



English Language Learning Anxiety and its Relationship with Language Achievement: A Study on Learners in a Technical University

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Abstract: Learning English has never been easy in an environment where it is seldom used. As such there is possibility that English language learners may suffer from language learning anxiety which could affect their language achievements. The present study aim is to examine the level of English language learning anxiety experienced by Diploma students in Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM). It also intends to determine if there is a relationship between the level of anxiety in the English language learning and the students' English language achievements in the national examination. Additionally, the study intends to identify if there is a difference in the level of English language learning anxiety between genders among the Diploma students in UTeM. Based on this, a sample of 125 students of first semester Diploma in Information Technology (DIT) were given a set of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) survey forms which was adapted from the original FLCAS version (Horwitz, et al., 1986). The students' English language grades at SPM level were used as the measurement of their English language achievement. The findings revealed that the students experienced a moderate level of English language learning anxiety ($M=2.68$). The results of Pearson correlation showed there is a significant negative relationship between total FLCA scores and SPM English language achievement scores ($r = -.360, n = 125, p < 0.05$). It was also discovered that the male diploma students experienced a higher level of English language learning anxiety ($M=2.758$) compared to the female students ($M=2.593$) of their cohort. In conclusion, the present study suggests that language educators need to provide positive experiences and conducive environment for English language learners. This is because unthreatening English lessons will definitely help TVET and MTUN undergraduates enhance their English communication skills.

Keywords: English language anxiety, FLCAS, gender differences, english achievement, technical university

1. Introduction

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR 4.0) demands the nation to produce a well-trained technical workforce equipped with skill sets that can withstand the ever-changing job market and progressive technology. Considering these impending changes taking place globally, Malaysia needs to restructure its workforce to the extent that the highly skilled will always be resilient in meeting the expectations of the industry. The TalentCorp (2019) hoped that employers would have better access to a talent pool of work-ready graduates from public institutions of higher education as well as technical and vocational education training (TVET) institutions in the near future. To this end, Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) is seen as the driving force in the country's development. TVET's curriculum has been made more practical and flexible to meet the challenges of the IR 4.0. In order to create more career pathways and opportunities for TVET students, the Education Ministry with the Malaysian Technical University Network (MTUN) comprising four universities; Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM), Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM), Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP) and Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP) together with the professional body for technologists

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and technicians; the Malaysia Board of Technologists (MBOT), have collaborated in establishing newly developed Bachelor of Technology Degree (BTech) programmes in specific technology fields.

It is worth noting that MTUN and TVET institutions have always placed paramount importance that all their programmes and trainings are adequately capable of catering for Malaysian graduates' employability. This has been echoed by Mustapha (2017) who strongly felt that the role of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) was crucial and claimed that retraining the jobless graduates to learn new vocational skills could reduce graduate unemployment. As suggested by Amiruddin et al. (2015), some indicators of employability skills are very important for TVET graduates. Among the aspects that the industry considers most desirable for graduate attributes are; social skills, knowledge in the fields of engineering, communication skills, technology and information skills, management skills, creative and innovative, problem-solving as well as critical thinking. This indicates that TVET graduates, in addition to having educational qualifications in their respective fields, must also have a social nature and interpersonal abilities. In other words, communication skills need to be acquired by TVET undergraduates besides their other technical skills.

Conversely, the issue of unemployment among graduates needs to be taken seriously by any government in order to ensure the robust development of the national economy. The ministry of higher education has always propounded that most employers require workers who have not only technical skills but also require generic skills to improve the productivity of a company. The ministry also concerned itself with the fact that Malaysian graduates' mastery of generic skills, including communication is weak. Hence, it is laudable that both MTUN and TVET institutions place a great deal of emphasis on producing technical graduates who are equally capable in their soft skills that is communicating in the English language specifically.

