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## Gender and Language: Communication Apprehension in Second Language Learning

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### Abstract

For over the decades, researchers all around the world have found that language learning comes with some difficulties and disabilities which can usually manifest into a more severe problem (Dembo, 1991). It is proven that second language learning can become a traumatic experience for certain language learners. Among the catalyst for this experience is the feeling of stressed, anxious and worries especially in communication (Banks, 2008). It is very apparent that communication apprehension, as stated by Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1991), has contributed towards the detrimental feeling of anxiety during the process of language learning. Since language anxiety is one of the major factor that determines the level of comprehensible input received (Krashen, 1982), it has undoubtedly developed into a prominent factor in determining the successful of second language learning. However, it is proven that communication apprehension can happen to anyone regardless of the gender. Wick-Nelson & Israel (2006) mention that communication apprehension, as the matter of fact manifests differently according to gender. Thus, it is important to note that female and male process their feeling and experiences differently. The aim of this paper is to determine the difference of communication apprehension level according to gender. A total of 60 respondents were randomly selected among the University Teknologi MARA (Perak) students from various faculties. The instrument used in this study is a set of questionnaire adapted from the measurement scale of language anxiety called Foreign Language Class Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) designed by Horwitz (1983). The data obtained were analyzed using SPSS version 16.0.

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*Keyword:* Anxiety; Second language learning; Communication; Apprehension; Gender

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## 1. Introduction

Malaysia is a country in which English Language is declared as a second language. Its position is secured in Article 152 under the country's law, thus reflecting its importance in the country. The act is significant in making English as a compulsory subject in the education curriculum in Malaysia. On average, most Malaysians start the learning of English Language as early as five or six year old during their kindergarten years, which continue through primary and secondary school. Hence, by the time a Malaysian begins tertiary level education, he or she should have a minimum of fourteen years of exposure to the language.

In UiTM (MARA University of Technology), it is compulsory for all diploma students to attend English classes for a minimum of three semesters during their studies. The language skills evaluated include reading, writing, speaking and listening. However, since speaking skill is not given an emphasis during students' primary and secondary school, difficulties in oral production is clearly observed among the students in tertiary level education.

Issues of language anxiety pertaining to Foreign Language (FL) and Second Language (L2), its symptoms, causes and effects have raised particular interest among language researchers and researches on these issues have been flourishing circa 1970s. Findings from these researches indicate that L2 and FL anxiety has a debilitating effect on language learning process. According to Zheng (2008), among all the learning disabilities, anxiety and fear have become the major factors in determining the success of second language learning. Speaking anxiety, also known as communicative apprehension, plays a huge role in determining learners' ability to adapt to the target environment and ultimately achieve their educational goal.

In order for the issue to be properly addressed, educators must first know the level of communication apprehension experienced by the learners. Therefore, the current study sought to investigate the level of the learners' communicative apprehension level in UiTM Perak, and its correlation with gender.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. *Language Anxiety*

For the past two decades, interest in the significance of anxiety in determining performance in second and foreign language has been thriving. Language anxiety is experienced by learners of both foreign and second language and poses potential problems "because it can interfere with the acquisition, retention and production of the new language" (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991, p.86). Horwitz (2001) debated that language anxiety is a specific type of anxiety and defines foreign language anxiety as 'a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to classroom learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process'. Tran (2012) too mentions about its volatile effect on language learning.

Numerous studies, like MacIntyre's (1999) and fairly recent ones in FL settings like Tran, Moni and Baldauf (2012) support the findings that there is a correlation between anxiety and language performance, so much so that it is viewed as one of the strongest predictors of foreign language success. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) divided language learning anxiety into three components, namely communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of being evaluated. From this research, an instrument, called FLCAS (Foreign Language Class Anxiety Scale) was designed to evaluate the level of anxiety that a learner is experiencing in learning foreign language. The instrument has since been used in various researches to help in giving insights in the anxiety faced by learners all over the world.

