

The Influence of Cultural Background on Language Anxiety Among Malaysian ESL Tertiary Learners

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Abstract: *Language anxiety is a significant barrier for ESL learners, particularly among Malaysian Chinese tertiary students, where cultural background plays an important role. This research investigates how cultural factors such as family expectations, home language use, and societal norms influence students' confidence and comfort in using English. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study incorporates a survey to measure levels of language anxiety and in-depth interviews to explore individual experiences and coping strategies. Findings reveal that cultural values, including respect for authority and the concept of "face," contribute to heightened anxiety, while strategies like preparation and practice, peer collaboration, and use of technology help mitigate its effects. The study underscores the need for teaching practices and targeted interventions that are mindful of learners' unique backgrounds to support ESL learners in overcoming language anxiety.*

Keywords: coping strategies, cultural background, cultural influence on learning, Malaysian Chinese ESL learners, language anxiety

1. Introduction

Learning English as a Second Language (ESL) is an important part of higher education, especially in Malaysia where English serves as a key medium of instruction at tertiary institutions. Despite the growing emphasis on English proficiency, many Malaysian students encounter significant challenges stemming from language anxiety, which is a psychological barrier marked by feelings of unease, nervousness, and apprehension when learning or using a foreign or second language (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). This form of anxiety can have a profound impact on students' academic success and emotional well-being, which often limits their participation in class and affects their ability to communicate effectively.

Language anxiety is influenced by various factors, including cultural background, learning environments, personal experiences, and social dynamics (Oad, 2020). In Malaysia, where cultural and linguistic diversity is prominent, students' exposure to English varies greatly. Some students grow up in English-speaking households or gain early exposure to English through media, while others primarily use native languages such as Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil, leading to significant disparities in English proficiency (Kashinathan & Aziz, 2021). These differences cause higher language anxiety for students who are less familiar with English, especially in academic settings where fluency is required.

For Malaysian Chinese ESL learners, cultural expectations further intensify this issue. These expectations based on Confucian values often focus on academic success, respect for authority and meeting parents' high demands (Huang & Asghar, 2016). These pressures contribute to a heightened fear of making mistakes or appearing incompetent, which discourages students from participating in class discussions or seeking clarification when they encounter difficulties (Guo et al., 2019). Also, the competitive academic culture in many Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can make this anxiety worse, as students feel the constant pressure to do well while following social and cultural rules that discourage taking risks in learning.

The problem becomes more complex when considering that many of these learners have been shaped by educational practices that favour rote memorisation over communicative competence (Heng, 2018). As a result, students may excel in written assessments but struggle with real-time and spontaneous English communication, which further reinforces feelings of inadequacy and anxiety.

Given these challenges, Chinese ESL learners use different ways to cope with language anxiety and improve their speaking skills. Many prepare and practice a lot by rehearsing speeches, memorising useful phrases, and reviewing class materials to feel more ready (Lundberg & Hyseni, 2022). Some work with friends in group discussions or study sessions, where they can practice speaking in a relaxed setting (Rublik, 2017). Technology also helps, as students use language apps, online translators, and other digital tools to learn at their own pace (Aydin, 2017). Others find comfort by talking to family, friends, or teachers for support. Understanding these coping methods can help schools and teachers create a learning environment where students feel safe and encouraged to speak English without fear.

The aim of this study is to explore how cultural background contributes to language anxiety among Chinese ESL tertiary learners at HEIs in Malaysia. Additionally, this research seeks to identify the coping strategies these learners employ to manage their anxiety.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Language Anxiety

Horwitz et al. (1986) and Oad (2020) define language anxiety as a specific type of anxiety experienced when learning or using a second language, leading to unease, nervousness, and apprehension. Depending on severity, language anxiety can impact a student's ability to learn and use the language effectively, which are often accompanied by physical symptoms like sweating and rapid heartbeat. Factors contributing to language anxiety include learning environment, teaching methods, teachers' attitudes, and classroom atmosphere (Alrabai, 2014; Berbar, 2019; Selvarajoo et al., 2024). Personal experiences, self-esteem, motivation, and personality traits also influence language anxiety, where negative past experiences can heighten fear and hesitation (Zheng & Cheng, 2018; ALGhazo, 2023). Social interactions play a role as well, as students may fear negative evaluation, leading to avoidance of participation and reduced language development (Chen, 2023).

