

ASSESSING THE INFLUENCE OF LANGUAGE ANXIETY ON ENGLISH ORAL PERFORMANCE AMONG MAINLAND CHINESE POSTGRADUATES IN A MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: *As international student mobility continues to rise, language challenges have become a significant concern, especially for Mainland Chinese postgraduates studying in non-native English-speaking countries like Malaysia. This study investigates the impact of language anxiety on English oral performance among these students at Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kelantan (UiTMCK). Using semi-structured focus group interviews, the research identifies key factors contributing to language anxiety, including cultural adaptation difficulties, fear of negative evaluation, and limited opportunities for English-speaking practice. The findings reveal that language anxiety significantly hinders oral performance, leading to speech hesitations, avoidance behaviors, and communication errors. The study's significant contribution lies in addressing a gap in the literature by focusing on Mainland Chinese students in Southeast Asia, offering insights that could inform targeted language support programs to enhance oral communication skills and reduce anxiety. Additionally, the study provides recommendations for future research to further explore these issues among other international student populations.*

Keywords: *language anxiety, English Oral Performance, Mainland Chinese postgraduates, Malaysian Public University.*

Introduction

In recent years, international student mobility has been on the rise, with a significant number of Mainland Chinese students pursuing postgraduate degrees in non-native English-speaking countries like Malaysia. These students often face challenges in mastering English, particularly in oral communication, due to various factors such as cultural differences, language barriers, and anxiety (Lou & Noels, 2020; Zhao et al., 2013). Proficiency in English oral communication is crucial for postgraduate success in Malaysian higher education institutions, as it directly impacts academic performance and social integration (Zhou et al., 2011).

Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kelantan (UiTMCK), is one of the Malaysian public universities that serves as an ideal setting to study language anxiety among international students. In recent years, UiTMCK has witnessed a steady influx of Mainland Chinese postgraduates, making it a relevant case study to examine the challenges these students face in adapting to the linguistic demands of their academic environment.

Mainland Chinese postgraduates who study at UiTMCK face significant difficulties in English oral communication due to language anxiety. This challenge has affected their academic performance and hinders their social integration within the university community (Ansari, 2015; Yassin & Razak, 2017). While research on language anxiety has grown in recent years, there is limited focus on Mainland Chinese postgraduate students studying in Malaysian universities (Zhang, 2013; Zhao et al., 2013).

This study aims to address this gap by examining the influence of language anxiety on English oral performance among Mainland Chinese postgraduates at UiTMCK during the specified period. The primary objectives of this study are to explore the impact of language anxiety on English oral performance among Mainland Chinese postgraduate students at UiTMCK and to identify the key factors contributing to language anxiety in English oral communication among these students. By examining these aspects, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how language anxiety influences academic performance and social interactions, thereby offering insights that could advise strategies to support international students in overcoming these challenges and enhancing their English proficiency in a multicultural educational setting.

Literature Review

This literature review aims to synthesize recent research findings, identify existing gaps, and highlight the need for further investigation into the factors contributing to language anxiety among Mainland Chinese postgraduate students in Malaysian public universities. By addressing these issues, better educational practices and support systems that promote successful language acquisition and overall student well-being can be established.

Factors Contributing to Language Anxiety in English Oral Performance

Language anxiety, particularly in the context of English oral performance, is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by various psychological, cultural, and social factors. Cultural adaptation difficulties, fear of negative evaluation, and insufficient opportunities have been

identified as significant contributors to the anxiety experienced by non-native English speakers, particularly those studying in foreign academic environments.

Cultural adaptation difficulties.

Refers to the challenges international students face when adjusting to a new cultural environment, which can significantly impact their language learning experience. Zhou and Todman (2020) emphasise that adapting to a different cultural context often involves navigating unfamiliar social norms, communication styles, and academic expectations. These difficulties can exacerbate language anxiety, particularly in oral communication, as students may struggle to align their speaking practices with the host country's cultural norms. For Mainland Chinese students in Malaysia, the cultural dissonance between their home culture and the local environment may intensify their anxiety during English-speaking tasks, as they might fear violating unspoken cultural rules or being misunderstood (Wang et al., 2021). This cultural mismatch can create a barrier to effective communication, leading to a reluctance to engage in English oral activities and, consequently, limiting opportunities for practice and improvement.

Fear of negative evaluation.

