



# Language Anxiety Among Adult Learners in UiTM Sarawak

Siti Huzaimah Binti Sahari<sup>1</sup>, Aiza Binti Johari<sup>1</sup>, Affidah Binti Morni<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Malaysia*

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## Abstract

Language anxiety is a crucial factor that must be considered in the learning and teaching of a second or foreign language. It is defined as the feelings of uneasiness, worry, nervousness, self-doubt, frustration, and apprehension (Brown, 2001) experienced by non-native speakers when learning or using a second or foreign language. Learners respond to language anxiety differently. This study investigates the language anxiety levels and coping strategies applied by adult learners at UiTM Sarawak when using English as a medium of instruction. The subjects of the study were between 45 and 50 years of age. Data collection was carried out through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The results show that adult learners experience varying levels of language anxiety and have adopted several strategies to cope with it. The conclusion presents suggestions and recommendations for handling anxiety in both the teaching and learning of a second language.

**Keywords:** language anxiety, adult learners, UiTM Sarawak

## Introduction

Language anxiety is a condition in which learners feel anxious, panicked, or worried when conversing in a language that is not their first language or mother tongue. A lack of confidence, reluctance to speak, and even insomnia in severe cases are common symptoms (Ellis, 2008). A significant area addressed by numerous researchers (MacIntyre, 1995; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; Young, 1991; Sparks & Ganschow, 1995) falls under affective factors, focusing on how a learner emotionally feels toward the language (Scovel, 1991).

Program Pensiswazahan Guru Besar (PKPGB) is a program offered at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Sarawak. It is designed to provide an opportunity for headmasters or principals from primary schools who are currently on the DG 32 or

DG 34 diploma scale to further their studies by pursuing a Bachelor's Degree in Education. The candidates' ages range from 40 to 50 years old.

Because English is the medium of instruction for all courses at UiTM Sarawak, this requirement has caused students to question their ability to cope with English in their classes and assessments. Consequently, there is a pressing need to analyze the language anxiety levels of these adult learners when using English as a second language. This analysis provides a clear perspective on their anxiety levels, which will assist in developing coping mechanisms and refining teaching methods.

### **Objectives**

The primary objective of this paper is to identify language anxiety levels among adult students at UiTM Sarawak. Additionally, respondents were interviewed to investigate their coping mechanisms and learning strategies. The paper also discusses effective methods for teaching and learning English as a second language.

### **Research Methodology**

Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were utilized to collect data. The questionnaire data was analyzed using simple frequency counts, while the interview responses were tabulated to identify students' language anxiety when using English as a medium of instruction.

The questionnaire was adopted and adapted from the Second Language Anxiety Scale by Dr. Carter. To identify anxiety levels, fourteen situational questions were administered, and respondents ranked their anxiety based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from not at all anxious to extremely anxious.

The questionnaire assessed these fourteen specific situations to comprehensively gauge anxiety levels. These scenarios included formal and informal interactions, such as being asked a question by an English lecturer in class or speaking informally to an English teacher outside of class. The survey also explored anxiety related to public performance and group dynamics, prompting respondents on their feelings when taking part in a group discussion, participating in a role-play or dialogue in front of the class, or giving an oral presentation. Furthermore, students were asked to rate their apprehension when contributing to both formal and informal class discussions. Interactions with university staff were also evaluated, specifically focusing on asking for advice in English from a lecturer or supervisor, talking to administrative staff, or being questioned by lecturers from their own or other faculties. Finally, the questionnaire addressed out-of-class social interactions, examining the anxiety provoked by engaging in or initiating a conversation with someone perceived to possess superior English skills, as well as being asked questions by an unfamiliar English speaker.

The interview questions focused primarily on the coping mechanisms students adopted to lessen their anxiety. Respondents were also asked to detail the specific steps they take to improve their English language proficiency over time.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Questionnaire Results**

The questionnaire results revealed that students' anxiety levels fluctuate significantly depending on the specific situation. Interactions with an English lecturer in both formal and informal contexts caused high levels of anxiety among the students. Conversely, participating in group discussions and conversing among peers did not provoke much anxiety. However, public performance tasks, such as delivering oral presentations and engaging in role-plays in front of the class, induced high anxiety for most students.

When contributing to class discussions, anxiety levels varied by context: formal discussions generated high anxiety, whereas informal discussions did not. Furthermore, communicating in English with administrative staff moderately affected students' anxiety, whereas talking to lecturers or supervisors triggered high anxiety. Finally, speaking with individuals whom the students perceived to have better English proficiency, or conversing with unfamiliar English speakers, greatly elevated their anxiety levels. Overall, in a majority of the assessed situations, this group of adult students exhibited a high level of language anxiety.

