

Exploring The Causes of Fear of Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract

Anxiety can affect learners in learning any foreign language; in particular speaking class. This is due to the fact that speaking is one the productive skills, as it involves the production of words and phrases in the targeted language. This study generally intends to explore causes of fear in foreign languages, in relation to the English-speaking class. This quantitative study focused on determining the existence of communicative apprehension and fear of negative evaluation among learners of foreign language in English-speaking class. A total of 340 undergraduates; 277 from UiTM Segamat, Johor and 63 from Hunan University, China were employed as the respondents in which the FLACS survey adapted from Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) was utilised as the instrument to collect data. Data was analysed using SPSS version 26 with the mean ranges between 2.70 to 3.94. The analysis suggests that learners are slightly influenced by the fear in English-speaking class which has led them not to perform well due to the fear of communication, concern over receiving unfavourable feedback and also fear of tests, with the mean ranges between 2.70 to 3.94. Findings from this study would very much facilitate future researchers to discover more on the impacts of students' native languages on their performance in language classes, particularly in English-speaking classes.

Keywords: Foreign Language, Non-Native Speakers, English-Speaking Class, Communicative Apprehension, Test Anxiety

Introduction*Anxiety*

Anxiety in learning a new language that is not one's native tongue is a phenomenon that occurs everywhere. In simple terms, when learners learn foreign language, feeling anxious is unavoidable as they are required to unlearn grammar of their native language and at the same time re-learn a new language. Moeller and Catalano (2015) concluded that foreign languages can be defined as any other languages that are taught and studied in an educational environment. To be more specific, the term "foreign language" refers to those languages that are studied and instructed as a component of the curriculum for specific classes (Gas and Schacter, 2003). As mentioned by Hasa (2018), in order for a particular language to be considered as a foreign language in a region, the language must not be natively spoken by its users.

Klimova (2011) outlined that one of the trends in the teaching of foreign languages is the furtherance of an interesting concept; multiculturalism. The objective of this idea is to raise students' levels of sensitivity and openness toward the cultures of people of other nationalities, with the secondary goal of raising students' awareness of their own traditions, values, and beliefs. Thus, learners of a foreign language are afforded the opportunity to participate imaginatively in the activities of everyday life, while at the same time being presented with a wealth of educational and culturally enriching experiences. Besides that, the significance of self-efficacy, anxiety, and speaking skill can motivate advisors to broaden their horizons to uncover the underlying causes of students' fear over learning a foreign language, and to examine the causes of the escalation in oral communicative skill (Ma, 2022).

Perez-Paredes and Martinez-Sanchez (2000) revealed that learners of foreign languages are often faced with a lot of strains in learning. Sadighi and Dastpak (2017) pointed out that there are three paramount causes of anxiety among language learners; fear of making mistakes, fear of negative evaluation and limited knowledge of vocabulary. The study that was conducted involved 154 Iranian students learning English as a foreign language, resulting in the discovery of the most significant factor in this issue. 81% of the participants agreed that fear of making mistakes has caused them to be anxious in the learning process of foreign language. An analogous study that was conducted by Yahya (2013) has highlighted that fear of negative evaluation was the most vital factor that explains learners' anxiety in learning a foreign language.

An identical scenario could also be found in Malaysia. Othman and Abdul Latif (2021) conducted a study on Japanese language learners in IIUM, Pagoh and found that 40 respondents of this study experienced a slight to moderate scale in all three components of foreign language anxiety in learning Japanese as foreign language.

As has been pointed out earlier, English is considered as a foreign language in Malaysia as of 2021, the country only ranks at 28 out of 112 countries being tested (EF EPI 2021 – EF English Proficiency Index – Malaysia, 2021). Due to this, learners of English are often faced with difficulties in learning as they may not have the appropriate skills needed.

Statement of Problem

Fear of learning can have a negative impact on a learner's future learning opportunities. Fear of language learning will impede learners' learning and reduce motivation to learn the language. Language learners frequently exhibit anxiety, fear, and anxiousness when learning a new language (Hashemi, 2011). Some students find it difficult to learn a foreign language, particularly because extrinsic motivators like social-affective factors and methodological factors, as well as intrinsic motivators like psychological factors, make students fearful of doing so. An understanding of language anxiety within different situations provides a deep understanding of the influence of fear. The study conducted by Rahmat (2019) shows that fear can affect how people perceive their language skills while they are learning a new language. According to Bensalem (2017), educators may be better able to handle students' fears if they identify their concerns. Investigating the causes of fear can assist students in overcoming hurdles to foreign language learning, increasing motivation to learn foreign languages, and improving mastery (Zheng & Cheng, 2018).