The apprehension about being judged unfavourably by others. This fear is particularly pronounced in language learning contexts, where students are often acutely aware of their linguistic shortcomings. A study by Chen and Wang (2020) examines how fear of negative evaluation contributes to speaking anxiety among Chinese learners of English. The study shows that fear of being judged by peers and instructors leads to significant anxiety during oral activities, reducing students' willingness to speak. Meanwhile, Zheng and Cheng (2021) further demonstrate that this fear is especially prevalent among Chinese students studying in foreign countries, where they may perceive a higher risk of negative evaluation due to cultural and linguistic differences.

Insufficient opportunities.

Refers to the lack of adequate and authentic contexts for practicing a language, particularly outside the classroom. Having limited opportunities for language learners, especially those in non-English-speaking environments to engage in meaningful conversations in the target language can significantly hinder their language development. Liu (2020) argues that limited exposure to real-life speaking situations outside the classroom is a significant factor contributing to language anxiety. For students in environments where English is not the dominant language outside of academic settings, such as in Malaysia, the opportunities for practicing English in social contexts may be scarce. This scarcity can lead to a cycle where students feel unprepared and anxious during formal speaking tasks, as they have not had adequate practice to develop their skills. Peng and Woodrow (2022) found that insufficient speaking opportunities are directly linked to higher levels of anxiety, as students are less likely to feel competent and confident in their oral abilities when they have not had the chance to regularly use English in diverse situations.

Recent Research on the Experiences of Chinese Students in Foreign Academic Contexts

Recent research has provided valuable insights into the experiences and challenges faced by Chinese students in foreign academic contexts, many of which have a direct impact on their English oral performance due to language anxiety. One significant area of focus has been the construction of multilingual identities among these students, a process that can deeply influence their confidence and anxiety levels when speaking English. For example, Fan et al. (2023)

explored how studying abroad shapes the multilingual identity of Chinese university students. Their study, which employed a multi-theoretical perspective, traced the development of students' identities before, during, and after their overseas experiences, highlighting the complex and dynamic nature of identity formation in study-abroad settings. This evolving identity often brings with it a heightened awareness of language competence, particularly in English, which can exacerbate anxiety and hinder oral performance.

Furthermore, the psychological and academic adjustments required during the COVID-19 pandemic have further complicated these challenges. Liu et al. (2022) conducted an eight-month exploratory case study involving eight Chinese international students in the UK, revealing that the pandemic not only intensified pre-existing challenges but also introduced new stressors, such as health concerns, social isolation, and academic disruptions. These stressors likely compound language anxiety, making it even more difficult for students to engage confidently in English oral communication, especially in new or high-pressure situations. Moreover, the pandemic's impact on students' intentions to study abroad is closely tied to concerns about their ability to perform in English-speaking environments. Xiong et al. (2024) investigated this issue and found that students from provinces with high COVID-19 exposure were more inclined to pursue studies abroad, driven by China's stringent preventive measures.

However, the study also noted a decline in the overall number of potential applicants, suggesting that the combination of pandemic-related stress and language anxiety; particularly regarding English oral performance; may be deterring students from studying in environments where English is the primary medium of instruction. This underscores the need for universities to rethink their recruitment strategies by offering robust language support and creating enriching social experiences that specifically address language anxiety, thereby helping Chinese students overcome the challenges associated with English oral performance in Malaysian public university settings.

Challenges in English-medium Instruction Programs

Research conducted by Zhu et al. (2021) investigates the challenges faced by Chinese students in English-medium instruction (EMI) programs, identifying language proficiency, academic cultural differences, and insufficient support from host universities as significant barriers to success. These findings underscore the necessity for universities to provide targeted language and academic support to help Chinese students thrive in EMI settings. Collectively, these studies reveal the complex challenges and identity transformations that Chinese students undergo in foreign academic contexts, emphasizing the importance of culturally responsive teaching and creating inclusive learning environments. However, recent literature on language anxiety, particularly among Mainland Chinese postgraduate students in Malaysian public universities, indicates several gaps that require further exploration.

For instance, most existing studies have primarily focused on Chinese students in Western contexts, such as the United States of America (USA) or Australia, leaving a gap in research specifically addressing their experiences in Southeast Asia. Liao and Liang's (2021) study on foreign language anxiety (FLA) among Chinese graduate students in the USA highlighted cultural and personal factors influencing anxiety, but similar dynamics in Southeast Asian educational settings remain underexplored. Additionally, while some studies acknowledge the emotional aspects of language anxiety, there is a noticeable lack of in-depth research examining its psychological impacts on academic performance and social integration among Chinese postgraduate students in Malaysian public universities. For example, Liao and Liang's

qualitative data emphasised self-adjustment strategies but did not explore the long-term psychological effects of sustained anxiety. Moreover, there is a need for more comprehensive studies to identify and evaluate effective coping strategies specifically tailored for Chinese postgraduate students in Malaysian public universities. Although some research has pointed to general strategies like making friends with native speakers, the effectiveness of these strategies in the unique cultural and academic contexts of Malaysian public universities remains under-researched.