It is often argued that learning or communicating in a foreign language can never be an easy task when one is aspiring to be a proficient user of a language that is not native to the learner. In the same vein, the English language is considered a foreign language to all Malaysian natives. English plays a dominant role in Malaysia and impacts every sector of lives today. The language has long been used massively and the untiring efforts made by many to master it has elevated it to be the most important language for learners internationally. It is equally essential to note that a wide interest among the people to learn and communicate in foreign languages has opened the floodgate to more foreign language learning researches. This happens to the English language too, which is very much used and learned by non-native English speakers. In many parts of the world, the English language is taught either as a foreign language (EFL) or as second language (ESL). Whatever status of the teaching of English is in any country, studies have shown that English language learners experience foreign language anxiety (FLA) when communicating in this language. Second language acquisition (SLA) researches and theories have always propelled the fact that FLA is an affective variable in foreign language learning and is generally discussed beside other individual learner differences (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993). Hence, it is to be stressed that FLA is a major variable that has a noticeable impact on students' level of achievement in foreign language learning. Looking at the vast number of studies on FLA, it is clear that FLA is still being researched and considered to be a developing area within foreign language research. Many renowned researchers in this field (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Young, 1991; Horwitz & Cope, 1986) had examined the relationship between anxiety and English language learning and had proven the existence of FLA among the learners. Horwitz (2001) and Lan (2010) found out that anxiety is associated negatively with language performance. In a recent finding Wan Iman et al., (2017) reinforced the earlier arguments that English language learners regardless of gender and language proficiency faced foreign language anxiety to a certain level. Similarly, Adaninggar (2018) stated the university students' speaking grade tended to be lower when the participants became more anxious. In another study, Minwuyalet (2019) agreed that there is a negative relationship between students' English language learning anxiety and their English test results.

As mentioned initially, the present study examines UTeM diploma students' level of foreign language learning anxiety and its relationship with the students' English language achievement. Also, it intends to determine if there is a difference in the level of foreign language anxiety between male and female students. With paramount importance given to mastering of English language at tertiary levels, it is believed that the findings of the present study will provide insights into how educators can develop appropriate interventions to decrease anxiety and promote autonomy among second/foreign language learners. Additionally, English language instructors at tertiary levels can be made aware of the students' psychological demands through the process of language teaching and learning. Remedies to this English language anxiety problems may be found in the manipulation of teaching methods, classroom environments and textbook contents. It is hoped that this study can enlighten Malaysian educators on the necessary steps to be taken in order to reduce the anxiety burden carried by many second language learners in Malaysia universities. UTeM is one of the frontrunners in the MTUN league advocating, especially, for its undergraduates to master English communication skills. Therefore, the present study focusses to answer the following research questions.

- i. Do UTeM diploma students experience foreign language anxiety in English language classrooms?
- ii. What is the relationship between UTeM diploma students' English language learning anxiety and their SPM English language achievement?
- iii. Is there a difference between UTeM male and female diploma students of their English language learning anxiety level?

1.1 Foreign Language Anxiety

There have been many attentions drawn to the studies of foreign language anxiety (FLA) in the past, in which different definitions was attributed to it. Spielberger (1983) described that anxiety is "the subjective feeling of tension, comprehension, nervousness and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system" while Scovel (1978) defined it as "apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object". Young (1991) claimed that FLA is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. She added that FLA has a unique feature and defined it as a complex psychological observable fact peculiar to language learning (Young, 1992). Horwitz et al., (1986) was the first to propose anxiety as a construct in language learning. This construct is called foreign language anxiety which is responsible for student's negative emotional reactions to language learning. They identified three categories of FLA in the language classroom, which are; *communication apprehension*, *test anxiety* and *fear of negative evaluation*. Keramida (2009) asserted that learners who suffered from communication apprehension did not feel relaxed while communicating in the classroom with others in the target language due to their inadequacy of knowledge of that language, specifically in speaking and listening. Similarly, learners that fear of being evaluated negatively by either their teacher or classmates also do feel threatened when their mistakes are pointed out. This happens when they are unable to consider language mistakes as a normal part of the learning process, thereby sees the act of correcting the mistakes as a threat to their image. Ultimately, it is a foregone conclusion that learners might withdraw from participating in classroom activities. However, those who suffer from test anxiety tend to judge the foreign language process, especially oral production as a test condition rather than a chance for communication and skills development. Lastly, other researchers (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989) explained that learners' FLA stemmed from negative expectation in foreign language learning.