This study investigates factors that cause fear of foreign language learning. This investigation is done to answer the following questions:

1. How do psychological factors influence fear of foreign language learning?
2. How do social-affective factors influence fear of foreign language learning?
3. How do methodological factors influence fear of foreign language learning?

Literature Review*Causes of Fear of Learning Foreign languages*

There are numerous causes of fear of learning foreign languages. According to Elahemer & Said (2022), reducing speaking anxiety (SA) among college students has been a major issue in second/foreign language (S/FL) learning. The inherent complexity of Speaking Anxiety Interventions (SAI) makes it difficult to synthesise and use the findings in reality (Elahemer & Said, 2022). The two basic categories of Speaking Anxiety Interventions in findings are direct and indirect. Elahemer & Said (2022) commented that causes of speaking anxiety and learners' English-speaking ability levels should be investigated before choosing or implementing any speaking anxiety reduction approach which may significantly influence the Speaking Anxiety Interventions effectiveness or failure. This is in addition to developing novel strategies to promote effective speaking anxiety interventions. Besides that, foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) has emerged as a significant area of research in EFL teaching and learning (Alsalooli & Al-Tale', 2022). Alsalooli and Al-Tale' (2022) examined the causes of Foreign Language Anxiety among 69 first-year EFL learners and the impact of gender on the level of Foreign Language Anxiety. They also looked into how Foreign Language Anxiety affected the participants' linguistic proficiency. Modified Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), SPSS and Microsoft Excel were used in data analysis. It was discovered that the majority of students often experienced a moderate level of Foreign Language Anxiety spurred on by communication apprehension and anxieties linked to unfavourable feedback and language examinations. However, Foreign Language Anxiety levels are not influenced by gender, and learners' performance was significantly impacted by high Foreign Language Anxiety levels.

Attitudes shape behaviour and attitudes towards science communication may affect how well students present themselves orally (Cormier & Langlois, 2022). French-speaking postsecondary CEGEP-program science students aged 17 to 19 participated in the study in Canada. In the mixed-methods study, students' attitudes toward oral communication in science (n = 1295) were assessed using a five-component model (perceived relevance, anxiety, enjoyment, self-efficacy (S-E), and context dependency). Samples of 26 students who were giving scientific subject presentations were videotaped and oral performance abilities were evaluated. The findings point to a significant relationship between oral performance in science and two attitude elements: enjoyment of giving oral presentations and a particular S-E component that is named showmanship S-E. Another finding is that all science students, regardless of their English proficiency, believe that, as future scientists, oral communication in Science is crucial. Majority of them reported feeling anxious while speaking in front of other people.

Past Studies of Fear of Learning Foreign Languages

Many studies have investigated learning foreign languages (Shah, 2022; Daud et al., 2021; Rafek et al., 2018; Baharuddin and Rashid, 2014; Soo and Goh, 2013). Shah (2022) studied the second language anxiety experiences of Year 5 students using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), developed by (Horwitz et al., 1986). It was discovered that anxiety is triggered by experiences such as being afraid to speak in English, worrying about not understanding English, worrying about being judged by others, making mistakes when speaking the language and worrying about forgetting learning topics. The research also suggests that teachers should also be aware of their students' anxiety, create a stress-free learning environment in the classroom, and collaborate with parents to give them the opportunity to practise the language.

In addition, Daud et al (2021) explored 71 undergraduate participants' perceptions of learning a foreign language and how negative emotions influenced their learning. It was found that students are affected by fear of foreign language learning, reducing their chances to excel. Furthermore, it was noted that foreign language learners are apprehensive about communicating with native speakers or their peers in the target language. They were also self-conscious about their appearance in the foreign language learning class. Rafek et al. (2018), in a study investigating 56 university students' perceptions of negative evaluation and the degree of anxiety for different genders, found that students experienced anxiety when getting evaluations from peers and teachers.

