

*Review Article*

## **English-speaking Anxiety Among Primary School Learners in Malaysian Vernacular Schools: A Systematic Literature Review**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In this review, the anxiety faced by students in primary vernacular Tamil schools in Malaysia when having to speak in the English language is the focus. The primary target for the study is students at the Tamil vernacular schools known as the Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Tamil (SJKT) in Malaysia. A decade-long window has been used to extract studies and draw conclusions from the results of the studies published between 2015 and 2025. The review analyses both quantitative and qualitative findings, allowing for a more comprehensive and detailed account of the language anxiety phenomenon. It is found that most studies have focused on the impact of language anxiety on the students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English. The review uncovered several factors that contribute to speaking anxiety, including psychological, social, and pedagogical factors, as well as fear of negative evaluation, peer judgement, and limited exposure to English outside the classroom.

The review also examined strategies such as task-based learning, peer-assisted learning, and mindfulness techniques, which were found to be effective in reducing anxiety and increasing WTC. The review highlights the need for contextually grounded strategies that address the unique challenges faced by students, particularly those in vernacular schools. Several recommendations for future research emerged from the synthesis. These include the need for

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design-based studies in vernacular schools, longitudinal tracking of anxiety levels, and the validation of anxiety measurement tools for students in the Southeast Asian setting.

*Keywords:* English-speaking anxiety, language anxiety, mindfulness interventions, peer-assisted learning, primary school students, task-based learning, vernacular schools, Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

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## INTRODUCTION

Primary school students need to master the English language because at the primary level, it is more effective for the students to be exposed to the basics of the language and enhance their level of proficiency. Unfortunately, students from vernacular schools like the Tamil vernacular schools or Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Tamil (SJKT) in Malaysia, have been facing the mountainous challenge of speaking anxiety when it comes to the English language. When these students avoid English-speaking situations, it is not a trivial or childish reaction; rather, it reflects genuine anxiety and a deep emotional response associated with speaking the language. These learners are from unique sociodemographic backgrounds, and from their perspective, learning a second language is challenging. This is mainly because there are significant cultural and linguistic differences among these learners (David et al., 2017). Many questions and gaps remain in the literature regarding how anxiety affects students in Tamil vernacular schools, largely because most research has focused on secondary and tertiary education (Toyama & Yamazaki, 2021). Recent evidence from the Malaysian SJKT context confirms that English-speaking anxiety is prevalent among these primary learners and warrants dedicated investigation (Shanmugan et al., 2025).

That has provoked the systematic review, which addresses the gap through a thorough investigation of research work that has studied English-speaking anxiety among primary school learners, particularly in Southeast Asia. The review aims to discover research work that has also emphasised studying the phenomenon in Tamil vernacular schools in Malaysia. There is a specific focus towards certain mediating factors, such as psychological, social and pedagogical factors that may cause the speaking anxiety (Hangyu Zhang & Hazel Tan, 2024)). At the same time, a proper analysis of past studies will result in the acquisition of interventions and strategies that have been used in handling the challenges of English-speaking anxiety. Ultimately, by systematically analysing and breaking down past studies, evidence-based recommendations can be made to the entire education fraternity and improve how English is taught in the second language classroom, especially. It has been proven that modifications of teaching and learning strategies can be effective when it comes to handling the problems of language anxiety (Alnuzaili & Uddin, 2020; Toyama & Yamazaki, 2021). Ultimately, this work aims to contribute to the greater body of literature on language anxiety in primary schools and, as a result,

continue to offer valuable inputs on effective teaching practices in vernacular schools.

Subsequently, the outcome from the review is expected to further develop the understanding of the problems faced by Tamil school students. Simultaneously, the review is expected to provide valuable input that will improve language education by focusing on specific classroom strategies suitable to the Tamil school setup. This study is eventually in line with the goals of Malaysia's Ministry of Education (MOE), especially in terms of providing quality education and equal access as well as learning opportunities for all students regardless of their background (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2016).

## **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

Traditionally, in Malaysia, a person's proficiency in English is vital for academic and professional advancement. However, when students are forced to face speaking anxiety, a hurdle appears, especially for students from Tamil schools in Malaysia. These students come from households which are not exposed to the daily use of the English language. This may be one of the most foundational reasons for the anxiety they face when they must use the language to speak. Nevertheless, this should not prevent the school from employing strategies that can help it address the anxiety. In Malaysia, educational reforms are taking place rapidly. The introduction of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is a major step towards enhancing English education in Malaysia.

Despite such aggressive reforms, students in Malaysia are facing anxiety when having to use the language to speak (Alnuzaili & Uddin, 2020; Toyama & Yamazaki, 2021).

