

English Speaking Anxiety among Primary Students: Evidence from Tamil Vernacular Schools in Selangor, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Speaking anxiety is widely recognised as a major barrier for second language learners. This study aims to examine the level of English-speaking anxiety among primary Tamil school students in Selangor, Malaysia. A quantitative survey design was employed using an adapted version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). A total of 120 Year 6 students from two Tamil vernacular schools in Bandar Kinrara and Serdang participated. The 20-item Likert-scale questionnaire was validated through a pilot study and expert review. Descriptive analysis was conducted to measure the overall level of anxiety and item-specific responses. The results revealed a high level of speaking anxiety among students ($M = 4.031$, $SD = .226$). The highest anxiety was recorded when students were directly asked to speak by the teacher ($M = 4.683$), while the lowest was reported for confidence in speaking before peers ($M = 1.617$). They also highlight how classroom practices and socio-cultural influences can reinforce avoidance behaviors. This study contributes to the growing body of research on language anxiety by offering empirical evidence from an underrepresented context Tamil vernacular schools in Malaysia. It underscores the importance of teacher practices and culturally responsive strategies, such as games, songs, and non-threatening speaking activities, to reduce anxiety. The study is one of the first to quantify speaking anxiety among Tamil primary students in Malaysia, providing valuable insights for

teachers, policymakers, and researchers seeking to design interventions that build confidence and foster inclusive English-speaking classrooms.

Keywords: English speaking, language anxiety, Malaysia, primary students, second language learning, speaking anxiety, Tamil vernacular schools

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INTRODUCTION

English has long been embedded in Malaysia's education system, functioning as both a global lingua franca and a vital medium for socioeconomic mobility (Nagappan, 2022). Despite extensive policy reforms aimed at strengthening English proficiency, the colonial legacy of vernacular Tamil and Chinese schools continues to influence the ways in which language is taught, acquired, and experienced within the Malaysian context (Ali et al., 2021; Tien & Jamil, 2022). These legacies intersect with broader demographic, socioeconomic, and cultural dimensions, creating multilayered challenges that shape students' language learning trajectories across different school types (Ismail & Aziz, 2023).

Among these contexts, Tamil vernacular primary schools occupy a distinct position in the education landscape. Catering largely to students from lower socioeconomic and working-class backgrounds, Tamil schools often contend with limited resources, weaker infrastructure, and sociocultural disadvantages that can impede students' acquisition of English (Maniam et al., 2024; Rajendran, 2021). One of the most pressing yet underexplored issues in this setting is English-speaking anxiety, which directly affects students' confidence, communicative competence, and long-term academic outcomes (Horwitz, 2020; Fattahi Marnani & Cuocci, 2022). Chinese vernacular schools on the other hand, have the advantages in terms of demography whereby most Chinese vernacular schools

are situated in highly urbanized cities in Malaysia (Qi et al., 2024). Unlike the Tamil schools, Chinese schools have the advantage of having students who are from a better socioeconomic background (Rahman & Azmawati, 2022). However, there are incidents of anxiety when speaking in English among students in Chinese vernacular schools in Malaysia because of critical factors such as dominance of the mother tongue and cultural beliefs (Chun & Sathappan, 2018).

Language anxiety, particularly in speaking, has been widely documented as a major affective filter in second language acquisition (Jugo, 2020; Russell, 2020). For Tamil school students, however, such anxiety is compounded by sociocultural dynamics, including parental educational backgrounds, home literacy practices, and peer influences, which can reinforce feelings of linguistic inadequacy (Sundaram & Rethinasamy, 2021). In addition, the lack of supportive classroom environments and the persistence of negative experiences—such as ridicule or punitive feedback—often leave lasting psychological impacts that further diminish learners' willingness to communicate (Maniam et al., 2024; Peng & Xie, 2022).

Recent scholarship emphasizes that anxiety in English speaking is not only a matter of individual psychology but also a socio-educational phenomenon, rooted in systemic inequities and cultural identity struggles (Rashid & Yunus, 2022; Shukri & Shaari, 2023). Tamil school students' heightened anxiety can therefore

be understood as an outcome of both micro-level classroom practices and macro-level societal structures. Yet, despite a growing body of research on language anxiety in Malaysian schools, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning its manifestation in vernacular school contexts, especially Tamil schools. Most existing studies adopt broad perspectives on language learning challenges in Malaysia without attending to the unique cultural and socioeconomic position of Tamil school students (Nagappan, 2022; Tien & Jamil, 2022).