Besides, James et al (2020), in a sequential-mixed method study with 11 interviews and 33 questionnaire respondents, highlighted that students experienced mild anxiety when receiving negative feedback. Additionally, foreign language anxiety can develop into other types of anxiety, negatively impacting students' academic performance. This was also highlighted by Baharuddin and Rashid (2014), who conducted a study that found communication anxiety among 70 undergraduate ESL students at Universiti Putra Malaysia was associated with a fear of receiving a poor evaluation or being judged. Furthermore, according to a comprehensive study by Soo and Goh (2013), Asian students tend to prioritise "face" and avoid circumstances that could jeopardise it, which is why Asian students are more passive in the teaching-learning process. Students thought they might "lose their face" as a result.

Materials & Methods

This quantitative study is done to investigate how the three mentioned components hinder learners’ ability in learning foreign language. Participants were purposely chosen from a public university in Malaysia and also a higher tertiary institution from China. The instrument used is a survey adapted from (Horwitz et al., 1986)

Table 1
Distribution of Items in Survey

SECTION	FACTORS	NO OF ITEMS
B	Communication Apprehension	11
C	Fear Of Negative Evaluation	6
D	Test Anxiety	15
	Total number of items	33

Data is collected via google form and analysed using SPSS version 26. With reference to Table 2, the SPSS analysis revealed a Cronbach analysis of .802, thus showing high internal reliability for the instrument. Data is presented in terms of percentage for the demographic profile and mean scores to answer the research questions.

Conceptual Framework

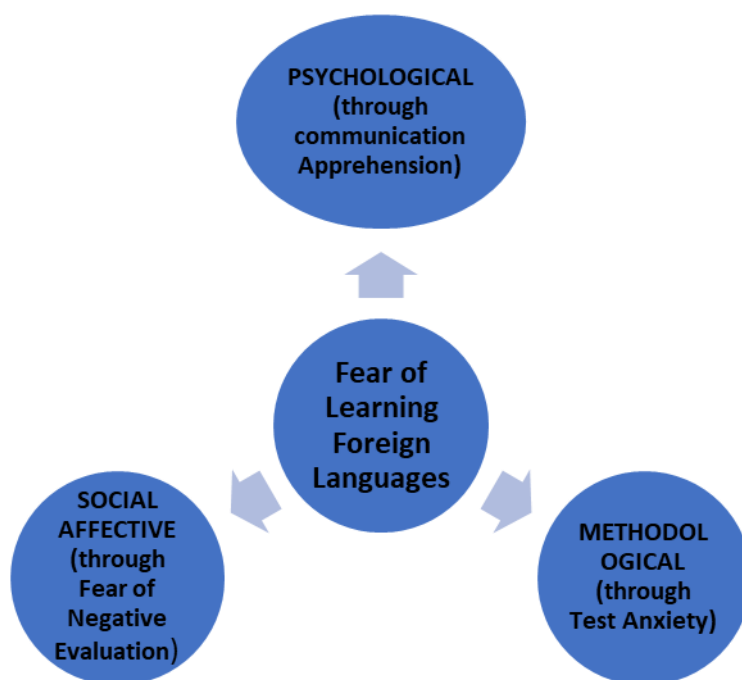


Figure 1- Conceptual Framework of the Study-Fear of Learning Foreign Languages

This study (refer to Figure 1) is rooted from Turula (2004), and Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986). According to Turula (2004), among some of the categories of language anxiety in the classrooms are; (a) psychological, (b) methodological and (c) social affective fear. The factors from Tarula (2004) are then combined with the language anxiety by (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Psychological (Communication Apprehension)

The term "Communication Apprehension" or "CA" refers, primarily, to a person's worry or level of queasiness because of the immediate or expected communication with other people, as stated by McCroskey (1977). This worry or level of queasiness is said to be the primary focus of the term. The fear or level of anxiety described above can be brought on either by the actual act of communicating with other people or by the anticipation of doing so with other people. Yahya (2013) found that this problem typically occurs as a result of a learner's lack of oral competency skills to actively participate in an interactive communication with other people despite having well-crafted ideas. This is the case even though the learner has the ability to communicate effectively with others. The high level of anxiety felt by learners is to blame for this situation.

