



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
EDUCATION, PSYCHOLOGY
AND COUNSELLING
(IJEPC)

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THE POWER OF SPOKEN LANGUAGE: UNDERSTANDING
COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION AND ENGLISH
LANGUAGE ANXIETY AMONG THAI-SPEAKING MINORITY
STUDENTS IN MALAYSIAN NATIONAL SCHOOLS

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 18.04.2023

Revised date: 16.05.2023

Accepted date: 23.05.2023

Published date: 12.06.2023

To cite this document:

Nasir, N. A. M., Yaacob, N. H., Ab Rashid, R., Amin, M. Z. M. (2023). The Power Of Spoken Language: Understanding Communication Apprehension And English Language Anxiety Among Thai-Speaking Minority Students In Malaysian National Schools. *International*

Abstract:

Communication apprehension refers to the feeling of anxiety or fear that individuals experience when they need to communicate with others. In the context of foreign language learning, communication apprehension can have significant implications on learners' abilities to learn, use, and acquire the language effectively, yet studies on it as one of the key components contributing to anxiety in language learning especially among minority learners are still scarce. This study examines communication apprehension as one of the four components recognised to spark anxiety in foreign language learning. The focus was directed at a group of Thai-speaking Malaysian secondary school students, who are always addressed as the minority ethnic groups in this country. As a minority race, it is believed that this population may have unique experiences and challenges in learning English as a foreign language, which have not been extensively studied before. The findings contribute to the existing literature by examining foreign language anxiety from the perspective of minority Thai-speaking students, identifying anxiety-inducing situations, and offering recommendations for educational interventions to address communication apprehension. It was found that these

Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling, 8 (50), 209-220.

DOI: 10.35631/IJEPC.850015

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students were uncomfortable or anxious in a variety of situations when speaking in English mainly when participating in impromptu tasks. The findings contribute to the identification of specific situations that can trigger anxiety and hinder language learning progress among them. It is hoped that this knowledge can guide educators in designing appropriate instructional approaches and creating a supportive classroom environment. Therefore, educators are recommended to offer more attention to the special needs of learners who struggle with communication anxiety by developing a friendly and secure learning environment where these students can confidently practise their ways of interacting. This is important to help them build confidence and self-esteem and thus alleviate unnecessary anxieties.

Keywords:

Communication Apprehension, FLCAS, Foreign Language Anxiety

Introduction

As Malaysia continues to embrace its diverse cultural heritage, the number of multiracial students in Malaysian schools is on the rise. With a melting pot of different races, religions, and backgrounds, these students bring a unique perspective and enriching experience to the classroom. As they navigate through a complex web of identities and cultures, these multiracial students face their own set of challenges and opportunities.

In fact, minority students, particularly those who come from different linguistic and demographic backgrounds than the majority, are at a higher risk of developing communication apprehension. This is due to several factors, and one of the main challenges for minority students is language barriers. Many students who come from non-English speaking backgrounds may struggle to communicate effectively in English, which can lead to feelings of anxiety and apprehension.

Thaher (2005), Amogne and Yigzaw (2013), and Zakaria and Hassan (2015), for example, conducted studies that identified communication apprehension as the most common cause of students' reluctance to speak English in front of the class. This apprehension caused difficulties in speaking fluently and accurately. Communication anxiety can manifest itself in various ways, such as experiencing fear of public speaking, feeling awkward while presenting in front of peers, or feeling anxious when expressing opinions in English (Sari, 2017).

Despite the growing recognition of foreign language anxiety, there is a lack of focused research on the specific challenges and anxieties faced by specific race groups even though Malaysia is well-known for its diverse nation. Previous studies in the literature center mostly on university students (e.g.: Tom, Johari, Rozaimi & Huzaimah (2013) and non-Malaysian students (e.g.: Amiri & Puteh, (2021); Jalleh, Mahfoodh, & Singh (2021). Thus, this study aims to fill the gap by bringing forth one of the core issues related to language learning among the minority Malaysian namely the Thai descent students in learning English as their foreign language. The aim is set to examine the specific language-related anxieties and communication apprehension experienced by these students which hinders their language acquisition and overall educational experience.