### 2.2. *Communication Apprehension*

As speaking skill is one of the most essential skills in language learning, anxiety in speaking is among the most significant factors in a second/ foreign language classroom. McCrosky (1987) defines communication apprehension as a type of anxiety experienced in interpersonal communicative settings where learners have little control of the communicative situation. According to Daly (1991), it is considered as 'Situational Apprehension' whereby it is

experienced due to ‘several characteristics of anxiety-provoking situation’ such as Evaluation, Novelty, Ambiguity, Conspicuousness, and Prior History (p.10).

This feeling leads to a ‘tendency for some people to avoid and fear when it comes to communicating orally’ (Daly, 1991:3). Furthermore, Mejiasset *al.* (1991) found that learners with higher communicative apprehension level are more likely to restrict their oral production and perceive silence as a desirable response during classroom activities. Additionally, the anxiety may also stem from the learners’ knowledge that people may have difficulty understanding them, or they may face difficulty understanding others (Seiler, 1996; McIntyre & Gardner, 1989).

Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1991) mentioned that learners are likely to experience difficulties to speak in language class due to having little control over some communication situations while their performances are constantly being monitored by everyone in the class especially their instructors or teachers (Van Worde, 2003; Price, 1991; Daly, 1991). Fear of being monitored by classmates also causes some students to have trouble in concentrating while speaking in second or foreign language (Pappamihel, 2002; Zheng, 2008). Additionally, students also experience speaking anxiety when they are not given adequate time to prepare the responses when asked by teachers (Chang, 2012). In the case of foreign language, a situation where learners have very limited access to, some experience difficulty in choosing the right word or sentences to be used in speaking (Young, 1991b; Zheng, 2008). These situations do not alleviate the feeling of anxiety in communication (Von Worde, 2003).

### 2.3. *Communication Apprehension and Gender*

Some researchers have looked into the correlation between gender and second and foreign language anxiety. McLean & Anderson (2009) also indicate that female have greater fear and have high possibility to develop anxiety as compared to men. However, findings on the relationship between learner’s difference in gender with their performance, anxiety level and understandings in learning L2 and FL remain inconclusive and debatable (Matsuda & Gobel, 2004).

According to Rosenfeld & Berko (1990), different gender does not affect the communication apprehension as they claimed that ‘gender is not significant in communication anxiety’ (p.125). Although males tend to be shyer while female tend to have more public speaking anxiety, there seem to be a few consistent differences between the genders.

However, a study by Wicks-Nelson & Israel (2006) found that naturally, female feel more anxious than male. This is due to many factors such as confidence, proficiency (Bruce *et. al.*, 2005), security, and superiority. Under certain circumstances, female tend to feel easily vulnerable and therefore lead to the feeling of anxious and worried while male on the other hand does obtain more self-control and ability to detach themselves from unpleasant feelings. On a similar vein, from a study conducted by Machida (2001), she examined FL Japanese language class anxiety based on gender differences and the findings reflected that female learners are more anxious than the male counterparts. Additionally, a study conducted by Mejiasset *al.* (1991) on the oral communication apprehension among Mexican American students in Texas found that Mexican American females in their study consistently produced higher communication score than the Mexican American males. Studies by Chang (1997) also seem to support the result.

On the contrary, Kitano (2001), in his research in the context of English as a foreign language found that in comparison to female students, male students tend to be more anxious while learning a second language. The data shows that male students are found to be more apprehensive in speaking as they perceive their speech to be less competent than that of the females.

## 3. **Methodology**

### 3.1. Respondents

The respondents of this study are 55 UiTM students who enrolled in English language classes. The respondents were selected randomly from a mixture of semester one, two and three from various faculties in University Teknologi MARA, Perak such as Faculty of Accountancy, Faculty of Business and Management as well as Faculty of Architecture, Planning and Surveying. For all the English classes taken, students are required to sit for final examination at the end of the semester. Besides the final examination, the students are also evaluated with five types of evaluation throughout the semester which are speaking, listening, grammar, reading and writing. As for the final exam, only reading and writing were evaluated.

The respondents involved in this study are 30 female and 25 male students. It is compulsory for all students to enroll in the English classes for the first three semesters in order to fulfill the university course requirement.

### 3.2. Instrument/Data Analysis

This study utilized the quantitative research methodology where the instrument used to collect the data was in a questionnaire form. The questionnaire was adapted from the measurement scale of foreign language anxiety called FLCAS (Foreign Language Class Anxiety Scale) introduced by Horwitz (1983). The FLCAS was used to establish the communication level for the respondents.

