addition to this, the scales produced a strong test-retest reliability of  $r = .83$  (p. 32).

The results obtained from the distribution of the FLCAS to 75 university students from four intact introductory Spanish classes demonstrated that many students experience significant feelings of foreign language anxiety in respect to the different factors that may contribute to foreign language learning. Based on their findings, Horwitz and her team concluded that Foreign Language Anxiety may account for the formation of negative emotional responses towards language learning in a learner (p. 34).

Utilizing the FLCAS developed by Horwitz et al., Casado and Dereshiwsky (2001) investigated and compared the perceived levels of anxiety experienced by a randomly selected sample of students in a

regular university setting at the beginning of their first semester with the levels of anxiety perceived by a similar sample of students at the end of their second semester in learning the Spanish language. The two researchers aim to determine the anxiety levels of the two groups and to identify if apprehension diminishes as students advance in the study of the language.

The results substantiate that the levels of confidence experienced by beginning foreign language students were higher than those of second semester students even though the two groups did not demonstrate perceptions of anxiety in most cases. This indicates that language learners' anxiety level may not decrease or disappear as they progress in learning the target language.

Similar results were obtained by the same researchers in a comparative experiment done on first semester university students who had studied Spanish in high school and were studying the language at university with students learning English at university after high school (Casado & Dereshiwsky, 2004). The two researchers postulated that the anxiety experienced could have been the result of lack of exposure to the target language and/or other affective variables.

Cheng (2001) also adapted Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope's FLCAS in her research measuring the association between learners' beliefs and English anxiety on university students at Taiwan. Based on the questions presented by Horwitz et al., Cheng adapted the scales to create her 33 items of English Classroom Anxiety Scale (ECAS). After the negatively worded items in each of the ECAS were reversed scored, a higher score on the ECAS corresponded to more English class anxiety. The researcher obtained an Alpha-reliability of .91 which indicates an adequate figure internal consistency for the generated scale. Cheng's investigation on the Taiwan ESL university learners revealed that ESL learners' level of anxiety about English class was positively and moderately correlated with their belief in the notion of giftedness, but was negatively and strongly correlated with their English self-efficacy.

The present study seeks to identify the different level of anxiety in English as a second language among international and local university students in Malaysia. The comparative study of English between Malaysian Chinese and students from Mainland China (PRC) hopes to provide information about the extent that university students experience language learning anxiety on three different perspectives which are communication anxiety, test anxiety and negative evaluation anxiety.

The focus of this study is to compare the levels of anxiety among first year Chinese students from Malaysia and students from China who are currently studying in a Malaysian college using the foreign language classroom anxiety scale adapted and adopted from Horwitz et al. (1991).

## **Method**

### **Subjects**

A total of 40 students from Stamford College, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia responded to the questionnaire. Twenty were Chinese students from the People's Republic of China and another 20 were Malaysian students of Chinese. Fifteen of the total sample were male and another 25 were female. All the students were first-year students doing their Bachelor Degree in Business Studies. Eight students were in their first semester while the rest were in their second semester.. The students were between 18 and 25 years of age and all have studied English formally since their school years.

### **Instrument**

A questionnaire was used in this study to assess the level of anxiety and the factors that may contribute to ESL university students' language classroom anxiety. The questionnaire that is the instrument for this study, English Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (ELCAS) with 32 items (see **Appendix I**) was constructed based on the 33 items from Horwitz et. al (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). Similar to Horwitz et. al. the ELCAS is based on the assumption that the ESL students' self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours affected the levels of anxiety found in English language classes. The ELCAS consisted of thirty-two items, each one on a 6-point ordinal scale ranging from "strongly agree" (SA), "agree" (A), "not sure" (NS), "no opinion" (NO), "disagree" (D) and "strongly disagree" (SD). The purpose of the scale is to examine the degree of severity of English language classroom anxiety. The ELCAS constructed and used for this study also demonstrated internal reliability, achieving alpha coefficient of .89 with all items producing significant corrected item-total scale correlations.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **English Language Classroom Anxiety and Performance**

In investigating whether anxiety affects language learning and performance, a cross tabulation of performance and nationality, and English language learning anxiety and nationality was performed. Only 15% of the total number of students scored the lowest mark of 50% – 59% in their recent test. Strikingly, only 7.5% of the students from both nationalities managed the highest score of 90% – 100% in the recent test. The rest of the students only managed to score between 60% – 69%, and 70% – 79% with a percentage of 52.5% and 42.5% respectively. Additionally, neither group of students from the two nationalities scored 80% – 89%. There is hardly any significant difference between the two nationalities with the Pearson chi-square significance value of .98. Therefore, the results from the table indicate that there are no significant differences in performance among English language learners from Malaysia and the PRC.