For Chinese ESL learners in Malaysia, cultural background plays an important role in language anxiety that is influenced by academic expectations and the need to "save face" (Guo et al., 2019; Chien, 2016; Heng, 2018). Pressure from parents and societal norms can increase anxiety, affecting language performance and participation (Peng et al., 2023). High anxiety levels may lead to avoidance of language activities, which result in gaps in proficiency,

lower self-confidence, and limited career opportunities (DemiR & ZaiMoğlu, 2021). Addressing language anxiety will improve their learning outcomes and well-being,

especially when considering cultural influences (Han et al., 2022). And understanding these influences allow students to develop coping strategies, helping them in academic success and a supportive learning environment for Malaysian ESL learners.

2.2 Cultural Background

Cultural background plays a powerful role in shaping how students experience language learning, influencing their emotions, thought processes, and levels of anxiety (Karlik, 2023). In Chinese culture, where academic excellence and respect for authority are deeply ingrained, students often feel immense pressure to succeed, which can heighten their fear of failure in English learning (Huang & Asghar, 2016). The fear of making mistakes coupled with the expectation to uphold family honour can make students hesitant to speak in class that would further reinforcing their anxiety (Bakar et al., 2021). Additionally, the concept of "face", which is the desire to maintain dignity and avoid embarrassment, causes many students to withdraw from speaking opportunities, limiting their exposure to the language and stalling their progress (Qi, 2017; Landström, 2015).

The way Chinese ESL learners in Malaysia interact with English is shaped by more than just cultural expectations. Parental pressure to succeed paired with the heavy use of English in higher education adds extra stress that can lead to burnout and loss of motivation (Peng et al., 2023; James et al., 2020). For many students, English feels unfamiliar and intimidating as they grow up speaking Mandarin or other Chinese dialects at home (Liao, 2020). On top of this, the focus on rote learning, a highly competitive academic environment and major differences between Mandarin and English sentence structures make spontaneous English communication even more challenging (Guo et al., 2019; Heng, 2018; Aporbo, 2024). Overcoming these barriers is important for helping students gain confidence, reduce anxiety, and view English not just as a classroom subject but as a valuable skill for real-world communication and success.

2.3 Application of Theories

This section explores two key theories, Lazarus and Folkman's Stress and Coping Theory (1984) and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), to explain how Chinese ESL learners in Malaysia experience and manage language anxiety.

2.3.1 Lazarus and Folkman's Stress and Coping Theory (1984)

Lazarus and Folkman's theory defines stress as a reaction shaped by how individuals assess situations and the strategies they use to cope (Yarwood, 2022). For Chinese ESL learners, cultural values like saving "face" can make using English in academic settings more stressful. This pressure often causes students to avoid speaking in class or participating in discussions out of fear of embarrassment (Wang, 2020; Peng et al., 2023; Heng, 2018).

The theory divides coping strategies into two types, which are problem-focused and emotion-focused. Problem-focused coping involves taking action to overcome challenges, such as practicing presentations, using language-learning apps, or rehearsing speeches (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lundberg & Hyseni, 2022). Emotion-focused coping focuses on managing feelings of anxiety, often through emotional support from family and peers (Bilecen et al., 2023). However, cultural norms that discourage discussing personal struggles may limit students from openly seeking help, causing many to handle anxiety alone (Wang, 2020).

2.3.2 Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978)

Vygotsky's theory highlights how social interaction is key to learning, especially when acquiring language. Chinese ESL learners benefit from activities like peer discussions and group projects, where they practice English in a low-pressure environment. These settings help students improve their language skills while feeling supported, reducing their fear of making mistakes (Wang, 2020).

The theory's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) shows that students' progress best when guided by teachers or peers who can assist them in completing tasks just beyond their current skill level (Anwar et al., 2024). This support helps students slowly build independence and confidence in using English (Wang, 2020). Cultural values such as collectivism and respect for authority also shape participation, as students may prioritize group harmony or defer to teachers rather than express themselves individually (Chien, 2016; Han & Han, 2019).

2.4 Coping Strategies

Coping strategies play a vital role in managing language anxiety among ESL tertiary students. Preparation and practice, peer collaboration, and technology are three key approaches that help students build confidence and improve language skills. These strategies are particularly important for Chinese ESL learners, who face additional pressure due to cultural expectations and language barriers.