Researchers all around the world have proven that FLCAS is relevant to be used in order to determine the anxiety level for second language learning. This is due to the dependability of the questionnaires to be used in all language learning. This is supported by studies conducted by Kondo and Yang (2004) that used FLCAS to verify the anxiety level in second language learning.

The questionnaire consists of two different sections which are; Section A for Personal details and Section B for communication apprehension items. The questionnaire was presented in two versions which were English and Bahasa Malaysia to assist respondents understanding of the items in the questionnaire. Respondents from this study were required to answer 12 items regarding their feelings of being evaluated by both peers and lecturer in class. The instrument consists of the five Likert Scales from 'Strongly Agree' (1), 'Agree' (2), 'Undecided' (3), 'Disagree' (4) and lastly 'Strongly Disagree' (5). The levels of communication apprehension are divided into two levels which are high and low. The low level of anxiety is determined from the mean value between 3.01 to 5.00, while the high level is taken from the range of 1.00 to 3.00. The data in this study is analyzed using Statistical package For Social Science (SPSS) software version 20.0 for frequency, percentage, and mean value.

## 4. Findings and Discussions

Table 1. Frequency and percentage According to Gender

Gender	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Male	25	45.50
Female	30	54.50
Total	55	100

Table 2. Mean value for male and female

No	Item	Male			Female		
		Mean	Level	Std. D	Mean	Level	Std. D
1	I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking English in my English class.	2.88	High	0.83	2.47	High	0.86
2	I tremble when I know that I am going to be called in English class.	2.84	High	1.14	2.40	High	0.89
3	It frightens me when I do not understand what the lecturer is saying in English.	3.24	Low	0.97	2.97	High	0.93

4	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in my English class.	2.76	<b>High</b>	1.16	2.27	<b>High</b>	1.00
5	It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class.	3.24	<b>Low</b>	0.92	2.77	<b>High</b>	0.97
6	I would be nervous speaking in English with native speakers.	2.44	<b>High</b>	1.08	2.13	<b>High</b>	0.81
7	I am not confident when I speak using English in my class.	2.80	<b>High</b>	0.87	2.73	<b>High</b>	1.04
8	I can feel my heart pounding when I am going to my English class.	3.40	<b>Low</b>	1.19	3.50	<b>Low</b>	1.01
9	I feel very self-conscious about speaking using English in front of other students.	2.44	<b>High</b>	0.76	2.63	<b>High</b>	0.93
10	I get nervous and confused when I am speaking using English in my class.	3.16	<b>Low</b>	0.80	2.57	<b>High</b>	0.86
11	I get nervous when I do not understand every word the English lecturer says.	2.88	<b>High</b>	1.16	2.50	<b>High</b>	1.04
12	I get nervous when the lecturer asks questions using English which I have not prepared in advance.	2.88	<b>High</b>	1.16	2.67	<b>High</b>	0.99

From the findings, it is found that majority of both male and female experience high anxiety level. However, it can also be concluded that female experience high anxiety level as compared to male students. This can be seen from Table 2 where out of 12 items, the level for male is high for 8 items whereas female is reported to have 11 item with high level of anxiety.

There could be several explanations for this situation. It is a fact that language classes in UiTM revolves around many activities such as speaking, listening, writing and reading. However, it can be noted that of all the activities, speaking is proven to be the most stressful since the direct output has to be projected immediately. The students are required to enroll in English classes for three semesters where speaking activity is considered quite crucial in overall assessment. Therefore, situation like this undoubtedly promotes high level of apprehension. Without proper guidance from language instructors, these activities can become one of the most anxiety-provoking activities in class. When this situation happens, students feel lost and therefore have negative perceptions on all speaking activities.