There is comparatively little research that explores language anxiety among primary school learners, especially students in vernacular schools in Malaysia. This is not the same for secondary and tertiary education sectors, where vast research on language anxiety has been conducted and reported (Shanmugan et al., 2025). Students in Tamil schools mostly do not use English daily outside the classroom because their communication is dominated by the mother tongue, which is Tamil. This habit is then practised in the school too, especially during periods where students get to interact with one another. Observing their interactions during recess at the school canteen or when they play football together, it is obvious that the preferred language for communication is Tamil. When there is a gap in practical use, the entire learning process of the English language is complicated for these students. This certainly increases speaking anxiety (Kumaran & Krish, 2021).

Therefore, this review serves the purpose of reviewing literature on the phenomenon of English-speaking anxiety in primary school learners. The review gives a specific focus on students in Tamil vernacular schools in Malaysia. The synthesis, which involves studies over the span of ten years (2015-2025), evaluates the prevalence and causes of anxiety and further proposes interventions to reduce it. The findings will contribute to improving

teaching practices and policy development, offering practical recommendations for enhancing English learning in multilingual classrooms.

### **English Language Anxiety Research Globally**

All over the world, anxiety faced by second language learners and foreign language learners is being researched extensively. However, most studies have focused on the issues faced by students at a higher level. One such study is the study conducted by Hu et al. (2024), where 631 primary school students in a province in China took part in the foreign language anxiety scale survey. Hu et al. (2024) found that the anxiety level of the students was inversely correlated to the foreign language achievements. Students were given examination-based tests to evaluate their language achievements. It was found that the achievements only increased when anxiety was lowered. Another study by Sosas (2021) with foreign language learners at a university in Indonesia also reported similar findings. The students at the university performed better in the English-speaking test when their anxiety levels were lowered. However, it also suggested an intervention where an application was developed to help students lower their language anxiety.

Anxiety faced by the students when having to speak in English is also related to their self-confidence, as established by Azimova (2020). Using a qualitative methodology, Azimova (2020) probed five university students to understand

how the anxiety they faced when having to speak in English affected their level of self-confidence. The case study with primary school students in Russia revealed that students' level of self-confidence is indeed affected by the high level of anxiety they face when having to speak in the English language. Subsequently, Alam et al (2021) also reported that students' level of speaking in English can be increased through motivation and proper strategies. Anxiety caused by unpleasant situations, however, can be a reason that affects their self-confidence in speaking the language (Alam et al., 2021).

However, a study by Ariyani and Yosintha (2022), who explored how anxiety impacted the level of self-confidence, reported that anxiety and self-confidence are only weakly related. The in-depth analysis based on 40 university students who completed the survey instrument showed that there was only a very vague relationship between anxiety and self-confidence. Ariyani and Yosintha (2022) further commented that individual differences can be a factor since different people respond differently to anxiety. However, Ariyani and Yosintha (2022) conducted the study with university students. This has implications for the results of their study, and it is not entirely like the situation in primary schools, especially Tamil schools in Malaysia. Some classrooms in Tamil schools may have certain traditional practices when it comes to learning languages.

It is also equally important to understand the current context of the study, which is the

situation in vernacular Tamil schools in Malaysia. Some past studies in Malaysia have focused on the anxiety faced by students in Tamil schools when it comes to speaking in the English language. Raadha Krishnan and Sharmini (2024) specifically reported how students in Tamil schools in Malaysia are now facing difficulties in speaking the language because of the lack of exposure and encouragement in the school environment. Using a qualitative methodology, Raadha Krishnan and Sharmini (2024) found that students feared using the language because they were not given many opportunities to use the language during daily activities. Nair et al. (2021), on the other hand, reported that the anxiety when using the English language is primarily because of mother tongue interference. Nair et al. (2021) added that students in Tamil vernacular schools are employing various strategies to learn the language better, and most of the strategies involve reducing the anxiety they face.

Research on anxiety for English language speakers has been conducted extensively. It has been found that a lot of research has been dedicated towards students' problems when they must face the English language. In Malaysia, extensive research has been conducted to explore how anxiety affects students in terms of English language speaking. It has made learning the English language very complicated in the classroom. When the Ministry of Education (MoE) initiated the Highly Immersive Program, it was motivated by a series of studies which explored the issues faced by learners in Malaysia when they had to

speak in English. For decades, research has contributed to various programs and strategies from the MoE. However, the focus of the studies varies according to different contexts and needs. On the other hand, there is a need to review the latest studies, mainly studies that have been published in the last five years. This is to refresh and review the latest findings related to anxiety in English language speaking. The latest findings from these studies are vital to understanding how students in schools are currently facing the phenomenon of anxiety. The study will also help in understanding how teachers can employ strategies to tackle the issue of anxiety in English-speaking.