Although 85% of the students obtained more than 60% in their recent English language test, nearly half of the students are nervous about learning English. It is interesting to highlight that the percentage of anxious PRC students learning English is higher than students from Malaysia. Of the students from the PRC, 27.5% are anxious about learning English as compared to only 17.5% of the students from Malaysia.

However, as previously described, there is no significant difference in the level of performance between students from Malaysia and the PRC. Therefore, although more students from the PRC are anxious about learning English as compared to students from Malaysia, the level of anxiety is not an indicative factor of the success or failure of the students' performance with the significance value of .34 (Pearson chi-square). Interestingly, from the cross-tabulation analysis between gender and English language learning anxiety, it was found that female students are more anxious about learning the language. Only 27% of male students agreed to the statement that they are anxious about learning English. However, the percentage of anxious female students is greater than male students where 44% of the female students responded that they are anxious about learning English. Although the percentage of anxious female students is greater than male students, the difference is not very significant, with the Pearson chi-square significance value at 26.

In addition, the less anxious male students performed better than female students in the recent test. All the male students scored more than 60% in their recent English language test. In contrast, 24% of female students got less than 59% in their recent test. Although the difference is observable, it has, however, a very slight statistical significance with the value of .10 Pearson chi-square.

## **Test Anxiety**

### **(a) Test Anxiety between Nationalities**

55% of respondents are anxious during the language tests. However, the percentage of PRC students who are anxious during tests in English classes is higher as compared to students from Malaysia. From the total percentage obtained, 70% of the PRC students get nervous during their English language tests in the classroom. However, only 40% of Malaysian students are apprehensive during tests. In addition to this, 35% of Malaysian students have a strong feeling of not getting apprehensive during tests, and none of the PRC students share the same attribute. The Pearson Chi-Square significance value demonstrated that the level of test anxiety between students from Malaysia and the PRC is very significant with the value of .03.

Responses to item 16 may give a fundamental explanation to why the PRC students are more apprehensive during English tests as compared to Malaysian students. 70% of students from the PRC are afraid of failing their tests. The number of PRC students who are apprehensive about failing their English language tests is very significant as compared to students from Malaysia with the Pearson Chi-Square value shows a highly significant difference of .033.

### **(b) Test Anxiety between Genders**

There is a minor difference in the percentage of male and female students who get nervous during English tests. Although the difference is slight, 60% of male students are anxious during tests as compared to 52% of female students. This is also proven from the Pearson chi-square with a significance value of .41. Nevertheless, 12% of female students have a strong feeling of test anxiety but, no male students have strong anxiousness during tests.

Responses gathered from item 16 from both genders show the percentages of male and female students who agreed and disagreed whether they are worried about failing their English tests. From information gathered, 66% of male students agreed that they fear of failing the English tests. However, only 48% of female students fear of failing their tests. The difference is statistically not very significant with the Pearson chi-square value of .31. Nevertheless, the percentage of female students who strongly worried about failing their English tests is higher than male students. Twenty-four percent of female students responded of strong feeling of anxiousness about failing while 13% of male students responded the same.

## **Fear of Negative Evaluation**

### **(a) Fear of Negative Evaluation between Nationalities**

In overall, 70% of the total f students are apprehensive about making mistakes during English classes. From this percentage, 42.5% are students from the PRC and only 27.5% are from Malaysia. Eighty-five percent of students from the PRC agree that they are concerned when making mistakes during English lessons. Meanwhile, 55% of students from Malaysia agree to the statement in item 12. The Pearson chi-square obtained for the responses shows an observable but slight significant difference with a value of .19.

It was revealed that 80% of PRC students are conscious about how others judge their command of English while 65% of students from Malaysia share the same sentiment and agreed to item 26. Only 5% of students from the PRC responded ‘not sure’ to the statement in item 26. Thirty-five percent of students from Malaysia however strongly disagree that they are worried about what others would say about their command of English but none from China share this strong objection. Interestingly, the difference in the students’ responses to item 26 is highly significant with a value of .02 (Pearson chi-square).