As for the differences in anxiety level between male and female students, several possible explanations which relate to the factors of confidence, security and superiority should be taken into consideration. Wicks-Nelson & Israel (2006) also mention that female students might feel more anxious when it comes to oral activities in class. This is due to the fact that sometimes the female students need to feel secured in class, thus try to avoid any kind of activities that might expose their mistakes in front of others. This is due to the fact that some of them are more concern about 'maintaining their faces' in front of others especially male students. Female students naturally do not like to appear as less proficient and less confident (Bruce *et al*, 2005), therefore escalating their anxiety whenever they are asked to get involved with activities like speaking and listening. This somehow is portrayed as a demonstration of weaknesses in front of others especially while presenting in front of the opposite gender (Tom *et. al*, 2013). Some male students on the other hand, do have more self-control and the ability to detach themselves from unpleasant feeling. In short, some of them might adopt the 'shutting down' technique where they appear to be more lay back and careless exteriorly.

Apart from that, struggling in understanding instruction is too a major problem for female students as compared to the male students. Agitation and apprehension are projected when they could not execute the task according to the instructions, thus making them more vulnerable in front of the class. This is consistent with Mclean & Anderson (2009) who found that female develop greater risk of anxiety according to their social factor and surrounding. This somehow might lower down their confidence level and making them feel more insecure in class. According to

Croates (2004:138), female students do have the urges to maintain their faces in front of different gender. This is what she refers to as ‘performing femininity’ where the female students need to be regarded as brilliant. Female students tend to feel more secured in class when others regard them as brilliant and smart but tend to feel intimidated if others perceive them stupid. This is proven by Tran, Moni and Baldauf (2012) who mention about the importance of maintaining language performance in class.

Nevertheless, this study also found that male students do feel anxious in certain situation where they are less confident and self-conscious. A study conducted by Zhao Na (2007) has also found that male students are more anxious in English class where the experience is considered as nightmare for them. This is supported by Bracken & Crain (1994) who claim that male students have the tendency to feel more anxious than female since female students have better interpersonal skills in class especially with lecturers. Hence, due to the feeling of quite distant with the language instructor, the tendency for male students to feel more anxious when they have to communicate in class is high. The feeling of male should be superior in class might also affect the possibility of maintaining the self-perceived ability.

In addition to that, one absolutely cannot disregard the role of language instructor here. Even though the second language students have become familiar with these kinds of activities, there are certain time when they feel quite confuse when they could not understand the instruction given by the language instructors. This happens when language instructors are not aware of the difficulties the students face even for a simple instruction in class. As mentioned by Von Worde (2003), most of the students feel quite anxious when they did not understand the slightness instruction given by the lecturer. The feeling become worst when they have to engage themselves in activities where no preparation is done.

## 5. Recommendations

The findings of this study suggest that the second language lecturers play a very important role in determining the communication apprehension level of the students. Hence, the language lecturers should be more sensitive towards students’ feelings when conducting lessons in the classroom since most of the students feel lack of confident and insecure while learning second language. Therefore, the lecturer should assist and accommodate the students to avoid them from feeling apprehensive and nervous when asked to speak in English. Besides that, language lecturers are also responsible in choosing the right methods and techniques used in the class. They need to be more alert with students’ learning preference to maximize the effectiveness of language teaching and learning. Few interesting activities that involve group interaction with less peers’ evaluation and more on developing cooperation among members are highly recommended. This is to ensure the comfortableness of the students during the process of learning and acquiring the language where all students have the chance to have a say equally regardless of their differences in competency. Moreover, it is important for the lecturers to be more sensitive towards this issue, thus strive to create a non-apprehension-inducing learning environment conducive for the students.

It is also found from this study that students suffer from the unfavorable feeling of apprehension due to due to negative evaluation by peers and lecturer while learning the language. Hence, students should be more supportive towards each other and not forgetting, lecturer’s support for the students during the learning process.

## 6. Conclusion

The findings from this study show that majority of the students have high communication apprehension level in communication apprehension factor. This highly indicates that apprehensiveness still becomes one of the factors that hamper language learning. Apprehension in language learning is sometimes considered as insignificant matter for some people. And yet, the consequences are far too apparent to be considered as unimportant. Thus, it is very crucial for language lecturers or instructors to be aware of all those factors especially the feeling of fear in evaluation. Since it is not possible to escape evaluations in language learning, students too have to be smart in dealing with fear such as adopting strategies and making preparation for English classes.

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