Literature Review

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is a psychological phenomenon that describes the feelings of fear and unease that individuals encounter when learning or utilizing a foreign language. As stated by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), FLA is made up of three distinct components: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. This literature review will delve into the component of communication apprehension, which is an integral part of the three factors contributing to the negative effects of anxiety among learners, particularly in multicultural settings where one or more minority students are part of the majority of learners.

Silenced Voices: The Impact of Communication Apprehension on ESL & FL learners

Communication apprehension is defined as a form of anxiety that occurs when individuals lack control over interpersonal communication situations. This is especially true in educational settings where learners may feel uncertain about communicating effectively (McCrosky, 1987). Communication apprehension is a form of fear or unease that arises when individuals communicate in a foreign language, especially when speaking in front of others. This may involve concerns about committing errors, facing judgement from others, or experiencing difficulty expressing oneself effectively. Research has demonstrated that communication apprehension can have a substantial influence on language learning, as it may result in avoidance behaviours such as refraining from speaking in class or social settings, which may hinder the acquisition of the language (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

In Malaysia's national schools, a diverse cohort of students from various ethnic backgrounds learn both formally and informally. However, minority students often encounter difficulties as they are required to master English as well as other languages like the national language and ethnic languages such as Mandarin and Tamil. For indigenous students who primarily speak their ethnic language at home, this can pose a particular challenge as they may experience difficulties achieving accuracy when learning the national language and English. It is worth noting that, unlike the major races such as the Malays, Chinese, and Indians, other minority ethnic groups, including the Malaysian Siamese, learn English as a foreign language instead of as a second language (Iber, 2014).

While communication apprehension is a concern in all types of classrooms, its impact can be particularly severe in foreign language or ESL classes (Lucas, 1984). According to a study by Mejias et al. (1991), students with higher levels of communication apprehension tend to restrict their oral involvement in classroom activities, opting for silence as their preferred response. This choice of remaining silent or offering minimal responses serves as a coping mechanism to handle their communication apprehension, enabling them to avoid potential embarrassment, criticism, or scrutiny from peers and instructors. Therefore, it is worth noting that individuals vary in their levels of anxiety and response patterns within classroom settings and thus, recognizing the interplay between communication apprehension, limited oral participation, and the preference for silence is crucial for educators and researchers. This understanding will consequently facilitate the development of strategies that could establish a supportive and inclusive learning environment, encouraging active engagement and addressing the challenges encountered by students with communication apprehension.

Similarly, a recent study by Shukor and Madzlan (2022) unearth that the fear of speaking in an unfamiliar language is often due to a lack of confidence that can potentially hinder learners' ability to improve their fluency and eventually increase apprehension. It has long been evident in the literature that when learners lack confidence in their language abilities, they may feel insecure about their language production like pronunciation, vocabulary usage, or grammatical accuracy. This self-doubt, when left unattended, can create a barrier that hinders their willingness to engage in oral communication.

Among all, a study by Jalleh et al., (2021) is considered closed to this study. Recognizing that communication apprehension can significantly impact language learning and overall language proficiency, the study underscores the importance of understanding and addressing communication apprehension among Japanese EFL international students in the specific context of a language immersion program. Correspondingly, this study seeks to look at the specific language-related anxieties and communication apprehension experienced by minority Malaysian Thai students when learning English as a foreign language in multilingual context. These two studies are similar in a way that both acknowledge the negative effect of communication apprehension on learners who learn the language in a context where they are considered as the foreign speakers of the target language. Jalleh et al. identified that the students' apprehension was particularly evident in public speaking situations and during interactions with native English speakers. For them, being put in these two situations are considered as mostly nerve-wrecking that has negatively affected the students' oral proficiency and hindered their ability to actively engage in classroom discussions and express themselves confidently in English.