2.4.1 Preparation and Practice

Preparation and practice are key strategies for helping students gain confidence and fluency in English. Structured practice sessions, such as rehearsing speeches, practicing conversations, or preparing for presentations, help reduce anxiety by making students more comfortable with the language (Ma'in et al., 2020). Repeated exposure to English improves students' retention of vocabulary and grammar, leading to more natural and fluent communication (Kim, 2023). Consistent practice across reading, writing, listening, and speaking activities builds overall language proficiency and allows students to feel more prepared in both academic and everyday contexts (Horwitz et al., 1986; Jabarani, 2019). Participating in language clubs, workshops, or practice sessions with native speakers provides additional real-world experience, enabling students to use English in meaningful situations while gaining social support (Lundberg & Hyseni, 2022). These structured environments offer a safe space for students to take risks, make mistakes, and refine their language skills without fear of criticism, promoting both linguistic growth and emotional resilience.

2.4.2 Peer Collaboration

Peer collaboration offers an encouraging and low-pressure environment where students can practice English with classmates and peers (Motallebzadeh et al., 2020; Ibrahim et al., 2024). Group activities such as discussions, peer feedback sessions, and study groups allow learners to share knowledge, reinforce understanding, and gradually build confidence in using English. Research shows that students who work collaboratively experience lower levels of anxiety than those who study alone, as the social nature of peer learning reduces feelings of isolation (Suryanto et al., 2022). Participating in language exchange programs also helps students gain exposure to diverse accents and expressions, further enriching their language skills. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory emphasises that social interaction is essential for language learning (Motallebzadeh et al., 2020). The concept of scaffolding, where students receive guidance from more experienced peers or instructors, helps them practice and develop independence over time (Ariffin, 2021). This research investigates whether peer collaboration enhances students'

confidence in participating in academic discussions and delivering presentations. Collaborative learning helps students to have a sense of community among ESL learners, reducing feelings of isolation and promoting a more inclusive language-learning environment (Masika & Jones, 2015; Mohamad Nor & Rashid, 2018).

2.4.3 Use of Technology

Technology has become a widely used and effective coping tool for managing language anxiety among ESL learners (Aydin, 2018). Language learning applications, such as Duolingo and Rosetta Stone offer interactive activities and real-time feedback which allow students to practice speaking, listening, and writing skills at their own pace (Stevani, 2024; Yurdean & Syafei, 2016). Studies have shown that consistent use of these apps helps students improve their language proficiency and lower their anxiety levels (Loewen et al., 2019). Online platforms like iTalki and Tandem enable learners to engage in virtual language exchanges with native speakers or experienced tutors which then offers valuable conversational practice in a relaxed and non-threatening environment (Liu, 2023). In addition, self-assessment tools such as Grammarly provide students with instant corrections and personalised feedback that helps them identify common errors and track their progress over time (Calma et al., 2022). The ability to set learning goals and monitor improvement helps students feel more in control of their learning journey, reducing fear of making mistakes. Technology thus supports independent learning while providing students with practical tools to build confidence, improve proficiency, and manage anxiety in both academic and informal communication settings.

3. Methodology

This research employed a mixed-method approach to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. The study aimed to investigate how cultural background influences language anxiety among Chinese ESL tertiary learners in Malaysia and to identify the coping strategies they use. The combination of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews allowed for a comprehensive understanding of both statistical patterns and individual experiences (Dawadi et al., 2021).

The participants were 89 Malaysian Chinese ESL learners from a private HEI in Southern Malaysia, selected through purposive sampling (Campbell, 2020). The inclusion criteria required participants to be Malaysian citizens of Chinese descent, enrolled in English-medium degree programs, and willing to share their experiences. The focus on this demographic ensured a targeted exploration of how cultural factors shape language anxiety.

The quantitative phase involved an online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. The questionnaire was designed to assess language anxiety, cultural influences, and coping mechanisms. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz et al., 1986) was used alongside adapted items from Peng et al. (2023) and Guo & Chueachainat (2024). Responses were measured using a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) for consistency and comparability (Joshi et al., 2015). Two pilot tests were conducted, first with 49 foundation-level students, which led to key revisions, and then with 38 diploma-level students, confirming the survey's strong reliability through Cronbach's Alpha values exceeding 0.7 (Yun et al., 2023).