1.2 Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety and Language Achievement

Previous studies conducted in variety instructional contexts with different target languages find a negative relationship between specific measures of language anxiety and language achievement. Horwitz (1986) profoundly discovered that there was a negative relationship between anxiety and the achievement of students who were learning Spanish or French languages. They further found that students with higher level of anxiety achieved lower grades than their less anxious classmates (Mahbib et al., 2017). Gardner (1997) concurred that there was a negative relationship between language anxiety and French grades. More so, a similar study investigated the relationship between foreign language anxiety vis a vis achievement and produced the same outcome confirming the important negative relationship between foreign language anxiety and achievement (Al-Shboul, Sheikh Ahmad, Nordin and Abdul Rahman, 2013). Dordinejad and Ahmadabad (2014) claimed in their study that the more students are anxious, the lower their English scores. In another study, Ali and Wong (2017) found that there was negative correlation between language anxiety and academic achievement. While Amiri and Ghonsooly (2015) in their study at Gonabad University of Medical sciences, Iran found there was a negative effect of foreign language anxiety on English language achievement. Lastly, in contrast to many of the previous studies, Mari (2016) discovered that a moderate level of test anxiety in learners had a positive effect on her learners' oral test performance.

1.3 Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety and Gender

There have been numerous studies on the relationship between anxiety and gender. Possible differences between male and female as regards anxiety level have always been a point of contention among many researchers. Outcomes of each gender-related anxiety-based study have never yielded similar results. As such, it may be concluded that either of the gender is possible of exhibiting a higher anxiety level than the other in different conditions and settings. Spielberger (1983) found out that "females are more emotionally stable than males in their reactions to highly stressful or relaxing circumstances" while Pappamihel (2002) claimed that language anxiety experienced by female in the mainstream class was related to "social performance and that type of performance anxiety are more related to interaction with peer, whereas in the ESL class it was more related to academic anxiety and worries about achievement". The reason for this condition could be due to the superior strategy used by females. Lan (2010) stressed that in general females possessed higher levels of motivation, which resulted their performance to be better compared to males. It is assumed that males' higher anxiety level compared to females, may have led to their lower second language performance. Yeo, Chin and Ting (2017) study found similar results, in which the male students were slightly more anxious than the females in the English language classes.

However, Machida (2001) laid down contrastive claims stating that female learners were more anxious than their male counterparts. Cheng (2002) also concurred that females were significantly more anxious than males. Elkhafifi (2005) argued that females and males exhibited different levels of anxiety, which very much depended on the kind of anxiety experienced. As female students were found to be more anxious in general Arabic language anxiety compared to males, but no differences were seen between genders in Arabic listening anxiety. Rezazadeh and Tavakoli (2009) study claimed that females had a higher level of test anxiety and confirmed there was a negative correlation between anxiety

and academic achievement. A study by (Hismanoglu, 2013) involving English language teacher candidates in a state university of Turkey, found that the males had a lower level of foreign language learning anxiety than their female counterparts. Dordinejad and Ahmadabad (2014) discovered that Iranian male students suffered less anxiety in their English language learning compared to the female students. In another study by Cakici (2016) involving 301 university preparatory students learning English as a foreign language, it was found that the females exhibited higher anxiety level than the males. Ali and Wong (2017) conceded that in their study involving Iraqi postgraduate students in three Malaysian universities, the females showed more anxiety compared to the males. Amiri and Ghonsooly (2015) concurred that their study showed that the female students exhibited more anxiety than the male students in the learning of the English language courses. The study of Pizarro (2018) discovered that the female university students suffered a higher level of anxiety in their English for Specific Purposes classes compared to their male counterparts. The study concluded that females are likely to be more concerned about the impression others may have of their linguistic competence in the second language than their male counterparts. Also, Berhane and Deepanjali (2019) in their study found that the female of Ethiopian University students had significantly higher level of English language anxiety compared to their male counterpart. A similar finding was made by Achame and Abebe (2019) in their study involving 362 grade 9 students whereby the females experienced more anxiety than the male students. However, Alsowat (2016) in his study found out that gender did not have a significant impact on foreign language anxiety among his Sausi English major university students. Wilainuch and Usaporn (2018) too discovered that there is no significant difference in the total FLA scores between male and female of Thai high school students in terms of gender. As such, Nurhaeni (2019) agreed to the same conclusion that there is no difference between male and female students of a junior high school with regards to their language learning anxiety.