Research Methodology

Participants

The study involved 113 secondary school students of Malaysian Siamese descent from the Tumpat district in Kelantan. This district was selected because it has the highest Siamese Malaysian population in Kelantan. The sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) method for determining sample size, and the total of 113 was deemed sufficient to represent a cross-section of the population. There were no specific criteria set for the participants, except they should be of Malaysian Thai descent attending any Malaysian schools at secondary level.

Instruments

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) questionnaire by Horwitz et al. (1986) was used in this study. FLCAS is a five-point Likert scale questionnaire that asks respondents to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with various statements. The scores range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The FLCAS has been used in many studies and is reliable across multiple administrations. Other studies that have used the FLCAS include Aida (1994), Cheng et al. (1999), Saito et al. (1999), Matsuda & Gobel (2001), Matsuda & Gobel (2004), Elkhafaifi (2005), Al-Saraj (2014), and Gerencheal & Mishra (2019) with high Cronbach Alpha value at 0.7 and above. Therefore, the researchers deemed it appropriate to be used in this study.

Essentially, the FLCAS questionnaire was divided into four: 1) communication apprehension; 2) test anxiety; 3) fear of negative evaluation; and 4) fear of the English class (Salim, Subramaniam, and Termizi, 2017). Table 1 displays the components of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) identified in the FLCAS and the number of items associated with each component. However, in order to suit the focus of this study, only items classified under communication apprehension were analysed and taken into account. The analysis was done using descriptive statistics of the SPSS software.

Table 1: FLA Components in FLCAS

FLA Component	Item No	Total Item
Communication apprehension	1, 3, 4, 9, 14, 15, 18, 20, 27, 29, 30, 32, 33	13
Test anxiety	8, 10, 21, 22	4
Fear of negative evaluation	2, 7, 13, 19, 23, 24, 31	7
Fear of English class	5, 6, 11, 12, 16, 17, 25, 26, 28	9

Results and Discussion

Table 2: Demographic Background

Demography	Frequency N=113	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	35	31 %
Female	78	69 %

The demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 2. Of the total 113 participants, 35 were male students (31%) and 78 were female students (69%). The FLCAS questionnaire used in this study was found to be reliable with an internal reliability score of $\alpha = 0.908$ using Cronbach's alpha.

Table 3: Percentages of Students' Responses on Communication Apprehension in FLCAS

Items	SA	A	N	D	SD
1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in English	18	44	28	9	1
3. I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in English class	14	42	33	6	5
4. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in English	17	39	33	10	2
9. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class	23	43	23	10	2
14. I would not be nervous speaking English with native speakers	7	24	39	21	9
15. I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting	12	46	35	4	4
18. I feel confident when I speak in my English class	9	20	36	29	5

20. I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in my English class	22	45	27	3	4
27. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English class	16	48	28	5	3
29. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says	15	39	35	8	4
30. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak English	16	38	35	11	1
32. I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of English	12	22	50	12	4
33. I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance	25	43	26	4	3

*SA=Strongly Agree; A: Agree=; N=Neutral; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree

Table 3 shows the percentages of students who chose each choice of each item available in the FLCAS. The percentages were rounded off to the nearest whole number for easier analysis and thus they may not add up to 100 %. The analysis of the responses was made by adding up the percentage of Strongly Agree (SA) and Agree (A) as positive responses expressing agreement with the statement, whereas the total percentage of Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD) were considered the vice versa. The percentages provided indicate the proportion of respondents who agreed with each statement to some degree, with higher percentages indicating greater levels of anxiety or discomfort. The respondents rated their level of anxiety on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating the lowest anxiety and 5 indicating the highest. The details on the total percentage for each item are shown in table 4 below:

Table 4: Total Percentage of Communication Anxiety

1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in English (62%)
3. I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in English class (56%)
4. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in English (56%)
9. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class (66%)
14. I would not be nervous speaking English with native speakers (31%)
15. I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting (58%)
18. I feel confident when I speak in my English class (29%)
20. I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in my English class (67%)
27. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English class (64%)
29. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says (54%)
30. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak English (54%)
32. I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of English (34%)
33. I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance (68%)

Overall, the results show that respondents experience varying levels of communication apprehension, with some items scoring higher than others. The highest level of anxiety was reported for item 33 "I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance" (68%) and item 9 "I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class" (66%). Both of these items relate to speaking in English without preparation. One possible explanation for this is that the Siamese students might feel more at ease when they have an adequate time to prepare what they wish to express. Similarly, item 20

“I can feel my heart pounding when I’m going to be called on in my English class” (67%) and item 27 “I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English class” are also relatable to being called in English class. Essentially, all of these dominant scores suggest that being put on the spot task is a significant source of anxiety for FL learners.

Unlike those who are naturally chatty or good at the old small talk, being called to speak in front of others, especially in an impromptu situation can trigger a high sense of self-consciousness and nervousness for most FL students. Highly anxious students tend to be more concerned about their pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary and worried that they might not be able to express their ideas clearly (Ajeng, 2016). Apart from that, a recent study by Jalleh and Mahfoodh (2021) found that limited opportunities to speak English, and attitudes towards English in the students’ society can potentially contribute to high levels of communication apprehension. The communication anxiety, they added, was exceptionally high when the students were assigned to participate in group discussions and conversation, where oral communication occurred spontaneously. They need to be given sufficient preparation time to respond accordingly, or else their anxiousness will spike (Chang, 2012). Thus, it is evident that a variety of environmental and personal factors, such as poor self-esteem, a lack of language proficiency, and a demanding learning environment, contribute to the anxiety experienced by EFL students in impromptu speaking circumstances.

Communication apprehension does not only occur when speaking the language but also when listening to the spoken language (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Thus, the statements in items 4 “It frightens me when I don’t understand what the teacher is saying in English” (56 %) and 29 “I get nervous when I don’t understand every word the English teacher says” (54%) also indicate communication apprehension. The findings, which relate to understanding the teacher also scored relatively high, showing that half of the students are anxious when they are unable to comprehend the teacher’s words. This could be due to the fact that learners may feel embarrassed or frustrated when they cannot understand something, or when they make mistakes. As the Siamese students communicate in the Thai language while their ESL teachers use a mix of English and Malay language to convey instruction, it is more probable that these students will encounter difficulties in comprehending lessons and structuring their ideas, as compared to other Malay students who have the advantage of sharing the same language with their instructors. Consequently, they may tend to withdraw and distance themselves out of fear or embarrassment.

Item 5 “I get upset when I don’t understand what the teacher is correcting” (58%) implies that the Siamese students are also anxious about being corrected. Mikminin et al., (2015) relate such distressing experience to their sentiment that their English is bad and thus they are always beware of being evaluated and noticed should they make errors. Ozturk and Gurbuz (2014) have emphasized that linguistic factors, such as incorrect pronunciation, inadequate vocabulary, and inaccurate grammar, are some of the primary drivers of speaking anxiety in foreign language (FL) learning, which constantly reinforce learners’ preconceived notions that they are under constant scrutiny (Sari, 2017). For learners who have limited exposure to foreign language vocabulary, the pressure to spontaneously identify the correct words during speech can exacerbate their anxiety (Zheng, 2008). Hence, Lightbown and Spada (1999) have advocated for teachers to regard mistakes as a natural aspect of the learning process, and to avoid correcting students on-the-spot during speaking activities to prevent them from feeling disheartened or self-conscious about making errors.