### **Application of Spielberger's State-trait Anxiety Theory to English-speaking Anxiety**

While many theories explain the foundations of anxiety in human beings, Spielberger's theory suits the needs of the current study, which explores the anxiety faced by learners in an academic setting. Spielberger's State-Trait Anxiety Theory (1966) was founded on the situations faced by learners in the real-world classroom setting. The earliest experiments conducted with students found that individuals have different responses to situations that pressure them or compel them to do certain things (Bijulakshmi & Kumar, 2024). Upon experimenting with the responses of different individuals, Spielberger (1966) theorised that two types of anxiety can be observed in individuals. According to Spielberger (1966), anxiety that produces spontaneous, situation-specific responses is termed state anxiety.

Raadha Krishnan and Sharmini (2024) explained that state anxiety is obvious when vernacular Tamil school students are observed in situations where they must suddenly speak in the English language. The spontaneous reactions and pressure students feel now that they are required to speak English clearly exemplify the state anxiety category (Raadha Krishnan & Sharmini, 2024).

In relation to the findings of Raadha Krishnan and Sharmini (2024), reports and explanations from Huang et al. (2025) elaborate further on the characteristics of state anxiety, which is defined as unpredictable, uncontrollable and sometimes dangerous depending on the situations faced by individuals. On the other hand, as proposed by Spielberger (1966), trait anxiety is a more stable and predictable response towards situations that induce anxiety. Individuals with trait anxiety are more prepared and appear calm and composed when they face certain pressing situations (Huang et al., 2025). A more recent in-depth experiment on the behaviours of different individuals when they must face anxiety uncovered that there are indeed individuals with two different types of anxiety responses. Han et al (2020) further confirmed that the theory by Spielberger (1966) is valid even in the current settings when they experimented with university students at the higher level. It is important to note that Spielberger's State-Trait Anxiety Theory was originally developed for adults. In this case, it is applied to young learners. However, the foundation of the theory remains relevant because it distinguishes between situational

and dispositional responses. Adaptations in recent child-focused studies show that children exhibit both state and trait patterns, validating its use in primary education contexts. Applied to the present review, the state–trait distinction provides an analytical lens for interpreting the findings: the recurring reports of nervousness, stuttering, and avoidance when learners are suddenly asked to speak (Shanmugan et al., 2025; Yahaya et al., 2021) reflect state anxiety, whereas the persistent, classroom-wide reluctance documented in Tamil vernacular settings points to a more stable, trait-like disposition. Distinguishing the two is essential for selecting interventions, since situational anxiety responds to low-pressure task design while dispositional anxiety requires sustained confidence-building.

This theory is vital in understanding the presence of anxiety among English language speakers, especially among school students in Tamil schools. When English language teachers face students in Tamil schools, the theory of anxiety helps teachers understand why certain students respond in a certain way to specific situations. This is a serious phenomenon which can go up to the level of classroom bullying, mainly because some students cannot handle sudden situations which require them to speak in English (Rahmawati et al., 2021). Some students may stutter, some may even laugh, and some students cry, and sometimes, in worst cases, students might choose not to come to school, and these are all signs of anxiety towards English language speaking (Rahmawati et al., 2021).

State-Trait Anxiety Theory, originally proposed by Spielberger (1966), provides a foundational framework for understanding the emotional and psychological dimensions of language anxiety. According to this theory, anxiety can be viewed in two forms: state anxiety, which is a temporary emotional response to a specific situation, and trait anxiety, a more stable, personality-based tendency to experience anxiety across situations. It is important to identify the two types of anxieties. The state anxiety, which may be observed when an individual is facing a specific task of communication, and the trait anxiety, which can affect overall classroom interaction, are both very different, and teachers must be aware of these differences (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994).

Subsequently, a newer, upgraded concept known as the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) was developed by Ato to conceptualise the elements of fear and nervousness in the language learning environment. The FLCA is more relevant to the situation faced by learners in the SJKT setting, where students are further burdened by anxiety because they do not get enough exposure to English outside the classroom (Alnuzaili & Uddin, 2020; Toyama & Yamazaki, 2021). These learners are often facing the continuous fear of being judged by their peers and the fear of negative evaluation. This is the crux of the FLCA, which defines the reality faced by vernacular school students when speaking in English.

## **L2 Willingness-to-Communicate (WTC)**

Willingness-to-Communicate (WTC), proposed by MacIntyre et al. (1998), is an expansion of the foundational concept of anxiety in second language acquisition. WTC focuses on an individual's readiness and capacity to communicate, and it is closely tied to second language acquisition because communication is central to learning. WTC suggests that psychological, social and contextual factors are all interrelated and contribute to the willingness of an individual to communicate in a certain language. When WTC is low, anxiety is higher, which translates to an inverse relationship between the two elements. Tamil school students in Malaysia may therefore exhibit low WTC as a direct consequence of high speaking anxiety. This relationship directly frames one of the review's central objectives, namely, to examine how anxiety suppresses willingness to communicate, and it explains why several of the reviewed interventions succeed precisely by raising WTC through safer, more learner-controlled speaking opportunities (Rajendran & Yunus, 2021; Shanmugan et al., 2025).