### **Interview Results**

When asked how they typically manage feelings of anxiety and nervousness, the respondents shared several practical coping mechanisms. Many learners attempt to calm down and use positive self-talk to relax during stressful situations. When in the classroom setting, they frequently rely on their peers, actively seeking assistance from classmates to navigate difficult linguistic tasks. Beyond peer support, they consciously force and encourage themselves to speak English by reflecting on their core academic motivations and their overarching purpose for being at the university.

To actively improve their English language proficiency, the students reported integrating several habits into their daily routines. They make a concerted effort to speak in English more frequently and dedicate dedicated time to reading English materials. This reading habit is supplemented by auditory and visual immersion, as they frequently listen to and watch English-language programs. When faced with a lack of understanding, they proactively ask questions and consistently refer to linguistic tools, utilizing both traditional physical dictionaries and electronic dictionaries installed on their smartphones.

## **Discussion and Recommendations**

Some students have developed personal coping mechanisms to deal with this pervasive anxiety (Dornyei, 2005). Often, facing their anxiety head-on and continuously practicing the language are the only viable options for learners. Despite these individual efforts, lecturers and language teachers can implement specific methods and techniques to help reduce anxiety levels within the educational environment (Chew & Chui, 2012). Chao (2003) suggested that understanding anxiety in language learning can effectively guide educators to view the learning process from the learner's perspective.

Mocking or insulting adult learners will undoubtedly hinder their efforts to converse and participate in class. Having worked for many years in a predominantly Malay-speaking environment, these professionals find using English as a medium of instruction profoundly challenging. Therefore, as noted by Zheng (2008), obtaining a full understanding of the students' situation provides educators with the necessary insights to develop suitable interventions aimed at decreasing language anxiety among second language learners.

Building students' confidence in using the language is a key motivational factor. Students of all ages need to be nurtured and encouraged in their educational journeys (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990). The necessity of using a second language for classroom participation, assignments, and examinations directly impacts their self-confidence. Thus, it is crucial for lecturers to actively boost this confidence. Trang, Moni, and Baldauf (2012) also suggested that continuously reinforcing the importance of learning English can help students develop strong motivation and reaffirm their commitment to mastering the language.

In planning and conducting classes for adult learners, educators can refer to Knowles' (1984) principles of andragogy. Knowles outlined basic principles for adult learning that can transform the classroom experience when properly applied.

## **Self-Concept and Self-Direction**

Adult learners deeply need to feel responsible for their lives and decisions; therefore, they must feel they have control over their learning trajectory. Establishing good rapport and a peer-like relationship with instructors fosters this necessary sense of control by enabling open communication and active participation. Facilitating self-assessment, providing multiple assignment options, and offering subtle, rather than overbearing, support are essential strategies for educators.

## **The Role of Adult Learner Experience**

Classroom activities must closely align with the learners' extensive life experiences. Discussing and sharing these diverse personal and professional experiences is critical before introducing any new theoretical concepts. Furthermore, mistakes or

weaknesses encountered during language acquisition should be gracefully framed as valuable learning experiences rather than academic failures.

### **Readiness to Learn**

As individuals mature, their readiness to learn becomes increasingly oriented toward the developmental tasks associated with their specific social roles. For adult learners, it is vital to purposefully incorporate elements of their real-world social and professional responsibilities into daily lessons, tasks, and overarching activities.

### **Orientation to Learning**

Approaches used in teaching the English language should revolve around practical problem-solving based on authentic, real-life situations. This pedagogical shift moves the focus away from strict subject-centeredness toward a more engaging problem-centeredness, making it significantly easier for adult students to understand the practical functions and applications of the language.

### **Internal Motivation to Learn**

In his later revisions, Malcolm Knowles highlighted that adult learners are primarily driven by internal motivation rather than external rewards. Consistent encouragement and validation from lecturers play a pivotal role in building and sustaining the intrinsic motivation necessary for successful, long-term learning.

Finally, anxiety itself can be harnessed as a positive educational force. Students' anxiety, uncertainty, and discomfort can serve as powerful catalysts to learn more deeply (Hallinger, 1998). Convincing students that the mistakes they make will ultimately help them speak better—because true learning occurs through the process of correcting errors—is an highly effective way to reframe and manage performance anxiety. Their apprehension can and should be channeled productively into improving their language skills (Richardson, 1996).

### **Conclusion**

Students of a second language will inevitably experience anxiety, as the process of acquiring a new language is inherently difficult and psychologically demanding. Students must actively develop personal coping mechanisms to face this challenge head-on (Robinson, 2005). Concurrently, lecturers and language teachers must cultivate a deep understanding of this anxiety, diligently help students build their self-confidence, and actively encourage a safe space for classroom participation.

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