This lacuna underscores the need for culturally responsive pedagogical approaches that can better address the affective and psychological dimensions of language learning. By acknowledging the specific challenges faced by Tamil primary school students, teachers and policymakers can develop interventions that mitigate speaking anxiety while enhancing students' confidence in English communication (Azman, 2021; Hashim & Yunus, 2022).

Against this backdrop, the present study focuses specifically on English-speaking anxiety among Year 6 students in Tamil primary schools in Selangor, Malaysia. This demographic is particularly significant as Year 6 marks a critical transition point before students' progress into secondary education, where the demands for English proficiency become increasingly pronounced. The study aims to analyze the level of English-speaking anxiety in this cohort, thereby contributing empirical evidence to an underexplored

area in Malaysian education research. More importantly, the study seeks to inform the development of improvised and culturally responsive teaching practices that are sensitive to the lived realities of Tamil school students, ultimately advancing efforts to create more equitable language learning environments.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

The reality that students in Tamil vernacular primary schools often struggle to attain proficiency in the English language has long been a concern among teachers, educationists, and policymakers in Malaysia (Thang, 2020). English continues to play a central role in Malaysia's education system, functioning as a global lingua franca and an essential tool for academic advancement, employment opportunities, and participation in the wider knowledge economy (Kho et al., 2025; Nagappan, 2022). However, despite the recognition of its importance, a considerable number of students, particularly those from socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, experience difficulties in developing confidence in English communication. Among these challenges, speaking anxiety stands out as a critical barrier to effective learning and communicative competence.

Research indicates that anxiety related to speaking English often emerges in the early years of formal education and, if unaddressed, intensifies as students' progress into secondary and tertiary levels (An et al., 2022; Kassim & Maniam, 2024). This progression underscores the

importance of examining language anxiety at the primary school level, particularly in Year 6, where students are preparing to transition into more demanding stages of education. Idrus (2021) highlights that the roots of such anxiety are multifaceted, extending beyond individual psychological dispositions to include sociocultural and structural factors. Parental education levels, cultural perceptions of English as a foreign language, and financial limitations all shape students' access to resources, their confidence, and their willingness to engage in English communication.

Classroom observations have further revealed that students in Tamil schools frequently avoid English lessons or remain passive during classroom interactions, primarily due to fear of making mistakes, ridicule, or perceived incompetence (Hassan et al., 2021). Such avoidance behaviors are not simply academic challenges but also reflect deeper cultural and social attitudes toward language learning. In Tamil vernacular schools, where students may have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, this anxiety is often compounded by insufficient opportunities for authentic practice and a lack of supportive environments for risk-taking in language use (Rashid & Yunus, 2022; Shukri & Shaari, 2023).

A review of current literature reveals that, although language anxiety has been extensively studied in the field of second language acquisition, very few empirical studies have been conducted within the specific context of Tamil vernacular

schools in Malaysia. A systematic search across major academic databases such as Google Scholar and ERIC confirms that there are no comprehensive studies examining English-speaking anxiety among primary Tamil school students. Instead, the available literature tends to focus either on secondary and tertiary education (Ahmad, 2023; Kho et al., 2025) or on general pedagogical challenges in vernacular schools (Ali, Hamid, & Moni, 2021). Research addressing pedagogical innovations in Tamil schools exists, but the focus rarely extends to affective factors such as speaking anxiety. This scarcity of targeted research is deeply troubling given the persistent underperformance of Tamil vernacular school students in English and the clear implications of anxiety for academic achievement and social mobility.

Therefore, the urgency of the present study is underscored by two key realities. First, English-speaking anxiety among Tamil vernacular school students remains an underexplored yet highly consequential issue, demanding closer attention from researchers and practitioners alike. Second, there is a pressing need for empirical evidence that can inform culturally responsive teaching strategies tailored to the unique sociocultural contexts of Tamil primary schools. By addressing this gap, the present research contributes not only to the academic discourse on language anxiety but also to practical efforts in improving educational equity and fostering student confidence in English communication.