## **Control-value Theory of Classroom Emotions**

In the Control-Value Theory, Pekrun (2006) proposed how classroom emotions can be further understood and explored. The theory provides a detailed model that evaluates students' ability to control situations and the value they place on a certain interaction or task.

There are two variables in this model, which are control and value. Control refers to how individuals perceive success or their ability to achieve certain goals. Value, on the other hand, refers to the significance of certain achievements. In the context of language learning, when students have limited exposure to and training in a language, they perceive low control, and this low control gives rise to negative emotions such as anxiety. Within this review, the theory helps explain why limited out-of-class exposure, a factor repeatedly identified in the SJKT context, lowers learners' perceived control and thereby amplifies anxiety.

It somewhat summarises how students in Tamil vernacular schools in Malaysia feel. They feel that they have little to no control over their proficiency because they do not get the chance to use the language sufficiently. As a result, they value English learning differently and, in most cases, the value is lowered. Eventually, they do not see the relevance of learning English because they no longer value it. (David et al., 2017) proposed that control can be enhanced with learning activities that incorporate interactivity, peer support and task-based learning.

### **Linking Theories to Moderators in Vernacular School Contexts**

The constructs drawn from these theories function as moderators in the context of Tamil vernacular schools. Firstly, WTC suggests that a stronger classroom climate that focuses on emotional support and peer coaching can improve the learning of the

English language (Toyama & Yamazaki, 2021). On the other hand, an important element that can be drawn from the theories is the opportunity element. The key aspect to practice English effectively is the opportunity to use English beyond the classroom. As stated by (Fragoulis & Tsiplakides, 2009; Putri Astawa et al., 2017), authentic speaking opportunities and project-based learning increase the sense of control, reduce anxiety, and eventually result in better English proficiency. It is important to note that most studies did not quantify the value in the control-value theory directly. These components must be defined either quantitatively or qualitatively. The integration of these frameworks is vital in creating a better understanding of the psychological aspects underlying English-speaking anxiety in the context of vernacular Tamil schools.

### **Understanding English-speaking Anxiety in Primary School Learners**

It is widely accepted and reported that English-speaking anxiety is a psychological barrier that impacts language learners, especially second language learners. When Horwitz et al. (1986) proposed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), it was widely accepted, and it was used as the primary scale to measure emotional problems experienced by students when speaking a foreign language. In the Tamil school setting, the same emotional problems are observed when students are facing anxiety about speaking in the English language.

More recent research has documented how language anxiety among primary school students not only impacts their speaking skills but also causes a negative effect on their overall academic performance (Alnuzaili & Uddin, 2020; Toyama & Yamazaki, 2021). Most Malaysian students learn the English language as a second language. The process of learning is often filled with fear of making mistakes, bad peer support, lack of confidence and rejection (Fragoulis & Tsiplakides, 2009; Putri Astawa et al., 2017).

### **Factors Contributing to English-speaking Anxiety in Vernacular School Contexts**

First and foremost, low self-esteem and fear or embarrassment of negative perception or feedback are key psychological factors that create speaking anxiety among primary school students (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996). In the context of Tamil vernacular schools, the extent of speaking anxiety is further amplified because English may be the third or fourth language. Therefore, the lack of proficiency is more severe, and it becomes a major cause for anxiety. Students become insecure about their use of English, and eventually, they push the language away (Kumaran & Krish, 2021; Shanmugan et al., 2025).

Additionally, research has indicated that teaching and learning practices also contribute to speaking anxiety. Language teachers who refuse to adapt to changes and continue to apply teacher-centred approaches increase the rate of anxiety

among students because traditional methods limit interactivity. The teacher is influential when it comes to creating effective learning opportunities that can combine a wide range of activities that promote positive communication (David et al., 2017). The high levels of anxiety that students in Tamil vernacular schools have can be attributed to the lack of creative and innovative pedagogical interventions in the classroom.

### **Interventions to Address Speaking Anxiety**

When it comes to addressing speaking anxiety, many interventions have been proposed. The past studies have shown that speaking anxiety can be managed effectively when there are interventions that can encourage stronger teacher-student relationships and a supportive classroom environment. The focus is to create classroom activities that can create a non-threatening environment where mistakes are not highlighted but used as opportunities to learn together (Venkatesan & Ganesan, 2021). Activities that promote meaningful collaboration among students create better opportunities for the use of English in a real-life context (Alnuzaili & Uddin, 2020; Toyama & Yamazaki, 2021).

Technological advancement in teaching and learning has impacted language learning. Digital tools like language learning apps and other platforms are seen as great innovations that can help students face anxiety issues because the technologies provide personalisation and self-paced learning activities (Kumar & Zain, 2019).