For the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten selected participants to gain deeper insights into their language anxiety experiences and coping strategies. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis, which

identified key themes related to cultural background, coping strategies, and specific manifestations of language anxiety. A sample of ten participants was chosen to capture a range of perspectives while ensuring an in-depth exploration of individual experiences. According to Vasileiou et al. (2018), this number strikes a balance between depth and diversity, allowing for meaningful analysis without overwhelming the study's scope. The interview findings complement the survey results, adding context and depth to the quantitative data for a more comprehensive understanding of the research questions.

Survey data analysis was conducted through Google Forms' automatic statistical tools, which generated summary statistics for each response. The analysis focused on reviewing response percentages to identify patterns in language anxiety, cultural influences, and coping strategies. This approach allowed for a clear identification of trends in participants' experiences, such as the proportion of students experiencing anxiety in specific contexts or utilizing particular coping mechanisms. These quantitative insights provided a foundation for the qualitative phase.

By integrating both quantitative and qualitative insights, this study ensures a comprehensive understanding of how cultural background shapes language anxiety and how students navigate these challenges. The findings aim to contribute to the development of effective support strategies for ESL learners in Malaysian higher education.

4. Findings & Discussions

4.1 How Does One's Cultural Background Influence Language Anxiety Among Chinese ESL Tertiary Learners?

The findings of this study strongly illustrate that cultural background is a key determinant of language anxiety among Chinese ESL tertiary learners in Malaysia. The survey data indicated that more than half of the participants experienced heightened anxiety when participating in English-medium instruction, with 53.9% expressing uncertainty and insecurity about their ability to use English effectively (Horwitz et al., 1986; Oad, 2020). One of the most prominent contributing factors was the lack of English exposure in students' daily lives, as most of them reported speaking Chinese as their primary home language. This limited exposure to English outside academic settings caused students to feel less prepared and less confident when engaging in classroom activities conducted in English. Interviews further confirmed this pattern, with 8 out of 10 respondents describing heightened anxiety in English-speaking contexts and some reporting physical symptoms such as trembling, sweating, and cognitive blocks during class presentations.

The role of cultural values, particularly those rooted in Confucianism, also emerged as a crucial factor in exacerbating language anxiety. The strong emphasis on respect for authority and adherence to social hierarchy created a reluctance to participate in class discussions, as 59.5% of students admitted to hesitating when asking questions, worried about disrupting class harmony or offending lecturers (Huang & Asghar, 2016). The interviews echoed this, with several students describing feelings of intimidation and self-consciousness when speaking in front of lecturers, particularly when lecturers were perceived as stern or unapproachable. The findings align with Berbar (2019), who argues that teacher attitudes and classroom environments can either mitigate or intensify students' anxiety levels.

In addition, the cultural concept of "face" was revealed to have a profound influence on students' willingness to engage. 51.7% of survey respondents reported feeling embarrassed

when speaking English due to a fear of making mistakes and losing face in front of their peers (Qi, 2017; Landström, 2015). This phenomenon, which prioritizes maintaining personal dignity and avoiding public failure, discourages students from volunteering in discussions or actively participating in oral presentations. Interviews reinforced this finding as students recounted withdrawing from speaking activities due to previous experiences of embarrassment or negative peer reactions.

Family expectations further compounded the issue. While the drive to meet parental standards motivated many learners, 50.6% revealed that family pressure, particularly surrounding academic performance and proficiency in English, undermined their confidence (Peng et al., 2023). In Chinese culture, academic success is closely tied to notions of familial pride and honor (James et al., 2020). This pressure was exacerbated by Malaysia's multilingual environment, where students face limited real-life opportunities to practice English, adding to their anxiety in academic settings.

The study also found that traditional educational practices, such as rote learning, contributed to students' anxiety. 50.6% of participants indicated that their reliance on memorisation hindered their ability to participate in spontaneous conversations or adapt to dynamic speaking tasks (Heng, 2018). The interviews further highlighted that students felt comfortable when reciting prepared scripts but struggled with unscripted dialogue, intensifying their fear of speaking in unfamiliar situations.

Finally, linguistic contrasts between Mandarin and English served as a major source of anxiety. 61.8% of students acknowledged that their cultural background, particularly Mandarin's paratactic structure, made it more challenging to adapt to English's hypotactic structure (Aporbo, 2024; Ming, 2023). Students shared that translating thoughts from Mandarin to English required additional cognitive effort, leading to hesitation and miscommunication during academic tasks. This mismatch between the languages heightened their self-consciousness and contributed to their avoidance of English-speaking opportunities.