Although more PRC students worry about how others perceive their command of English, more students from Malaysia however are embarrassed if the teacher corrects them in the classroom. However, the difference of percentage between students of the two nationalities is not great. 40% of Malaysian students agree to the statement in item 13 as compared to 35% students from the PRC. The percentage obtained

could imply that PRC students are more receptive when they are being corrected by the language teacher when they make mistakes in the language classroom. The very slight difference is strengthened by the Pearson chi-square significance value obtained which shows a value of .87.

Finally, an analysis of responses for item 14 could provide another reason that could contribute to ESL students' fear of negative evaluation from the two nations. Almost all of the PRC students are afraid of being laughed at by their peers in the language classroom. Ninety percent of students from the PRC fear of being the laughing stock by their peers but, only 45% of Malaysian students fear of being in that position.

Additionally, a high percentage of 45% PRC students strongly agree that they are afraid of being laughed at by their classmates and only 20% of Malaysian students share this strong apprehension. The Pearson chi-square also shows a highly significant value of difference in the students' responses to item 14. The value obtained is .02. Therefore, it is statistically apparent that PRC students are very apprehensive about being laughed at by their peers if they cannot speak to the expected fluency level in the language classroom.

### **(b) Fear of Negative Evaluation between Genders**

A cross tabulation analysis of responses from male and female students to the statement of item 12 was also tabulated. Eighty percent of male students are anxious about making mistakes in the English classes. In contrast, only 64% of female students agree with having the same feeling during English classes. A higher percentage of male students who worry more about making mistakes during English classes were also obtained. Twenty percent of male students strongly agree to the statement of item 12 while only 12% of female students agree to the same statement. However, the difference of responses between genders does not show a statistically significant value. The Pearson chi-square value obtained is .70.

The next analysis shows the percentages of responses given by male and female students to item 26., the difference in their responses toward their fear of being judged by others is almost non-existent with 73% and 72% of male and female students respectively about worrying about what others would say about their command of English. The difference is statistically not significant with the Pearson chi-square value

of .68. Nevertheless, the results show that male and female ESL students have a strong inclination to get apprehensive when judged by others as they use English especially in the classroom.

40% item 13 40% of the male girls and 30% of the responded that they would get embarrassed when their teachers correct their mistakes in front of their classmates in the language classrooms. The difference of responses is statistically not very significant with the significance value of .48 (Pearson chi-square).

Another factor that might contribute to ESL male and female learners' fear of negative evaluation is item 14. The responses show a highly significant difference between the two genders. As compared to 13% of the male ss, 44% of female students strongly agree that they are afraid of being laughed at by their friends when they speak in the English classroom. Nevertheless, the total percentage of male students who fear of being laughed at in the language classroom is greater than that of female students. 80% and 60% of male and female students respectively agree that they fear their friends would laugh at them when they speak in the target language during English classes. The difference is very significant with a Pearson chi-square value of .01.

## **Fear of Communication**

### **(a) Fear of Communication between Nationalities**

The first analysis compares ESL learners' responses to item 20. Results obtained show that students from the PRC (60%) are more apprehensive when they cannot understand the teacher during lessons. 60% as compared to students 40% from Malaysia. The difference is highly significant with a Pearson chi-square value of .03. However, it is interesting to highlight that more ESL students from Malaysia strongly agreed to the statement as compared to students from the PRC. Twenty percent of Malaysian students strongly agreed to the statement but only five PRC students presented the same response.

From the responses gathered for item 31, it was identified that PRC students (40%) tend to worry more when they cannot understand every word that the teacher says in the language classroom. As compared to only 30% of students from Malaysia responded the same. The difference of the ESL students' responses is very significant with a significance value of .06 (Pearson chi-square).

Additionally, a highly significant difference between students of both nationalities was also obtained in responses to statement 18 which questions students' level of confidence to speak in English. 70% of Malaysian students are more confident to speak the target language compared to only 20% of students from the PRC responded that they are confident to use the target language. The Pearson chi-square highlights an exceptionally significant difference value of the responses with the significance value of .004. This result illustrates that ESL students from the PRC get apprehensive if they have to communicate with others in the target language.

The students' responses from both countries are consistent for item 24 when compared with item 18. A slight difference of percentages for the responses was gathered from the PRC and Malaysian students. Malaysian students 70% are sure of themselves when repeatedly asked about their confidence to speak in English compared to 30% of the PRC students. The difference is highly significant with the Pearson chi-square value obtained showing a significant value of .02.

Although a very high percentage of students from the PRC are not confident to speak in the target language, they are however not afraid of being called by the teacher during English classes as compared to the ESL students from Malaysia. PRC students 85% strongly (65% of students from Malaysia) disagreed with the statement in item 19 that they are afraid when being called during language lessons as compared to. The difference is strongly significant with the Pearson chi-square showing a significance value of .06. This finding demonstrated that ESL students from the PRC are less apprehensive if they are called to participate in language classroom activities.