In the context of SJKT, using technologies by language teachers can help students to use the language more engagingly.

Plus, it has also been found that interventions based on the concept of mindfulness have been able to reduce anxiety. Students in schools have been exposed to techniques such as breathing exercises, relaxation, and positive visualisation (Toyama & Yamazaki, 2021). However, these techniques have been tested for students in the higher level, and the effects towards students in the primary school setting remain untested.

### **Language Anxiety in Malaysian Vernacular Schools**

Vernacular school students often face the challenges of learning languages because they must encounter learning at least three different languages, including their mother tongue which is very dominant (Kumaran & Krish, 2021). In the vernacular Tamil school setting, the dominance of the Tamil language among the students can cause a severe impact against the use of English in their daily communication.

The gap in research concerning primary school students in vernacular schools in Malaysia is a crucial area for investigation. While studies on language anxiety in secondary and tertiary students are more prevalent, the challenges faced by primary learners in vernacular schools have not been adequately addressed. Understanding the factors contributing to anxiety in these settings and exploring potential interventions tailored to their unique needs

is essential for improving their language learning outcomes.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a systematic literature review (SLR) design. Among the available frameworks for conducting and reporting systematic reviews, this review uses the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 framework as its primary guideline, applying its 27-item checklist and four-phase flow (identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion) to ensure transparency and replicability. The review was guided by three objectives: (i) to determine the prevalence and manifestations of English-speaking anxiety among primary learners in Malaysian vernacular schools, (ii) to identify the psychological, social, and pedagogical factors that contribute to this anxiety, and (iii) to synthesise interventions that have been shown to reduce anxiety and increase willingness to communicate. The literature search was conducted across five databases, namely Scopus, Web of Science, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, ERIC, and Google Scholar, using the keyword combinations listed in Table 1. The search was restricted to peer-reviewed studies published in English or Malay between 2015 and 2025. The full screening and selection procedure, including the number of records identified, duplicates removed, records screened, reports excluded, and studies finally included, is reported in the Results section and summarised in the PRISMA flow diagram as shown in Figure 1.

## Eligibility and Exclusion Criteria

The eligibility and exclusion criteria are a vital part of a systematic literature review. Using the PRISMA framework, the eligibility criteria for the current review are presented in Table 1. In ensuring that the chosen articles truly reflect the needs of ESL/

EFL learners and the experiences of learners in Tamil vernacular schools, the inclusion criteria have been set very precisely. Articles selected for the review must strictly be based on research that has been conducted in vernacular schools, especially vernacular Tamil schools in Malaysia.

Table 1  
*Eligibility and exclusion criteria*

Criteria	Eligibility	Exclusion
Population	Primary ESL/EFL in vernacular (SJKT/SJKC) schools in Malaysia	Secondary School Students Higher Education Students Preschool Students National School Students
Research Design	Quantitative (Survey, Experimental) Qualitative (Interview, Focus-group Discussions) Mixed Method	Meta-Analyses Systematic Literature Reviews Case Studies
Language	Published in English or Malay	Other languages apart from English or Malay
Focus	Anxiety related to English-speaking tasks or classroom interventions.	Learning anxiety due to external factors
Publication Timeframe	Year 2015 to 2025	Anything before 2015
Database	Scopus, Web of Science, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Google Scholar Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC)	Any other database apart from the listed ones
Keywords	“Speaking anxiety” “nervousness” “KSSR” “English” “communication” “Foreign language classroom anxiety” “Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale” “Oral communication apprehension” “L2 speaking” “primary” “elementary” “ESL”/ “EFL” “Tamil”/ “vernacular” “Malaysia”	Anything other than the listed keywords