Spielberger's State-trait Anxiety Theory

The most fundamental element to understand in this context is the concept of anxiety and how humans develop anxiety. Ultimately, Spielberger's State-Trait Anxiety Theory (1966) provides the most apt theoretical foundation in understanding anxiety in the context of English language speaking among second language learners. In layman's terms, the elaborate theory by Spielberger (1966) established two categories of anxiety which are state and trait anxiety. Individuals may exhibit either one type of anxiety or at times, a mixture of both the types of anxiety (Spielberger, 1966). The state anxiety is a spontaneous response towards a sudden situation or stimulus (Stella, 2022). Additionally, Charbonneau et al (2022) stated that state anxiety is a sudden reaction and it differs according to the situation. Raadha Krishnan and Sharmini (2024) reported that Tamil school students project state anxiety especially when they are suddenly required to respond in the English language. It is easy to identify the state anxiety because the common signs of stuttering, nervousness and physical symptoms can be seen in the individuals (Nair et al., 2022).

On the contrary, individuals who have a calmer and more composed respond towards sudden situations are said to be in the category of trait anxiety (Spielberger, 1966). A student with trait anxiety is often a student who is able to think carefully and respond appropriately even when facing a sudden situation which requires them to speak in the English language.

Research experiments such as the one by Li et al (2021) reported that when students have the mastery of a subject matter, their anxiety, especially state anxiety reduces significantly. In the English language education context, Spielberger's (1966) theory has been utilised extensively especially in order to show how second language learners perceive English language speaking. Raman et al. (2022) reported that Tamil vernacular school students lacked motivation and enthusiasm in English lessons when it was conducted online during the pandemic, mainly because of their anxiety, specifically state anxiety.

In this study, Spielberger's framework is instrumental in analysing how English-speaking anxiety emerges among Tamil primary school students. By differentiating between situational and trait-based anxiety, the theory provides valuable insight into why students avoid speaking tasks and how interventions such as supportive teaching strategies can be designed to reduce anxiety and build confidence.

The Novelty

The novelty of the present study lies in its focused examination of English-speaking anxiety among Tamil vernacular school students, a context that has received insufficient scholarly attention despite its significance within Malaysia's multilingual and multicultural education system. While language anxiety has been extensively researched in second language acquisition studies (Horwitz, 2020; Kassim & Maniam, 2024; Kho et al., 2025), most existing

literature has been general in scope, overlooking the challenges encountered in vernacular school settings where socioeconomic disadvantage, cultural identity, and limited exposure to English converge to shape students' linguistic experiences. By specifically situating the inquiry within Year 6 Tamil primary schools in Selangor, this study addresses an underexplored gap and generates context-specific insights that extend beyond broad generalizations about Malaysian learners. Year 6 students were specifically selected since they have gone through six years of primary education with the English language curriculum which includes speaking skills. This also reflects that the level of anxiety in English language speaking may differ across different groups of students. This is because students from different age groups have different levels of exposure towards the English language at different periods of their entire primary schooling.

A further contribution of this research is its pedagogical applicability for teachers, especially those serving in Tamil vernacular schools. The findings underscore the urgency of equipping teachers with strategies to identify and address English-speaking anxiety in their classrooms. Rather than relying solely on standardised, top-down curricular reforms, the study provides a foundation for teacher-led action research at the school level, encouraging educators to design interventions that are sensitive to their students' unique sociocultural and psychological realities.

Teachers, therefore, are positioned not only as implementers of policy but also as active agents of change, capable of creating safe learning spaces that minimize fear, reduce embarrassment, and build communicative confidence among students.

Moreover, the novelty of this study extends to its holistic framing of language anxiety as a socio-educational issue rather than a purely psychological one. By situating English-speaking anxiety within the broader network of influences family literacy practices, community attitudes toward English, and structural inequities in resource allocation the study demonstrates that responsibility for alleviating anxiety does not rest solely on the individual learner. Instead, it calls for a shared commitment from multiple stakeholders, including parents, community leaders, and educational policymakers. For instance, families can support learners by integrating English into everyday interactions in informal, non-threatening ways, while community organisations can create platforms for authentic communicative practice through extracurricular clubs, peer mentoring, or cultural events conducted in simple English.

At the societal level, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on equity in language education in Malaysia. By highlighting the disproportionate anxiety experienced by Tamil school students, it challenges assumptions of uniformity in English acquisition and calls attention to the layered disadvantages that vernacular school learners face. This

perspective encourages policymakers and education planners to rethink the implementation of language policies through a more culturally responsive lens, ensuring that interventions are tailored to the lived realities of different school types rather than applying a one-size-fits-all model.