The analysis of results also found that there is a significant difference to the level of confidence of the ESL students from Malaysia and the PRC when they have to speak spontaneously during English classes with 40% students from the PRC agreeing and 35% of students from Malaysia panic when they have to speak without any preparation during their language classes. However, a higher percentage of Malaysian students 25% strongly agree that they panicked when asked to speak spontaneously during their ESL classes. However, no students from the PRC have this strong feeling of apprehension. The difference is highly significant with the Pearson chi-square significant value of .004.

Although more Malaysian students panic when they have to give an immediate reply during language classes, they are however not afraid to

volunteer and give answers during language classes. Seventy-five percent of students from Malaysia and the PRC disagreed that they are embarrassed to volunteer and give answers in the language classes as shown in results obtained for item 22. However, the percentage of Malaysian students who strongly disagreed with the statement of item 22 is higher than the responses given by students from the PRC. Forty percent of Malaysian students strongly disagreed to the statement in item 22 but, only 10% of the PRC students gave their strong opposition. The difference of the students' responses is quite significant with the significance value of .09 (Pearson chi-square). Therefore, ESL students from Malaysia are presumably would have lower tendency to get apprehensive if they volunteer to give answers in the language classroom.

Percentages obtained from the cross-tabulation between item 27 and nationality show that the majority of students from both Malaysia 80% and the PRC 90% are self-conscious about speaking in English. However, most of these students are neither anxious, nor confused when they have to speak in the target language during their language classes. Sixty-five percent of Malaysian students disagreed while 70% of the PRC students also disagreed to the statement in item 29. These results show that although most students from Malaysia and the PRC are self-conscious to speak in the target language, they are not nervous or confused when they speak in English classes.

### **(b) Fear of Communication between Genders**

Cross-tabulation results obtained for responses to item 18 between genders show that male students are less confident to speak in English as compared to the female students. Twenty-seven percent of male students are confident to speak in English but a higher percentage of 56% female students are confident to speak in the target language. The difference is significant and the significance is .09 (Pearson chi-square).

Although female students are more confident to speak in the target language as compared to the male students, students from these two genders however do not differ much in their level of self-consciousness to speak in English as shown in results gathered for item 27. Eighty-seven percent of male students and 88% of female students agreed to the statement of item 27. Their level of self-consciousness to speak in English has no significant difference with a Pearson chi-square value of .45.

The reason why students are self-conscious to speak in English could be due to their feelings of apprehension when they do not know how to pronounce a word. Sixty percent of male students agree that they get worried when they do not know how to pronounce a word. However, female students are more apprehensive when they do not know the pronunciation of a word. Eighty-eight percent of female students agreed to the statement in item 28. The difference of responses between male and female students to item 28 is slightly significant with a significance of .20.

In addition, students not only get apprehensive when they do not know how to pronounce a word. They are also apprehensive when they could not understand what the teacher is saying during English language classes. The percentages of responses for students who agreed and disagreed that they worry when they could not understand what the teacher is saying do not differ much. Forty-seven percent of male students and 52% of female students agreed to the statement in item 20 while the rest disagreed. The difference of responses obtained is not statistically significant with the significance value of .86 from the Pearson chi-square value obtained.

Although half of the total number of male and female students get upset when they cannot understand what the teacher is saying during language classes, they are however not apprehensive if they could not understand every word that the teacher says during lessons. This is suggested by the percentages of responses obtained. Only 33% and 36% of male and female students respectively agreed to the statement in item 31 while the majority disagreed. This difference is hardly significant with the significance value of .23 (Pearson chi-square).

In analysing the ESL male and female students' responses to item 19, it was found that the majority of students are not afraid when they are called by the teacher during English classes. Eighty percent of male students and 72% of female students disagreed to the statement in item 19. This difference is not significant and the Pearson chi-square value shows a significance of .84.

Additionally, both male and female students show a strong inclination of not panicking when they have to speak without preparation during English classes. Sixty seven percent of male students strongly disagree with the statement in item 21. However, the percentage of responses obtained for female students is slightly lower with 56% disagreed to the statement in item 21. Therefore, female students are more nervous to

speak spontaneously during language classes. However, the difference is not significant enough with the significance value of .82 from the Pearson chi-square.