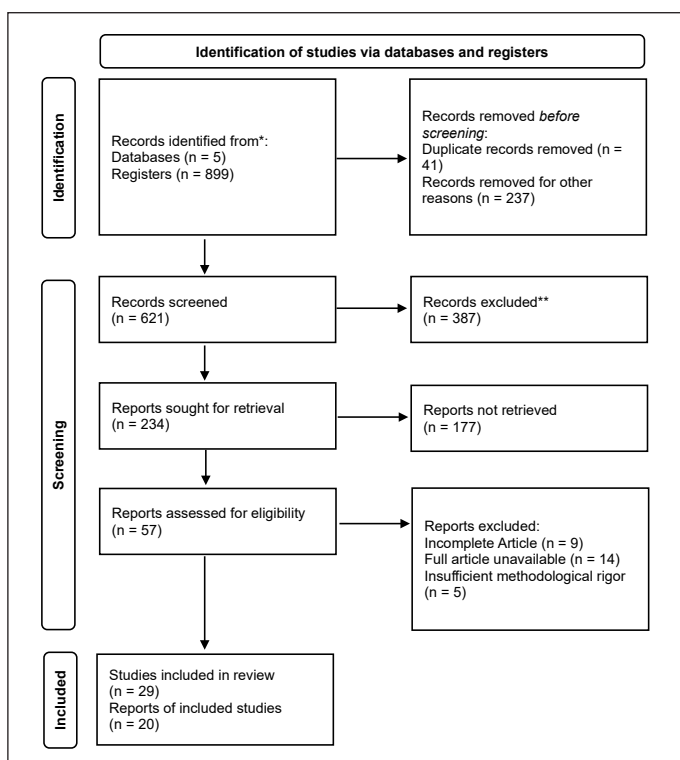


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of study identification, screening, and selection process  
Source: Adapted from (PRISMA, 2020)

Articles based on vernacular Chinese schools are also expected, seeing that ESL/EFL learners in vernacular Chinese schools in Malaysia and vernacular Tamil schools fall within the same category, which is under the vernacular school category. Articles selected for the review must fall within the proposed eligibility and exclusion criteria.

Plus, articles chosen were within the decade-long (2015-2025) publication window to ensure relevance to the current education situation. Focusing on articles earlier than 2015 may produce results that are not relevant to current educational needs, policies and future needs. Since the words “fear”, “anxiety” and “embarrassment”

may overlap if not defined clearly, precise definitions were set. ‘Fear’ referred to anticipation of failure, ‘nervousness’ to physiological responses during performance, and ‘embarrassment’ to self-perceived social exposure. This ensured consistency in theme development. To avoid over-generalising from studies involving non-Tamil primary learners in other Southeast Asian countries, comparative studies were included only if cultural or linguistic parallels existed.

### Data Synthesis

The qualitative method of analysis is used to analyse the articles in the systematic literature review. Specifically, the thematic

analysis approach by Braun and Clarke (2019) is used to categorically segregate the articles based on several themes, which have been decided based on the needs of the systematic literature review. As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2019), the process of thematic analysis starts with familiarisation, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and finally producing the report. Themes are developed based on the keywords that have been coded during the coding and theme generation stages. Since the study involved emotional descriptors which may carry cultural bias, cross-checking between coders was employed. Descriptors were interpreted contextually using each study's cultural framing to avoid imposing external meanings. Coding was iterative, with ambiguous terms reviewed through consensus.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This review uses secondary data from published studies. Ethical approval was not required as all studies adhered to ethical guidelines, including informed consent and confidentiality.

### **Limitations**

This systematic literature review is limited to English-speaking anxiety within the context of Tamil vernacular schools, which may constrain the generalisability of its findings. In addition, the small number of studies focusing specifically on SJKT primary learners means that some inferences are drawn from closely related contexts, such

as vernacular Chinese schools and writing-focused studies, and should therefore be interpreted with caution.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Screening and Data Selection**

As suggested by the PRISMA framework, the screening and data selection process are vital procedures in a systematic literature review. In this review, the chosen framework is known as the PICOS method of screening and data selection (Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2021). The PICOS refers to population, intervention, comparator, outcomes and study design. Therefore, every selected article for the review will be analysed using the criteria of the PICOS. This makes the review more structured and comprehensible to the reader. The procedures of article selection are presented in the diagram in Figure 1. In the initial stage of identification, titles of the articles were reviewed on all five databases, and the search results indicated  $n=899$  articles. However, duplicate records ( $n=41$ ) were removed because similar articles were published in different databases. Next,  $n=237$  articles were removed because the articles were not based on studies that were done with primary school students, especially vernacular school students in Malaysia. Furthermore,  $n=621$  articles were screened thoroughly. At this stage, articles which were meta-analyses, reviews or case studies, together with articles that focused on external factors other than foreign language anxiety, were excluded ( $n = 387$ ), resulting in  $n=234$  articles finally sought for retrieval.  $N=177$  articles could not be retrieved due

to various reasons such as website failures, online unavailability and copyright issues.  $N=57$  reports were assessed in full. Of these, incomplete articles ( $n=9$ ), unavailable articles ( $n=14$ ) and articles with unreliable data ( $n=5$ ) were excluded, leaving  $n=29$  studies. After a final eligibility screening that removed a further nine studies, which did not meet all inclusion criteria,  $n=20$  studies were deemed eligible and included in the final review.

### Characteristics of the Study

In Table 2, the matrix provides the general information of each study. The key information includes the sample size, study

design, and the main findings or focus of each study. Although all the articles chosen for the analysis are quantitative, in-depth thematic coding of the quantitative results allowed the researcher to capture emotional and psychological nuances of anxiety. Anxiety caused by language difficulties and challenges and anxiety caused by sociocultural factors have been carefully differentiated in the analysis. Studies which focused on anxiety caused by language difficulties and studies focusing on factors that cause fear and stigma have been analysed and separated using the codes analysis, which allowed the researcher to carefully categorise the studies.