Finally, the study offers an important theoretical contribution by reaffirming the interconnectedness of affective, social, and structural dimensions in second language learning. Nervousness, fear of negative evaluation, lack of self-confidence, and fear of mistakes are not merely personal traits, but outcomes shaped by a complex interplay of classroom dynamics, peer interactions, and societal expectations. In this regard, the research does not only diagnose the problem of speaking anxiety but also advances an agenda for its practical resolution through collaborative, culturally grounded, and community-driven strategies.

Taken together, the novelty of this study rests in its contextual specificity, pedagogical relevance, and sociocultural framing, offering a fresh perspective that enriches both the theoretical literature on language anxiety and the practical discourse

on improving English language education in Malaysia’s vernacular schools.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative survey research design to investigate the level of English-speaking anxiety among Tamil primary school students in Selangor (Table 1). The decision to utilise a quantitative approach was guided by its strength in capturing measurable trends and identifying patterns across a large cohort of respondents, thereby providing an empirical basis for understanding the prevalence and intensity of language anxiety (W. Creswell & D. Creswell, 2021; Kho et al., 2025). In particular, the survey design enabled the systematic collection of data concerning students’ perceptions and experiences of anxiety within classroom speaking contexts, which are central to the phenomenon under investigation.

The target population for the study comprised Year 6 pupils in Tamil vernacular schools, as this group represents a critical juncture in Malaysia’s education system. Year 6 is the final stage of primary education, where pupils are expected

Table 1
Summary of research design

Research Design Aspects	
Design	Quantitative Survey Design
Instrument	Questionnaire
Population	Year 6 students from Bandar Kinrara and Serdang Tamil Primary School in Selangor
Sample	120
Data Analysis	Descriptive Analysis

to demonstrate readiness for secondary schooling, including the capacity to engage with English as a compulsory subject (Nagappan, 2022; Kassim & Maniam, 2024). Given the transitional nature of this stage, the ability to speak English confidently becomes increasingly important for students' academic and social integration in secondary school.

A total of 120 pupils were selected through random sampling procedures. Two Tamil primary schools in Selangor were chosen as research sites, and a computer-based randomiser was used to ensure equal probability of selection, thus enhancing the representativeness of the sample (Sekaran & Bougie, 2020). Random sampling was adopted to minimise bias and to strengthen the generalisability of findings within the Tamil vernacular school context.

The research instrument was a 20-item questionnaire, adapted from the well-established Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) originally developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986). The FLCAS has been extensively validated in a variety of educational and cultural settings and is considered one of the most robust tools for measuring language-related anxiety (An et al., 2022; Russell, 2020). In this study, the instrument was modified to emphasise items that directly relate to speaking anxiety in classroom contexts, thereby ensuring greater alignment with the research objectives. The adaptation process first began with an expert review. A panel comprising three experts who are an English language panel head in a

primary school, a national trainer for English language curriculum development and an English language lecturer in a local public university. Next, the survey was subjected to a series of pilot tests where items were identified, restructured and modified. Several items were removed prior to the pilot test cycles. The final pilot test involved 30 pupils who were randomly selected. The results were analysed using the Cronbach's Alpha test and the survey questionnaire proved to be very reliable ($\alpha = 0.87$).

Each item was measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). This scaling approach was chosen because it allows for nuanced responses and facilitates quantitative analysis of subjective experiences (H. Boone & D. Boone, 2021).

To analyse the collected data, descriptive statistical methods were employed, focusing primarily on mean scores and standard deviation. Descriptive statistics provide a comprehensive overview of participants' responses, highlighting central tendencies and variability in the level of English-speaking anxiety among the sample group. Such analysis is especially valuable in identifying overall patterns of anxiety, as well as variations among students based on self-confidence, willingness to communicate, and fear of negative evaluation (Kho et al., 2025; Rashid & Yunus, 2022). While descriptive statistics do not establish causal relationships, they are essential in the preliminary exploration of educational phenomena, serving as the foundation for

deeper inferential or qualitative analyses in subsequent studies (W. Creswell & D. Creswell, 2021).

By employing this design, the study ensures methodological rigour and contextual relevance, thereby enabling a reliable assessment of speaking anxiety levels among Tamil vernacular school students. The findings derived from this approach are expected to provide actionable insights for teachers and policymakers, particularly in developing culturally responsive strategies to mitigate speaking anxiety and support students’ transition from primary to secondary schooling.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical procedures were strictly observed. Permission was obtained from the participating schools, and informed consent was secured from students and their parents. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured, and participation was voluntary. By safeguarding the rights of young learners, the study ensured that their voices could be heard without fear of repercussion, reflecting the importance of treating pupils’ experiences with sensitivity and care.