Social Affective (Fear of Negative Evaluation)

Fear of negative evaluation has been defined as "apprehension about others' evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively" (Watson & Friend 1969 as cited by Horwitz et al., 1986, 128). Meanwhile, affective factors such as attitudes, motivation, anxiety and self-confidence have been identified as factors that contribute to successful language learning outcome (Shabani 2012; Zayed & Al-Ghamdi 2019). Language anxiety, as described by Turula (2004), encompasses language learners' low self-confidence, uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension and tension. In a language classroom, fear of negative evaluation such as being corrected and mocked by the teacher, and social affective factors like assuming other students are better than oneself and having stage fright and embarrassment, affect the learners' language learning outcome (Turula 2002; Turula 2004).

Methodological (Test Anxiety)

Fear of learning a foreign language is influenced by methodological factors of behavioural reactivity. The student with test anxiety may exhibit fear in various manners or psychological reactions when studying a foreign language in a classroom. It is possible to do methodological research on fears associated with learning a foreign language in analysis to define their causative factors and evaluate or reflect on how learners feel or think about their behaviour while taking a course or an exam. Test anxiety is a group of phenomenological, physiological, and behavioural reactions linked to the fear of unfavourable outcomes or failing a test or other form of evaluation (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Test anxiety might occur for language learners who are particularly nervous in class. Language learners who lack confidence in their proficiency would be apprehensive about taking a test. Salehi and Marefat (2014) found a correlation between test anxiety and fear about learning a foreign language. This indicates that learners who have high levels of fear of foreign language learning also have high levels of test anxiety, and vice versa. Students' fear of exam failure makes them feel negative about assessment practices. This will have an impact on exam performance, particularly on the speaking test.

Results and Discussion

Section A

Figure 1 below highlights the demographic of the study in terms of their gender.

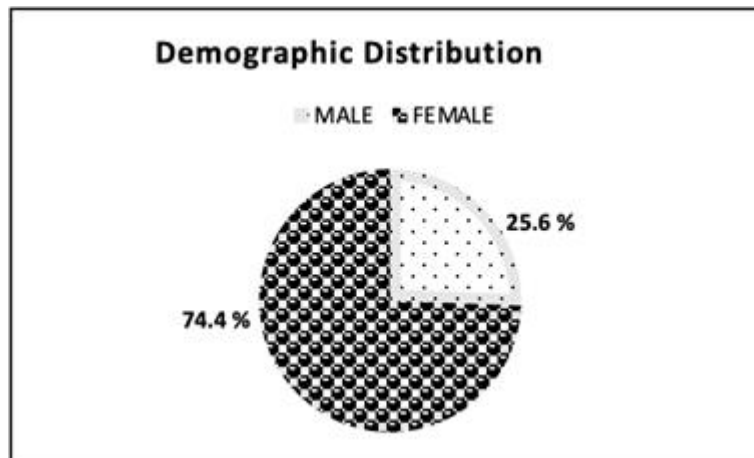


Figure 1: Demographic of the study

It was noted that there are more female than male respondents in this study with a difference of 48.8 percent. Male students recorded only 25.6 percent (n=71) compared to females with 74.4 percent (n=206).