Table 2  
*Characteristics of the studies*

No.	Sample Size	Study Design	Key Findings/Focus
1	58	Quantitative	Anxiety, nervousness, fear
2	144	Quantitative	Embarrassment, lack of confidence
3	111	Quantitative	Fear, anxiety
4	238	Quantitative	Fear of embarrassment, anxiety, and lack of confidence
5	98	Quantitative	Lack of confidence
6	87	Quantitative	Learning challenges
7	105	Quantitative	Differentiated Strategies, learning anxiety
8	105	Quantitative	Anxiety, fear
9	134	Quantitative	Lack of confidence
10	64	Quantitative	Learning strategies
11	44	Quantitative	Anxiety, fear
12	58	Quantitative	Embarrassment, lack of confidence
13	122	Quantitative	Peer Pressure, anxiety
14	23	Quantitative	Nervousness, classroom bullying
15	268	Quantitative	Lack of exposure
16	302	Quantitative	Anxiety, lack of confidence
17	119	Quantitative	Lack of exposure
18	77	Quantitative	Anxiety, nervousness
19	101	Quantitative	Peer pressure, bullying
20	133	Quantitative	Lack of confidence, anxiety

The studies chosen were not specifically chosen based on the geographical settings of the schools, but the results showed that students in rural and suburban vernacular schools were more prone to anxiety when speaking English.

### **Anxiety, Fear and Embarrassment**

Yahaya et al. (2021) conducted a study to explore the obstacles faced by primary school students in a rural district in Malaysia. The study used the explorative method to observe classroom activities that took place in a primary school in the district. The researchers also surveyed the English language teachers in the district. The results focused more on the obstacles faced by the students when they must learn the English language. One of the obstacles in learning English is the anxiety they face when they must speak in English. The observations showed how students used various strategies of avoidance when it comes to learning English, which is related to the core behaviours of avoidance when individuals must face anxiety. The survey with the teachers further revealed that students show anxiety, especially when they must speak in front of their peers in the English language. Teachers also agreed that students refuse to learn the English language because they feel uncomfortable having to face the anxiety when speaking in the language. One of the most agreed-upon items in the survey is the embarrassment faced by students when they make mistakes in the English language.

Ejeng et al. (2020) are also consistent with Yahaya et al. (2021), especially about some of the things faced by primary school students in Malaysia in the English language classroom. Although the article focuses on the use of songs to teach the English language in Malaysian primary school classrooms, it does focus specifically on anxiety related to the English language. According to the researchers, students in the primary school setting in Malaysia require creative strategies employed by teachers that can help them reduce the anxiety that they feel. The anxiety faced by the primary school students in Mukah, Sarawak, is mainly related to the strict and traditional pedagogy used by English language teachers in the classroom. The researchers proposed using songs in the English language classroom. Students were interviewed and observed before and after songs were used. In comparison to Yahaya and Madzlan (2021), the study conducted pre- and post-interviews to observe how a change of strategy can impact the level of anxiety among the students.

Ejeng et al. (2020) reported that after using songs in the English language classroom, students appeared to be happier and more confident, especially when learning in English. They let their guards down, and they seem to struggle less when songs are incorporated into the lesson. Ejeng et al. (2020) and Yahaya et al. (2021) also reported similar observations in terms of students' way of speaking when their anxiety is lower. As stated by Yahaya et al. (2021), they become more confident

in communicating their ideas successfully when they have less anxiety. The two articles agree that a change of strategy is required in addressing the issues of anxiety in English language speaking among primary school students in Malaysia.

Subsequently, a study by Rajendran and Yunus (2021) conducted a very precise study involving just five participants who were year three students at a primary school in Malaysia. The study involved the use of a mobile application in the lessons conducted by the teacher. This study took place during the Movement Control Order (MCO), which was enforced to curb the spread of COVID-19. Rajendran and Yunus (2021) conducted a semi-structured interview to evaluate how the students felt in terms of using English to speak when they used the mobile application. The crux of the study is like that of Ejeng et al. (2020), who explored how interventions and strategies could help students manage their anxiety. Rajendran and Yunus (2021) made several discoveries in the study, which included the importance of integrating mobile-assisted language learning tools to help students manage anxiety. It is like Ejeng et al. (2020), except that Rajendran and Yunus (2021) used a technological tool. Some responses from the participants showed that when they used an application, they became more confident, mainly because they had control over the speaking activity. Tamil vernacular students often respond positively to digital tools due to reduced peer scrutiny and increased control over pace. Yet, limited home internet access and parental support can restrict

consistent engagement compared to national school peers.