Table 2
Descriptive statistics

	Overall	Valid N (listwise)
N	120	120
Minimum	3.45	
Maximum	4.55	
Mean	4.031	
Std. Deviation	.226	

RESULTS

Table 2 shows the descriptive analysis of the 20-item scale revealed that the overall level of English-speaking anxiety among Year 6 Tamil school students was high (M = 4.031, SD = .226). This finding resonates with recent studies indicating that Malaysian learners often report heightened anxiety in second language contexts (Kassim & Maniam, 2024; Kho et al., 2025).

The highest mean was recorded for the item *“I get anxious when the teacher asks me to speak English”* (M = 4.683, SD = .767), highlighting the role of teacher-directed speaking tasks as a primary source of anxiety. Similar results have been observed in contexts where fear of negative evaluation increases apprehension (Rashid & Yunus, 2022). Conversely, the lowest mean was noted for *“I feel confident when speaking English in front of others”* (M = 1.617, SD = .891), reflecting a clear deficit in self-confidence.

Overall, the results demonstrate a strong link between low self-confidence and high speaking anxiety, affirming earlier findings that affective barriers significantly constrain willingness to communicate (An et al., 2022). These outcomes underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions to reduce classroom anxiety and promote confidence in English communication among Tamil vernacular school students.

Figure 1 clearly shows the mean scores across the 20 items in the survey. All items except for item 3 have shown almost similar levels of mean scores. Item 3, in contrast, has scored a significantly lower level of mean score.

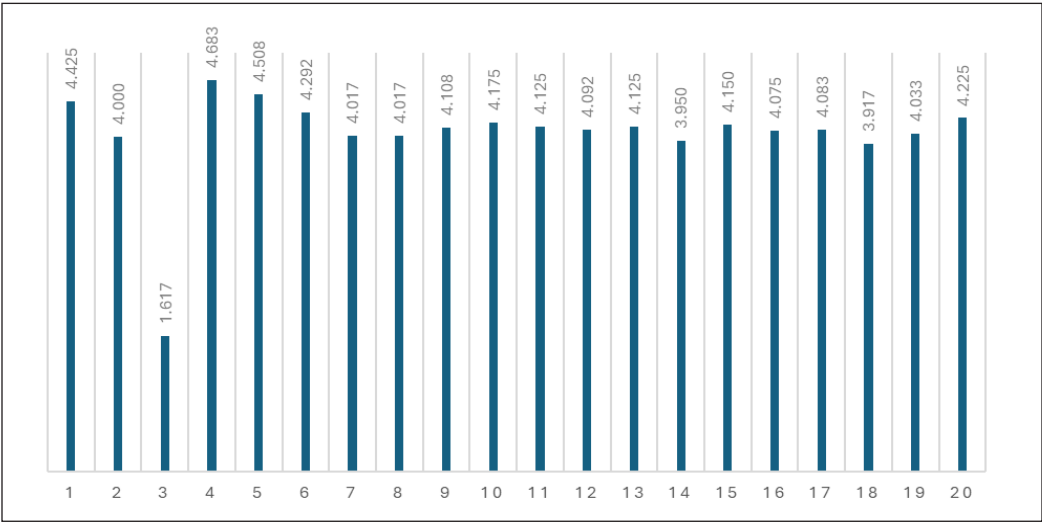


Figure 1. Anxiety scale mean score

DISCUSSION

Levels of Anxiety among Tamil Primary Students

Based on the findings in figure 1, several important elements must be discussed. The descriptive analysis revealed a high overall level of English-speaking anxiety ($M = 4.031$, $SD = .226$) among the 120 Year 6 students surveyed. The strongest indicator of anxiety emerged when students were directly asked by the teacher to speak English ($M = 4.683$, $SD = .767$), suggesting that classroom demands are perceived as highly threatening. These findings are consistent with earlier studies (An et al., 2022; Dana & Aminatun, 2022), which reported that speaking tasks under teacher supervision intensify students' nervousness and create a heightened state of anxiety. In this context, Spielberger's (1966) concept of state anxiety provides a useful framework: the sudden requirement to

speak triggers immediate emotional distress that is difficult for students to regulate. This result highlights the urgent need for less intimidating speaking activities in the classroom.