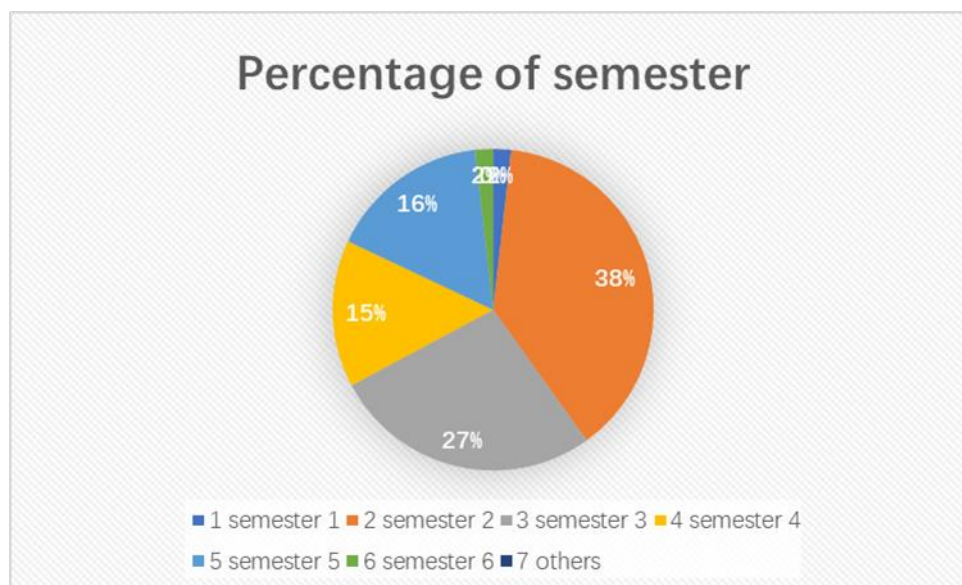


Figure 2: Percentage for semester

Figure 2 shows the percentage for semester of study of the participants. It was noted that students come from different semesters. The highest percentage of participants involved in the study was semester 2 of 38.3%. Next is semester 3 with 27.1%. The lowest is from semester 1 and 6 for 1.8% respectively

Section B (Psychological Factors)

This section presents data on how psychological factors influence fear of foreign language learning in terms of communication apprehension.

STATEMENT/ QUESTION	Mean	SD
I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my English class.	3.1	0.88
It frightens me when I do not understand what the teacher is saying in English.	3.04	1.08
I feel confident when I speak English in my English class.	3.04	0.82
I would be nervous speaking in English with native speakers.	3.52	1.06
I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.	2.73	1.09
I feel confident when I speak in the English class.	3.02	0.82
I feel very self-conscious about speaking English front of other students.	3.24	0.87
I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class.	3.43	0.96
I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says.	3.10	0.98
I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak a foreign language.	2.93	1.00
I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language.	3.16	0.80
OVERALL	3.11	0.97

Figure 3: Mean and standard deviation for Psychological factors

Figure 3 presents the mean and standard deviation for psychological factors. The overall mean for psychological factors is 3.11 which indicates moderate fear of foreign language learning in terms of communication apprehension. The results indicate that the responders “would get nervous speaking English with native speakers (mean = 3.52) and “get nervous when he or she is speaking in the English class” (mean =3.43). The lowest mean indicated that the respondents “get upset when they do not understand what the teacher is correcting” (mean = 2.73). On the other hand, the highest standard deviation is “I get upset when I do not understand what the teacher is correcting” (SD = 1.09), followed by “It frightens me when I do not understand what the teacher is saying in English” (SD = 1.08). The lowest standard deviation value is “I feel comfortable around native speakers of English” (SD = 0.80).

Section C (social affective factors)

This section presents data on how social affective factors influence fear of foreign language learning in terms of fear of negative evaluation.

STATEMENT/ QUESTION	Mean	S.D.
I do not worry about making mistakes in language class.	3.12	1.00
I keep thinking that the other students are better at language than I am.	3.94	0.93
It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class.	3.11	1.07
I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	2.70	1.05
I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language.	3.38	1.16
I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	3.55	1.15
OVERALL	3.30	1.12

Figure 6- Mean for (Social) Affective Factors

Figure 6 shows the mean scores for affective factors that lead to fear of negative evaluation. The overall mean for affective factors is 3.30 which means that the learners have moderate fear of foreign language learning in terms of fear of negative evaluation. Learners' belief that other students are better than themselves at the language scores the highest mean (M=3.94). This means, in the context of the study, the most significant social affective factor that influences the learners' self-confidence and performances in speaking the foreign language is their own belief that their peers are better in the language. Meanwhile their fear that the language teacher will correct every mistake they make scores the lowest mean (M=2.70). This denotes that the learners do not really mind being corrected by their language teacher.

Section D (methodological factors)

This section provides data to address how methodological aspects of behavioural reaction affect fear of learning a foreign language.

STATEMENT/QUESTION	Mean	SD
1 I am frightened when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class.	3.42	1.06
I worry when I have to attend more English classes.	2.96	1.06
During English test, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.	2.72	1.00
I am comfortable during English speaking tests.	2.91	0.81
I worry about the consequences of failing my English class.	3.77	1.09
I don't understand why some people get so upset over English speaking class.	2.88	0.91
Even if I am prepared for English speaking test, I feel anxious about it.	3.87	0.91
I feel like not going to my English speaking test.	2.62	1.07
I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on during English speaking class	3.67	1.03
The more I study for an English speaking test, the more confused I get.	2.64	0.99
I don't feel pressured to prepare very well for English-speaking tests	2.99	0.87
English class moves so quickly that I worry about getting left behind.	2.95	0.94
I feel more tense and nervous in my English speaking class than in other classes.	2.98	1.07
When I'm on my way to language class, I feel very sure and relaxed.	3.17	0.81
OVERALL	3.11	1.05