2. Theoretical Framework

The present study adapted Horwitz et al., (1986) theoretical framework to determine the level of foreign language learning anxiety in both the male and female students. Horwitz developed the foreign language anxiety theory in the belief that all anxiety existing in the language learning environment is debilitating in nature. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) as proposed by Horwitz provides a useful analytical framework which is very appropriate for quantitative analysis. Analysis of language learning anxiety levels is demonstrated with statistics. To date the FLCAS has been used in most of the researches concerned with the examination of foreign language learning anxiety primarily among the students in learning institutions. Horwitz et al. (1986) established a theory that is able to determine learners' foreign language anxiety in the classroom and his FLCAS includes three domains: communication apprehension test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation.

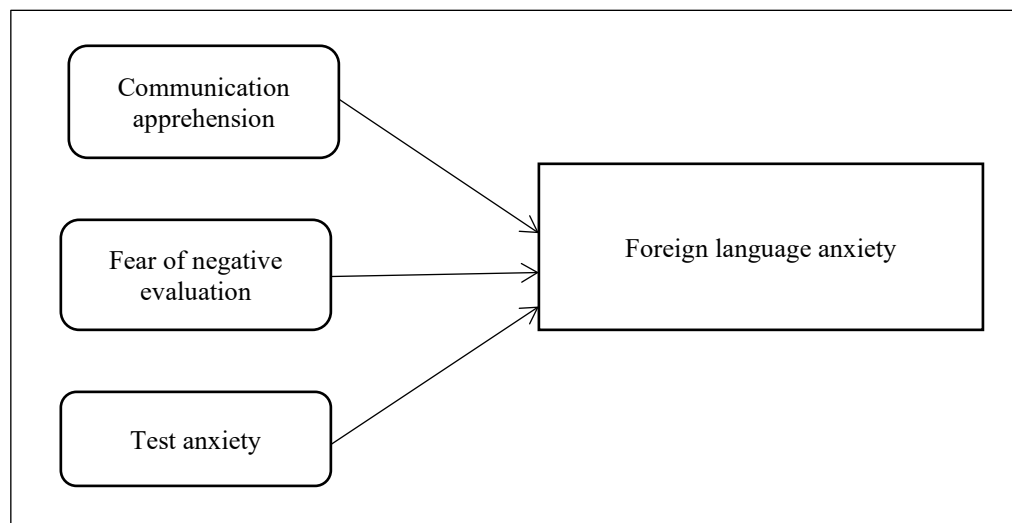


Fig. 1 - Model of theoretical framework on foreign language anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986).

3. Methodology

3.1 Design

The present study employed survey methodology which is basically a quantitative research. Past studies in the area of foreign language anxiety have mostly been survey research. The present study is mainly about exploring the level of

English language learning anxiety of UTeM diploma students and its relationship with their English language achievements. Hence the adoption of the survey research would be best to answer the research questions raised.

3.2 Sampling

The participants for the current study were UTeM first semester students pursuing studies in the diploma of information technology. They were all fresh school leavers having finished their SPM examination prior to their admission to this diploma programme. The total number of the students in this programme was 125 and all of them were taken in as respondents in this survey research.

3.3 Research Instrument

The instrument used in the present study is a set of adapted questionnaires known as Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), consisting of 33 items which is self-report in nature. Horwitz et al. (1986) originally came up with this questionnaire "to examine the scope and severity of foreign language anxiety". In the present study, all the 33 items are to be answered on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). The possible range of score is 33-165. A higher score indicates a higher level of anxiety in the participants. Researchers agree FLCAS is a relevant instrument to be used to determine the level of English language learning anxiety. Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient of 0.98, suggests that the items have relatively high internal consistency (Horwitz et al., 1986).

The first section of the questionnaire requires the participants to fill in their programme of study, gender and the grade achieved in their SPM English language paper. The second section contains items which assess components of foreign language anxiety as proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986) i.e. communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Table 1 lists the components and the number of items belonging to each component of foreign language anxiety.

Table 1 - Components of FLCAS.

Component of FLA	Item No.	Total item
Communication apprehension (CA)	1,4,9,14,15,18,24,27,29,30,32,35,6,8,10,11,1	11
Test anxiety (TA)	2,16,17,20,21,22,25,26,28	15
Fear of negative evaluation (NE)	2,7,13,19,23,31,33	7

The participants' English language grades at SPM level were used as the measure of their English language achievement. The SPM English language paper, which is prepared by Exam Board of Malaysia, is the best available indicator of Malaysian students' English language proficiency.