Furthermore, the role of institutional support in mitigating language anxiety among Chinese students in Malaysian public universities is insufficiently examined. While support from educational institutions has been shown to significantly influence students' experiences, there is limited empirical evidence on the effectiveness of such support in Malaysian public university contexts. Another area that needs more attention is the impact of sociocultural differences on language anxiety. While cultural forces were noted in Liao and Liang's study, the specific cultural dynamics and their effects on language anxiety in Malaysian public universities have yet to be thoroughly investigated. Finally, most of the existing research is cross-sectional, providing only a snapshot of language anxiety at a single point in time. There is a pressing need for longitudinal studies that track changes in language anxiety and its impact on oral communication throughout postgraduate studies in Malaysian public universities. Such studies could offer valuable insights into how anxiety evolves and influences academic performance and social integration.

The literature on language anxiety, particularly among Mainland Chinese postgraduate students in Malaysian public universities, highlights a significant and multifaceted issue that affects academic performance and social integration. Recent studies have confirmed the negative impact of language anxiety on oral communication, revealing that high anxiety levels can hinder students' ability to express themselves effectively in English. While research has explored various dimensions of language anxiety, including its cognitive, emotional, and sociocultural influences, gaps remain in understanding the unique experiences of Chinese students in Malaysian public university contexts. Key findings indicate that cultural factors, institutional support, and coping strategies play crucial roles in shaping language anxiety experiences. However, the existing literature predominantly focuses on Western contexts, leaving a void in research specifically addressing the challenges faced by Chinese postgraduate students in Malaysian public universities. Furthermore, there is a lack of longitudinal studies that track the evolution of language anxiety over time and its long-term effects on students' academic and social outcomes. To address these gaps, future research should focus on the specific sociocultural dynamics at play in Malaysian public university educational settings, the effectiveness of institutional support systems, and the development of tailored coping strategies for Chinese students. By filling these gaps, researchers can provide valuable insights that inform educational practices and interventions aimed at reducing language anxiety and as well as enhancing the overall academic experience for Mainland Chinese postgraduate students in Malaysian public universities. This comprehensive understanding is vital for fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment that promotes both academic success and emotional well-being.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design utilizing semi-structured focus group interviews to gain in-depth insights into the experiences of language anxiety and its impact on English oral performance among Mainland Chinese postgraduate students at UiTMCK (Debus,

1990; Krueger, 2002). Focus group interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method to foster a permissive and comfortable environment where participants could openly share their perspectives and experiences (Denscombe, 2007; Patton, 2002).

Seven Mainland Chinese postgraduate students from various majors currently studying at UiTMCK were purposefully selected to participate in the focus group interview. The participants were recruited based on their shared characteristics as Mainland Chinese postgraduates and their experiences with language anxiety in an English-medium academic setting (Denscombe, 2007; Krueger, 2002).

A single semi-structured focus group interview was conducted with all seven participants. The interview was guided by predetermined questions that explored the students' personal experiences with language anxiety, its impact on their English oral communication performance, and the coping strategies they employ to manage anxiety in academic and social contexts (Debus, 1990; Krueger, 2002). The focus group setting allowed for interactive discussions and the generation of rich qualitative data (Denscombe, 2007; Patton, 2002).

The focus group interview was audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in capturing the participants' responses while maintaining confidentiality and participant anonymity (Denscombe, 2007; Krueger, 2002). The researcher also took detailed notes during the interview to supplement the audio recordings and facilitate the data analysis process.

The audio recordings of the focus group interview were transcribed verbatim, and a thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes related to language anxiety and its effects on English oral communication performance among Mainland Chinese postgraduate students (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). The analysis involved a systematic process of coding, categorising, and interpreting the data to uncover patterns, relationships, and insights that address the research objectives (Krueger, 2002; Patton, 2002). The methodology for this study were summarized in the following table:

Table 1: Summary of Research Methodology

Component	Descriptions
Research Design	Qualitative research design
Data Collection Method	Semi-structured focus group interviews
Participants	Seven Mainland Chinese postgraduate students from various majors at UiTMCK
Data Recording	Audio-recorded interviews, supplemented by detailed notes
Data Analysis	Thematic analysis: Transcription of interviews followed by systematic coding and categorization to identify recurring themes

Findings And Discussions

The focus group interviews revealed several key themes related to language anxiety among Mainland Chinese postgraduate students at UiTMCK. The first prominent theme was the fear of negative evaluation, where participants expressed concerns about being judged by peers and instructors during oral communication. This fear often led to heightened anxiety levels, making them hesitant to participate in discussions or presentations. Another significant theme was the

cultural adaptation challenges faced by the students, which included difficulties in understanding local accents, idiomatic expressions, and cultural nuances in communication. Participants reported feeling out of place and struggling to express themselves effectively in a foreign environment. Additionally, the theme of perceived inadequacies in English proficiency emerged, with students frequently doubting their language skills, which further exacerbated their anxiety during oral interactions.