Item 30 “I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak English” (54%), which relates to the number of rules in English, also scored relatively high. The degree suggests that the Siamese students may feel overwhelmed by the amount of information that they need to learn concerning English. This is in line with Mukminin et al. (2015) who revealed a poor mastery of grammar especially in terms of word arrangement and sentence structure as the deterrent for learning and eventually triggering anxiousness and refusal to speak in English.

On the other hand, items 14 “I would not be nervous speaking English with native speakers” (31%) and item 32 “I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of English” (34%) relate to speaking with native speakers scored relatively low. This could be due to the fact that learners may feel more comfortable speaking with their peers compared to English native speakers. The term "native English speakers" in this context refers to individuals who speak English as their first language or ESL teachers who have attained native-like fluency and proficiency. Cagatay's (2015) research has supported the notion that students' speaking anxiety is likely to intensify when communicating with native speakers, who often speak at a faster pace and use more complex language compared to their classmates. FL learners may view native speakers as a threat to their fluency and are more likely to feel anxious when they are expected to use more sophisticated language, which can significantly impede their ability to communicate in English (Woodrow, 2006).

The least score was recorded for item 18 “I feel confident when I speak in my English class” (29%). The statement is related to the level of confidence that these students have to speak in their English class. The reason why these students had lower levels of communication apprehension could be linked to the fact that the sample was taken from a setting with a small proportion of the Malaysian Siamese population, with less than 10% representation in each school. According to LaRochelle and Karpinski (2016), schools with a more racially diverse student body and representation could create a more comfortable environment with a larger "in-group" to communicate and identify with.

It is worth noting that while there is variation in the percentages across the different items, many of them fall within a relatively narrow range (between 54% and 68%). This suggests that for the majority of respondents, speaking and learning English can be a source of anxiety or discomfort in various contexts. Possible reasons for the percentage of each item could be related to various factors, such as anxiety around speaking without preparation, understanding the teacher and being corrected, and feeling overwhelmed by the rules of the language.

Table 5: Students' Communication Apprehension

	Item Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
1	I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in English	3.69	0.90	High
3	I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in English class	3.53	0.99	High
4	It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in English	3.59	0.94	High
9	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class	3.75	0.98	High

14	I would not be nervous speaking English with native speakers	3.01	1.05	Average
15	I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting	3.58	0.88	High
18	I feel confident when I speak in my English class	3.02	1.03	Average
20	I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in my English class	3.80	0.94	High
27	I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English class	3.69	0.90	High
29	I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says	3.54	0.96	High
30	I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak English	3.58	0.91	High
32	I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of English	2.74	0.94	Average
33	I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance	3.84	0.93	High
	Total	3.49	0.95	High

Table 6: Interpretation Scale Mean Score

Mean score	Interpretation
1.0-1.80	Very low
1.81-2.60	Low
2.61-3.40	Average
3.41- 4.20	High
4.21-5.00	Very High

Table 5 shows the mean and standard deviation of students' communication apprehension and Table 7 shows the interpretation scale of the mean score adapted from Alias (1997). As we can see, of all the 13 items, the highest mean belongs to item 33 (mean= 3.84), indicating high level of communication apprehension. This is correspondence to the total percentage of the item as chosen by the students which also recorded the highest percentage value (68%), indicating that most students agree to the statement. These students appear to experience a sense of pressure when they are required to engage in spontaneous speaking as they may be believed that they often necessitate additional time to effectively structure their thoughts or contemplate their responses before saying it out.

The lowest mean is item 32 (mean=2.74) which indicate moderate communication apprehension level. The students seem to feel at ease when engaging in oral communication with native English speakers, suggesting a lack of anxiety in such interactions. However, considering the nature that this research was done among school students, this result may be attributed to their limited opportunities to engage with native English speakers and thus they may have limited idea on the complexities of the native speakers' speaking style. This is contrary with Jalleh et al. (2021) who reported that interacting with native English speakers has caused high level of apprehension among their students and eventually hinder their oral proficiency and confidence in participating in classroom discussions.