3.4 Procedure

The questionnaires were distributed to the participants and the researcher briefed them of the purpose of them filling up the survey forms. They were given assurances that all the information was confidential and that it was best the questions were answered honestly. All participants were calm and relaxed during the 20-minute respond period.

3.5 Data Analysis

The data collected from the responses in the questionnaires were analysed using SPSS version 22.0. Descriptive statistics in the form of mean scores were used to explain the level of English learning anxiety of the participants while inferential statistics using Pearson Coefficient Correlation test explained the relationship between the participants' level of English learning anxiety and their English language achievements.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 2 shows 125 participants consisting of 67 (53.6%) male and 58 (46.4%) female students respectively in the present study, while Table 3 shows participants' English language grades at SPM level. In terms of their English language mastery level, 45 (36%) participants are highly proficient in the English language with grades of 1A and 2A. Majority are average in their English language proficiency with 64 (51.2%) passed with credits. Only 16 (12.8%) participants had mere passes with grades 7D and 8E.

Table 2 - Demographic profile of participants.

Gender	Frequency (f) N = 125	Percent (%)
Male	67	53.6 %
Female	58	46.4 %

Table 3 - SPM english language achievement in terms of grade.

Grade	Mastery level	Frequency (f) N = 125	Percent (%)
1A	Excellent	28	22.4
2A	Very good	17	13.6
3B	Pass with credit	40	32.0
4B	Pass with credit	6	4.8
5C	Pass with credit	17	13.6
6C	Pass with credit	1	0.8
7D	Pass	12	9.6
8E	Pass	4	3.2
9G	Failure	0	0

4.1 Level of Foreign Language Anxiety of UTeM Diploma Students

Determining the level of foreign language anxiety in the students is important in order to answer the following research question.

Table 4 - Participant's level of english language learning anxiety.

	N	Mean	Level
Communication Apprehension	125	2.67	Moderate
Test Anxiety	125	2.76	Moderate
Fear of Negative Evaluation	125	2.61	Moderate
Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety	125	2.68	Moderate

The table above shows the mean score distribution. All variable scores are moderate between 2.61 and 2.68. The test anxiety variable has the highest mean value ($M = 2.76$), followed by communication apprehension variable ($M = 2.67$) and fear of negative evaluation ($M = 2.61$). The mean score for overall foreign language classroom anxiety is 2.68. This indicates that UTeM diploma students do suffer from English language learning anxiety to a certain level albeit moderately.

4.2 Relationship between Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety and English Language Achievement

Establishing the existence of a relationship between the participants' foreign language classroom anxiety level and their English language achievement will help to answer the next research question for the present study.

Table 5 - Correlations between FLCAS scores and SPM english language achievement scores (n = 125).

		SPM English Achievement	Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety
SPM	Pearson Correlation	1	-.360**
English Language Achievement	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	125	125
Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety	Pearson Correlation	-.360**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	125	125

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 6 - Correlations between FLCA component scores and SPM english language achievement scores

		SPM	Communication Apprehension	Test Anxiety	Fear Of Negative Evaluation
SPM English Language Achievement	Pearson Correlation	1	-.285**	-.252**	-.337**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001	.005	.000
	N	125	125	125	125

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 5 shows that there is a significant negative relationship between total FLCA scores and SPM English language achievement scores ($r = -.360$, $n = 125$, $p < 0.05$). This indicates that the higher the level of FLA in the students, the lower the English language grade achieved at SPM level. Table 6 equally indicates that there is a significant negative relationship discovered among the total SPM English language achievement scores and the three-subscale FLCAS scores. Among them, the correlation coefficients of the SPM English language achievement score has the highest correlations with the subscales of fear of negative evaluation ($r = -.337$, $p < 0.05$) compared to communication apprehension ($r = -.285$, $p < 0.05$) and test anxiety ($r = -.252$, $p < 0.05$). The results show that students with lower SPM English language achievement scores seemed to be affected very much by negative evaluation of others compared to test anxiety and communication apprehension.