Collectively, these findings show that language anxiety among Chinese ESL tertiary learners is not solely a result of individual factors but is deeply intertwined with cultural expectations, linguistic barriers, family dynamics, and educational practices. To reduce this anxiety, educators and institutions should prioritise culturally responsive teaching methods that consider these cultural dimensions and foster supportive, confidence-building learning environments.

4.2 What coping strategies do Chinese ESL tertiary learners at Higher Education Institutions use to manage their language anxiety?

The findings of this study reveal that Chinese ESL tertiary learners in Malaysia adopt a variety of coping strategies to navigate and manage their language anxiety. The data indicate that learners rely heavily on three core strategies, which are preparation and practice, peer collaboration, and the use of technology. These strategies help students reduce anxiety and improve their language proficiency in the face of cultural and academic challenges.

4.2.1 Preparation and Practice

Preparation and practice emerged as the most common and effective coping mechanism among Chinese ESL tertiary learners. 58.4% of respondents shared that regularly preparing for English-speaking tasks, such as rehearsing speeches or reviewing academic materials, significantly reduced their anxiety in the classroom. Moreover, 84.3% agreed that being well-

prepared helped them feel more confident and less anxious before engaging in English-language activities (Ma'in et al., 2020). Interviewees supported these findings by describing how frequent practice, including memorising scripts, role-playing conversations, and reviewing previous work can boost their fluency and self-confidence. Many students noted that preparation also made spontaneous speaking situations, such as answering unexpected questions or contributing to discussions less intimidating. This strategy is consistent with the observations of Shin and Kim (2023), who emphasise that repetitive practice improves memory retention, deepens familiarity with language structures, and reduces cognitive strain during live communication.

4.2.2 Peer Collaboration

Peer collaboration also proved to be a key strategy for managing language anxiety, with 76.4% of participants stating that working with classmates helped ease their nervousness in English-speaking contexts. Students reported that engaging in group discussions, practicing presentations with peers, and receiving peer feedback made the learning environment feel more comfortable and supportive (Motallebzadeh et al., 2020). The data further revealed that 70.8% of respondents felt less anxious when speaking English in group settings compared to individual or formal settings. Interviewees explained that peer collaboration allowed them to share challenges, exchange tips, and learn from each other in a relaxed atmosphere. This cooperative learning approach offers both emotional reassurance and practical help, which makes it easier for students to speak up and participate in English-language tasks. The findings align with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), which highlights how social interactions and scaffolding from peers contribute to language development and reduced anxiety.

4.2.3 Use of Technology

Technology was the most widely used strategy, with 82.1% of students relying on digital tools such as language learning apps, translation platforms, and online resources to cope with language anxiety. Students frequently mentioned using apps like Duolingo and Grammarly, as well as tools like Google Translate and ChatGPT to practice English independently and without time pressure (Aydin, 2018). Many interviewees shared that technology gave them a private and non-judgmental space to make mistakes and improve at their own pace. These tools offered immediate feedback, helping students refine their grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary without the fear of embarrassment associated with classroom settings. According to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Stress and Coping Theory, technology serves as both a problem-focused strategy, which addresses gaps in language skills; and an emotion-focused strategy which helps learners manage the emotional discomfort tied to language anxiety.

In short, this study shows that Chinese ESL tertiary learners use a combination of preparation, peer collaboration, and technology to effectively manage their language anxiety. These strategies not only help students improve their English proficiency but also reduce the cultural and emotional pressures that limit their confidence. The findings emphasise the need for educators to incorporate these coping mechanisms into classroom practices to promote a more supportive and anxiety-reducing learning environment for ESL students.

5. Conclusion

This study sheds light on how deeply cultural background shapes the language anxiety of Chinese ESL tertiary learners. Rooted in traditions of respecting authority, preserving "face," and relying on rote learning, many students find themselves hesitant to fully engage in English-speaking settings. Coupled with the stark linguistic contrast between Mandarin and English,

these cultural norms intensify learners' sense of unease. Yet, despite these challenges, students actively navigate their anxiety through preparation and practice, leaning on peer collaboration for both academic and emotional support, and harnessing technology to sharpen their skills at their own pace. These findings highlight the importance of a balanced approach, one that acknowledges cultural and linguistic hurdles while equipping students with practical, accessible tools to overcome them. The research delivers meaningful guidance to educators and institutions committed to building more empathetic, confidence-boosting learning spaces for Chinese ESL students.

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