Figure 7: Mean for Methodological Factors

Figure 7 shows the mean scores for methodological issues in this study's context which can lead to test anxiety. The overall mean score of 3.11 indicates that the learners have moderate fear relating to test anxiety. Without regard to preparation, learners experience fear prior to an English speaking test with the highest mean score ever recorded (M=3.87). This is the most significant external element that influences fear of language learning. The learners who are tempted to miss their English speaking test were the least significant external variables due to their fear of language learning, as evidenced by the lowest mean score reported (M=2.62).

Conclusion

Summary of Findings and Discussion

Communicative Apprehension

Findings from this section outline that most respondents opted for a neutral reaction when it comes to revealing their emotions in an English-speaking class. However, 34.7% expressed their concern when it comes to using English to communicate with native speakers. Conversely, respondents claimed that they are comfortable and calm when they are surrounded by native speakers. Thus, findings from this section support the claim made by Abdullah and Daud (2017) where respondents were uncertain as to whether their fear of ridicule is the primary reason they do not use Arabic for class communication.

Fear of Negative Evaluation

This section deals with respondents' perceptions on their own performance in English-speaking class. Findings from this section reveal that learners lack self confidence in using the foreign language to communicate in the class. As mentioned by Ok and Ustaci (2013), being corrected by class instructors could be one of the sources of anxiety as teachers or instructors are seen as a knowledgeable person who possesses the right skill in the teaching of foreign language. With 3.3 is the overall score for mean, this shows that respondents agree that low self-confidence has prompted learners to experience fear of negative evaluation as they believe that they will be judged by their performance in the language class (Wardhani, 2019).

Test Anxiety

Spielberger and Vagg (1995) concluded that there are two elements that are involved in test anxiety; worry and emotionality. Worry involves internal feelings; negative internal talks and negative self evaluation. Contrariwise, emotionality is associated with emotional facets which trigger an uncontrolled nervous system in producing physical reactions; nausea, sweaty palms. Findings from this section support the research question that methodological factors have greatly influenced how learners respond in the English-speaking class. Almost half of the respondents agreed that they would experience at least one of the physical reactions when they have to communicate in an English-speaking class.

Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

Anxiety has been proven to be one of the contributing factors in learners' inability to excel in foreign language learning. As learners are not able to enjoy the learning process, it also has a big influence on their perception of learning itself. Kumar (2018) pointed out that students with less anxiety level in English speaking perform well in terms of academic achievement as compared to those students who are highly anxious. In dealing with anxious learners in any language class, instructors may need to modify their teaching by considering how anxious learners can be probed to participate in the class.

Instructors also need to be able to create the appropriate ambience in the class, making sure that learners' anxiety level is kept at a low level.

It is suggested that for future research, more studies should be carried out in determining the underlying factors that lead to this issue, in reference to the three components of foreign language anxiety.

Findings of this study support other past studies that investigate this phenomenon. Learners, irrespective of what foreign language they are studying, struggle with their own anxiety. Fear of making mistakes can eventually lead to fear of being laughed at; and this is one of the factors of being anxious among learners of foreign languages. Apart from that, this study contributed the insight that, specifically, uncontrolled physical reactions occurred when learners have to communicate in an English-speaking class, teachers should contemplate the possibility that certain students may be experiencing anxiety rather than automatically assuming that the poor performance of inattentive and uninterested learners is entirely attributable to their lack of motivation, aptitude, or skill. Therefore, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) educators must take students' speaking anxiety into account as part of the possible condition in EFL classrooms and strive to equip students with helpful coping mechanisms to help them navigate a variety of anxiety-producing circumstances (Ma, 2022). Thus, it is imperative for instructors, syllabus developers or even learners themselves to be aware of the presence of anxiety among students during lessons or even during presentations.

For future research, a closer and deeper investigation may be needed in terms of finding out the causes of all three elements. Future research could also investigate the association between low achievement in language class, specifically English-speaking class with the influence of learners' native language. As mentioned above, foreign language is defined as any language that is not natively spoken by users in a particular country. Thus, learners' native language is believed to have an impact in the learning process.

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