It is paramount to note that the findings of this question agree with many studies of foreign language anxiety which have concluded that FLCA relates negatively to English language achievement (Gardner, 1997; Horwitz, 2001; Liu, 2006; Atasheneh & Izadi, 2012). Recent studies by Al-Shboul, Sheikh Ahmad, Nordin and Abdul Rahman (2013) as well as Dordinejad and Ahmadabad (2014) also came with the same conclusion. It is now apt to state that foreign language anxiety does carry some effects on the students' learning process and results.

4.3 Difference in the foreign language anxiety level between males and females

It is pertinent to establish that males and females suffer from different level of language learning anxiety in the English language classrooms. Hence, the last research question for this study is expected to avail the answer.

The result of the t-test indicated in Table 7 showed that the t-value for comparative levels of foreign language classroom anxiety for male and female is $t = 2.434$ and significant level $p = 0.016$. This significant level is smaller than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$). Thus, there is a significant difference between male and female participants in foreign language classroom anxiety. Table 8 shows mean score for male ($M = 2.75$) is greater than for female ($M = 2.59$). This means the male participants in this cohort suffer higher level of English learning anxiety compared to the female participants. This finding is in agreement with the findings in Lim and Budin (2014) where it was discovered the boys' mean language anxiety score ($M=3.07$) was greater than the girls' ($M=3.02$).

Table 7 - Difference between male and female participants foreign language anxiety level.

		Levene's Test for		t-test for Equality of Means						
		Equality of								
		Variances								
				95% Confidence						
				Interval of the						
				Difference						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-	Mean	Std. Error	Lower	Upper
						tailed)	Difference	Difference		
FLCA	Equal variances assumed	1.395	.240	2.434	123	.016	.16511	.06783	.03086	.29937
	Equal variances not assumed			2.454	122.861	.016	.16511	.06728	.03194	.29829

Table 8 - Difference between male and female participants in language anxiety.

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
FLCA	Male	67	2.7584	.39706	.04851
	Female	58	2.5933	.35505	.04662

5. Conclusion

In order to achieve the status of a developed nation, Malaysia needs high-skilled workforce who would be able to cope with the changing nature and demands of works. These employees who are to support the growth of Malaysia's economy, need to possess the employability skills required by all industries. Therefore, the use of technical and vocational education will play a major role in meeting this expectation. This is because the Malaysia education blueprint 2015–2025 (Higher Education) emphasises that the country needs graduates who have both the technical knowledge and expertise as well as soft skills. One of the soft skills which have been identified for the higher learning institutions to enhance is communication skills. To this end, MTUN has embarked on the mission with the introduction of a number of B. Tech programmes, which are a wholesome Engineering curriculum encompassing the soft skills in demand. To this end, it is pertinent that Malaysian undergraduates are equipped with good communication skills and it is necessary to ensure that every graduating student of TVET institutions and MTUN universities are able to communicate in English specifically, with confidence and conviction.

With the industry demand of English communication skills in graduates, it is high time that Malaysian English language educators understand foreign language anxiety intricacies and be aware of the impacts on their students. The present study has shown that students at higher learning institutions do and still suffer from English language learning anxiety to the point that it has affected their English language grades in the national examinations. Teachers in schools must concede that these students have been facing language anxiety problems since their primary and secondary schooling years, though at moderate levels. The present study findings also show that there is a difference in the levels of language anxiety between genders in which the male student's language anxiety level was higher than the female students. Here our English language educators must be seen taking some remedial actions, especially during their English language instruction periods. English language instructors must take note of the gender differences in the designing of their lesson activities. Lessons filled with affective elements will definitely be highly welcomed by students who tend to shy away from participating in English language activities. Zia and Sulan (2015) suggested that EFL instructors must take into account the needs of their learners and design lessons and learning materials which are less anxiety-provoking. Ardi (2007) opined that teachers' approaches to teaching could contribute to students' feeling of anxiety. This is in line with the view of Wu (2010) who suggested that it is the teachers' duty to create a less threatening atmosphere, motivate, and strengthen student confidence and that the students who are more motivated tend to be more successful language learners. Finally, it is crucial that English language learning anxiety should never be dismissed as it could be the reason why students fail to make their mark in attaining a good level of English language proficiency.

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