Impact of Language Anxiety on Oral Performance

The analysis of how language anxiety manifests during oral communication highlighted several observable behaviours among participants. Many students reported experiencing hesitations and avoidance behaviours, such as refraining from speaking in class or opting to communicate in writing rather than verbally. These behaviours were often accompanied by speech errors, including mispronunciations and grammatical mistakes, which participants attributed to their anxious state. The fear of making mistakes not only affected their confidence but also hindered their ability to engage fully in academic discussions. This aligns with the findings of Liu et al. (2021), who noted that language anxiety can significantly impair students' oral performance by creating a cycle of avoidance and decreased participation.

Contributing Factors to Language Anxiety

The focus group discussions identified several contributing factors to language anxiety among the participants. Academic pressure was a major concern, as students felt overwhelmed by the expectations to perform well in their studies while simultaneously mastering a second language. Peer interactions also played a crucial role, with participants indicating that comparisons with more proficient classmates heightened their anxiety. Furthermore, instructor feedback—particularly when perceived as critical—was cited as a source of stress, leading to feelings of inadequacy. Lastly, students highlighted the restricted opportunities for practice in real-life situations, which they believed contributed to their lack of confidence in speaking English. These findings resonate with the research of Zhang et al. (2022), which emphasised the importance of supportive peer and instructor relationships in mitigating language anxiety.

Comparison with Recent Literature

The findings from this study align with existing literature, particularly regarding the impact of language anxiety on oral performance and the contributing factors identified. For instance, Huang and Chen (2023) found that fear of negative evaluation significantly affects language learners' willingness to participate in oral tasks, echoing the sentiments expressed by participants in this study. Similarly, the challenges of cultural adaptation reported by students align with the findings of Wang et al. (2021), who highlighted the difficulties faced by international students in adjusting to new linguistic and cultural environments. However, this study also deviates from some existing research by emphasising the role of limited practice opportunities as a distinct factor contributing to anxiety, a nuance that may warrant further exploration in future studies. Overall, the findings underscore the multifaceted nature of language anxiety and its profound impact on the academic experiences of Mainland Chinese postgraduates in Malaysia.

Conclusion

This study has provided valuable insights into the influence of language anxiety on English oral performance among Mainland Chinese postgraduate students at UiTMCK. The findings indicate that language anxiety significantly affects students' willingness and ability to engage in oral communication, manifesting through behaviours such as hesitations, avoidance, and speech errors. The fear of negative evaluation emerged as a predominant theme, highlighting the psychological barriers that hinder students from expressing themselves effectively in English. These results align with the existing literature that emphasises the detrimental impacts of language anxiety on academic performance, particularly in speaking tasks (Huang & Chen, 2023; Liu et al., 2021).

Moreover, the study identified several contributing factors to language anxiety, including academic pressure, peer interactions, and limited practice opportunities. The academic environment in which these students operate often exacerbates their anxiety, as they navigate the challenges of mastering a second language while meeting high academic expectations. This finding is consistent with previous research that underscores the importance of a supportive learning environment in mitigating language anxiety (Wang et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). The cultural adaptation challenges faced by these students further complicate their experiences, as they struggle to adjust to a new linguistic and social context.

The implications of these findings are significant for educators and institutions seeking to support international students. Strategies aimed at reducing language anxiety should be prioritised, including creating an inclusive classroom atmosphere that encourages participation and fosters positive peer interactions. Additionally, providing more opportunities for practice in low-stakes environments can help build students' confidence and proficiency in English. As highlighted by the participants, positive reinforcement from instructors and peers is crucial in alleviating feelings of inadequacy and anxiety (Debus, 1990; Krueger, 2002).

In conclusion, addressing language anxiety among Mainland Chinese postgraduate students at UiTMCK is essential for enhancing their academic success and social integration. Future research should continue to explore the multifaceted nature of language anxiety, considering the diverse experiences of international students in various educational contexts. By understanding and addressing the factors that impact language anxiety, educators can better support students in their language learning journeys, ultimately leading to improved oral communication skills and academic outcomes.

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