Self-confidence and Its Relationship with Anxiety

The lowest mean score was observed for the item, "I feel confident when speaking English in front of others" ($M = 1.617$, $SD = .891$). This inverse relationship between confidence and anxiety reflects a significant challenge for Tamil primary school students. Whereas Ariyani and Yosintha (2022) suggested only a weak link between self-confidence and speaking anxiety, the present study indicates a stronger correlation, aligning with Maftuna (2020), who found that anxiety directly undermines students' self-assurance in oral performance. In practical terms, when pupils

lack confidence, their anxiety is amplified, leading to avoidance of English-speaking tasks. This finding not only confirms the role of affective factors in second language learning but also calls for interventions that explicitly target confidence-building as part of language pedagogy.

Classroom Practices and Cultural Influences

The data further revealed that 45.8% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement that they fear being laughed at by classmates when speaking English. This echoes Idrus (2021), who highlighted the cultural dimension of anxiety, where fear of embarrassment and peer judgment discourages participation. Such classroom practices—whether teacher-centred questioning or peer ridicule can inadvertently reinforce avoidance behaviours. From Spielberger's perspective, these repeated threatening experiences may transform situational state anxiety into more stable trait anxiety, shaping students' long-term attitudes toward English speaking.

The findings in this study suggest that more attention should be given to restructuring classroom practices. The evidence from the study shows that some classroom practices such as incorporating songs, games and storytelling can reduce anxiety as these are non-threatening strategies where mistakes in English-speaking is perceived as a common thing and part of the overall learning process. Students must be reassured even in Tamil vernacular schools, that speaking in

English is not something to be feared and if they make mistakes, it is only part of the overall learning process (Fattahi Marnani & Cuocci, 2022).

Future Work

In the future, there are certain things researchers can do to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Firstly, a mixed-method approach should be used to gain deeper understanding. Interviews and focus groups can provide useful information about the reality in schools. It can guide the researcher in understanding the reality students face in schools.

On top of that, research in the future must integrate classroom observations which can help uncover a major part of the practices used inside the classroom. Classroom observations provide a major advantage to researchers especially in terms of obtaining evidence related to students' change of behaviours, subtle cues and signs of anxiety when they have to speak in English.

A combination of quantitative and qualitative research designs will result in richer data which could be used to understand the phenomenon better. The results would also encourage policymakers and teachers to change practices and introduce strategies that would eventually reduce English-speaking anxiety.

Limitations

Notably, the study is limited to participants from only two schools. This limits

generalizability of the data obtained from the study. Plus, the study also lacks data triangulation because it does not incorporate multiple data collection methods and analyses.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the study showed that there is a high level of English-speaking anxiety among the students at the vernacular Tamil schools involved in this study. The results reported further highlight the adverse effects of English-speaking anxiety towards the students' self-confidence when required to speak in English. It also provides ample evidence to further explore fear of mistakes and peer judgment which also cause anxiety among the students. In summary, the results of the study show the urgency to further study global trends in language learning within unique sociocultural contexts such as the Malaysian Tamil school context.

The theoretical foundation of the current study aids in further understanding the concept of anxiety and how it exists in the context of Tamil school students' lack of proficiency in English speaking. Spielberger's State-Trait Anxiety theory provided indispensable data and information on anxiety especially in terms of categorising anxiety into state and trait anxiety categories. The distinction is vital in understanding the responses of different students. The theoretical basis further confirms the patterns of behaviour observed in the study and also consolidates its contribution to the entire field of language anxiety research.

Subsequently, this study echoes the urgency in transforming the classroom practices for long term changes. The findings of the study support change in teachers' behaviour and attitude especially when teaching English. Teachers must be ready to embrace changes and prepare to employ simple strategies like integrating songs, games and role-playing activities in their classrooms. Additionally, the study also invokes the need for parents and communities to work together with teachers to create opportunities for meaningful use of English outside the classroom.

Retrospectively, the study has provoked various parties to be more responsible in ensuring that students have better opportunities to enhance their English-speaking skills. The data from the study does not only prove the existence of anxiety among Tamil school pupils but it also further establishes the existence of some classroom practices that must be changed. However, more research involving larger populations and incorporating various types of methodology must be conducted to fully uncover the issues faced by the students when speaking in English. The results would be highly beneficial towards teachers, policymakers and stakeholders in the future.

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