Meanwhile, another study by Ghulamuddin et al. (2021) and Mohari and Ariffin (2021) provided an insight into the anxiety faced by Malay primary school students in Malaysia when learning the English language. Unlike Ejeng et al. (2020) and Rajendran and Yunus (2021) or Ghulamuddin et al. (2021) and Yahaya et al. (2021), who provided a better view of the realities faced by second language learners in Malaysia. The study involved year six students in a school in Malaysia. The focus, however, was on the English language writing skills. However, the challenges faced by the students can be related to their English language speaking skills as well. Ghulamuddin et al. (2021) conducted a semi-structured interview with the students to explore the challenges they faced. Some interesting discoveries were reported, and these discoveries are vital in understanding anxiety when it comes to speaking in the English language. Ghulamuddin et al. (2021) reported that the anxiety faced by the students was mainly due to the lack of mastery in the English language. When they cannot master components such as the vocabulary and the grammar structure, they become nervous when writing in the language. This is also relatable to speaking in the language.

### **Peer Pressure and Lack of Exposure**

Like Kumaran and Krish (2021) and Ghulamuddin et al. (2021), who also explored the problems faced by Tamil

school students when it comes to writing in the English language. Although their study did not specifically focus on speaking skills, there is a lot of information on anxiety faced by Tamil school students when they must deal with the English language. Kumaran and Krish (2021) explained how the anxiety towards the English language formed the students' beliefs and perceptions towards the language in general. Compared to Kumaran and Krish (2021) and Ghulamuddin et al. (2021), who dived deeper into the problems faced by Tamil school students too. They analysed 30 essay scripts by primary school students. This study, when compared to other studies, is very different because of its specific focus on the mechanics of writing. Nevertheless, it has contributed to understanding the situation of English language learning in Tamil schools in Malaysia. The analysis discovered many issues related to spelling. More importantly, Kumaran and Krish (2021) explained that students are not familiar with the use of English terms and phrases in their daily lives. This is related to speaking skills, too, because the lack of familiarity creates anxiety among the students.

The analysis of the sentences written by the students provides an exclusive view of the students' perceptions towards the English language structure in the spoken and the written form. In this sense, it can be said that Kumaran and Krish's (2021) study provides a concrete understanding of how anxiety towards English language speaking among Tamil school students emerges from a lack of structural understanding.

At the same time, Kumaran and Krish (2021) also encourage further exploration of the interference of the mother tongue. This is because strong mother tongue interference has a significant impact on the English language learning by second language speakers.

Another crucial study in understanding the use of the English language among Tamil people in Malaysia is the study by Raadha Krishnan and Sharmini (2024). It is a study that focuses specifically on the use of the English language among Tamil speakers in Malaysia. It is not specifically aimed at students in Tamil schools. However, it is very important to understand the anxiety developed by Tamil school students towards the English language. Raadha Krishnan and Sharmini (2024) surveyed 30 Tamil school teachers in Malaysia, and they reported that there are some major issues which cause the respondents to fear the use of the English language in public. As suggested in previous studies, the lack of knowledge of the main components of the English language makes speakers feel nervous and anxious. Secondly, Raadha Krishnan and Sharmini (2024) also reported that the lack of a supportive environment that promotes the use of the English language in their daily lives contributes to their anxiety when they must suddenly speak in English. Since it involved Tamil school teachers, the findings have significance to the Tamil school students who may face similar situations when having to speak in the English language.

## CONCLUSION

This review set out to determine the prevalence and manifestations of English-speaking anxiety among primary learners in Malaysian vernacular schools, to identify the factors that contribute to it, and to synthesise effective interventions. In response to the first two objectives, the synthesis confirms that speaking anxiety is widespread among SJKT learners and is driven by interrelated psychological, social, and pedagogical factors, including fear of negative evaluation, peer judgement, mother-tongue dominance, and limited exposure to English beyond the classroom. Interpreted through the State–Trait, WTC, and Control-Value frameworks, these findings show that anxiety both reflects low perceived control and suppresses learners' willingness to communicate. In response to the third objective, the review identifies task-based learning, peer-assisted learning, song- and technology-mediated activities, and mindfulness techniques as promising strategies that reduce anxiety and raise willingness to communicate, particularly when they lower peer scrutiny and give learners greater control over the pace of speaking. A clear gap remains only a small number of recent studies address Tamil vernacular primary learners directly, and teacher-related anxiety is largely unexamined. The broader implication is twofold. For practice, teacher training should equip educators to recognise signs of anxiety, such as withdrawal, silence, and avoidance, and to design low-pressure, communicative speaking tasks that build

confidence. For policy and research, there is a need for context-specific, design-based and longitudinal studies in vernacular schools, together with the validation of anxiety measurement tools suited to Southeast Asian primary learners. By connecting established theoretical foundations to realistic classroom strategies, this review offers an evidence-based basis for improving English language teaching in Malaysia's multilingual primary classrooms.

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