Table 7: Communication Apprehension Level in Male and Female Students

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Male	35	3.37	0.13
Female	78	3.54	0.07

Table 7 shows the mean value of communication apprehension level of male and female Siamese students. From the table, it can be observed that female students experience high level of communication apprehension (mean=3.54) compared to male students with moderate communication apprehension level (mean=3.37). This mean score interpretation is adapted from Alias (1997) as shown in Table 6.

Based on the mean obtained, it can be concluded that in this study, female students experience higher communication apprehension than male students. This result aligns with other findings (e.g.: Mejias et al., 1991; Machida, 2001; Wicks-Nelson & Israel, 2006) which also indicated higher level of anxiety among female students compared to male students. This result could be attributed to the notion that female students place significant value on their public image, as they strive to consistently present their best selves to others. Bruce et al. (2005) also highlighted that female student inherently dislike presenting themselves as less skilled and less confident.

Table 8: Comparison of Communication Apprehension in Both Males and Females Using t-test

Communication apprehension item	t-value	Significance (p<0.05)
9. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class.	-2.18	0.031
29. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says.	-3.28	0.001

Table 8 shows the t-test values for items with significant difference in communication apprehension. Overall, it was observed that only item 9 and 29 exhibit significant difference in the scores between male and female Siamese students in which females' scores were higher than males' scores. The t-test values obtained are $t = -2.18$, $p = 0.031$ and $t = -3.28$, $p = 0.001$ for item 9 and 29 respectively.

Limitations of The Study & Recommendation for Future Research

This study may have certain limitations. First, the data collection method and instruments used to assess communication apprehension could be further refined or diversified. Future studies could employ mixed-methods approaches by incorporating some qualitative data collection methods such as interviews or observations to gain a deeper understanding of learners' experiences. Next, this study does not extensively explore the specific contextual factors that contribute to communication apprehension among minority Thai-speaking students. Future research therefore could delve into factors such as cultural influences, societal expectations, and educational policies that may impact language learning anxiety in this particular context.

Conclusion

Drawing from previous studies (e.g.: Lucas (1984), Mejias et al. (1991), Shukor and Madzlan (2022), and Jalleh et al. (2021)), it is evident that communication apprehension is a significant concern in language learning contexts, particularly among minority learners. Students with

higher levels of communication apprehension tend to limit their oral participation, opting for silence or minimal responses as a coping mechanism to manage their anxiety. This lack of confidence can hinder learners' fluency development and increase their apprehension.

In the context of Thai-speaking Malaysian secondary school students, it is essential to recognize the unique experiences and challenges faced by minority learners in acquiring English as a foreign language. The findings contribute to the existing literature by identifying specific anxiety-inducing situations, such as impromptu tasks, where these students experience discomfort or anxiety when speaking in English. This aligns with Jalleh et al.'s (2021) findings, which highlighted public speaking situations and interactions with native English speakers as particularly nerve-wracking for learners. These anxiety-inducing situations can negatively impact the students' oral proficiency and hinder their active engagement in classroom discussions.

Therefore, based on the integration of previous studies and the findings of this research, it is crucial for educators to address communication apprehension and create a supportive learning environment. Strategies should be implemented to build learners' confidence and self-esteem, allowing them to practice and interact with the language more comfortably. By designing appropriate instructional approaches and fostering a friendly and secure classroom environment, educators can alleviate unnecessary anxieties and promote active engagement among learners with communication apprehension.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the understanding of communication apprehension among minority Thai-speaking students in the context of foreign language learning. By addressing their unique challenges and identifying anxiety-inducing situations, the study emphasizes the need for targeted educational interventions. The integration of previous research highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing communication apprehension, promoting active participation, and ultimately supporting learners' language learning journey.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to acknowledge Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Sultan Ismail Petra who funded the publication of this article.

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