The percentages of responses gathered for item 29 could explain the reason why female students are more apprehensive when they have to speak spontaneously during English classes. More female students agreed to the statement. Forty-eight percent of female students and 10% of male students agreed that they feel nervous and confused when they have to speak during English classes. The difference is highly significant with the Pearson chi-square significance value of .04. It is therefore evident that ESL female students are more apprehensive when communicating in English.

Moreover, female students are also more apprehensive when they have to give instant reply to the English language teacher's questions during classes. Forty-four percent of female students and only 33% male students agreed with the statement in item 30. However, this difference is not sufficiently significant with the Pearson chi-square value showing a significance of .33. Nevertheless, the result obtained strengthens the account that female students are communicatively more apprehensive as compared to male students in the ESL classrooms.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of ESL university students of Chinese ethnicity from the PRC and Malaysia addresses the research questions of this study. Nonetheless, these results cannot be generalized to the whole ESL students' population due to the small number of participants of this study. However, the findings can be used to shed light of the possible level of anxiety that ESL students experience as well as the different factors that could trigger anxiety in the language classroom.

## **Language Anxiety and Performance**

The findings showed that there is no significant difference in the students' performance in their previous test. Thirty-eight percent from the total number of participants are nervous about learning English. Half of these are students from the PRC. Additionally, there is a slight significance that ELS female students are more nervous learning English as compared

to male students. In reviewing Gardner's Model (1985), MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) found that results from the study consistently show that anxiety is one of the best predictors of success in the second language (p. 96).

MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) agreed with Horwitz (1986) that foreign language anxiety can be distinguished from other types of anxiety and it can have a negative effect on the language learning process. However, they suggested an alternative theory of how language anxiety is developed. MacIntyre and Gardner suggested that language anxiety is based on the negative expectations of the learner leading to worry and nervousness (p. 112). Additionally, the researchers believe that anxiety has an insignificant effect on proficiency. They suggested that any feelings of anxiety experienced during the early stages of language learning are more likely based on trait anxiety rather than on specific language learning situations.

Results in the present study also show that the PRC students are significantly more nervous during English tests. This could be that they are more anxious about failing the tests compared to Malaysian students. Apparently, the results also show that male students are more nervous than female students about failing their tests. However, the difference is not significant. This could be due to anxious students tend to underestimate their ability and more relaxed students tend to overestimate their ability. MacIntyre, Noels and Clement (1997) found that anxious students have the tendency to underestimate their level of ability. In contrast, more relaxed students would overestimate their ability in the second language because "self-enhancement" occurs in less anxious students and more anxious students would experience "self-derogation" (p. 278).

## **Language Anxiety and Fear of Negative Evaluation**

Results also illustrate that PRC students are significantly more anxious about what others would say of their command in the English language. Nevertheless, both male and female students are highly anxious about how others judge them in their command of the language. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991, p. 112) suggested that anxious students are characterised as individuals who perceive the second language as an uncomfortable experience.

In addition, they would also feel the social pressure of not making mistakes in front of others and would be less willing to try uncertain or produce new linguistic forms. Cross-tabulation result for item 27 and 28 proved that students would significantly get worried when they do not know how to pronounce a word which leads to their high level of self-consciousness to speak in English. This could be explained by the statement made by Horwitz et al. (1991) that “any performance in the L2 is likely to challenge an individual’s self-concept as a competent communicator and lead to reticence and, self-consciousness, fear, or even panic (p. 31).

### **Communication and Language Anxiety**

MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) also suggested that anxious students would usually withdraw from voluntary participations. However, contrasting results were obtained from the present study. Results show that a high percentage of 75% students from Malaysia and the PRC are not embarrassed to volunteer and give answers during English classes. Nevertheless, results show that female students are significantly more confident speaking in English as compared to male students as shown in cross-tabulation analysis for item 18. This could be caused by psychological and sociological attributes of the female gender. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) recorded that “communicative anxiety is also conceptually related to social-evaluative anxiety as each involves apprehension surrounding social perceptions and self-consciousness when speaking or participating in a social context” (p. 51)

Finally, it can be summarised that gender is of slight significance but nationality is a more important feature in identifying the anxiety level with the various factors that may contribute to English language classroom anxiety. This may be related to the economic rewards for success and penalties for failure for the PRC students. Although this study has its limitations, the results may shed some light and provide information about English language learning and classroom anxiety. The results indicate that the nationality and gender of ESL students have some influence on the different types of language classroom anxiety that ESL university learners experience. However, some differences might be due to the different cultural influences of a certain community.

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