

Article**Communication Apprehension among Young Learners of English in Malaysia: The concept of Vygotsky's *Perezhivanie***

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<https://doi.org/10.58304/tc.260506>**Abstract**

Learning English is mandatory in Malaysia from preschool through tertiary education. Nevertheless, many students experience anxiety in oral communication. Utilizing Vygotsky's concept of *perezhivanie*, this study investigates the emotional factors influencing Malaysian children's communication apprehension (CA) while learning English as a second language (L2). Qualitative approaches such as observations of a group of four six-year-old bilingual preschoolers, along with semi-structured interviews with experienced early years English teachers and young learners were used for data collection. Thematic Analysis (TA) was employed to analyse collected data of which revealed that while young learners enjoy learning English, cognitive (language proficiency), psychosocial (teacher and parental influences), and environmental factors contribute to CA. Identifying these factors is crucial for educators to develop effective teaching strategies that can alleviate anxiety and enhance the L2 learning experience.

KeywordsCommunication apprehension, sociocultural theory, *Perezhivanie*, early L2 learning**Introduction**

Malaysia is a multicultural and multilingual country. Malay is the national language, while English, as a second language (L2) to most of the population (Azirah & Leitner, 2021), is widely used in education and employment. Learning English in Malaysia is compulsory from preschool to tertiary education. Other languages, including Chinese (Mandarin and other dialects), Tamil, and indigenous languages like Iban and Kadazan, are also commonly spoken among the communities.

Despite the early exposure to English, the competency of English oral communication skills is still a concern among Malaysian older students. Malaysian students from primary to higher education levels reported experiencing anxiety when using the English language in oral communication (Azmi & Sham, 2018; Nadesan & Md. Shah, 2020; Abdul Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021). English as a Second Language learner (ESL) learners in Malaysia face difficulties speaking English because of a variety of psychological and cognitive issues, including low motivation and self-confidence, anxiety, inhibition, limited vocabulary, English proficiency level, and classroom instructional approach (Saraswathy & Azlina, 2021). Pertinent studies (Girija & Parilah, 2022; Malvin, 2022) indicate that speaking in English is the main contributor of speaking apprehension among Malaysian older students from different academic levels. The majority of tertiary learners in Malaysia generally have a moderate level of communication

apprehension (Joseph Alagiaraj Thambu Raj et al., 2024). The question of why Malaysians have not developed a standard for speaking English, despite early exposure to and education in the language, arises. Could the root cause of the problem stem from the learners' early experiences that they carried over into their subsequent learning environments?

Communication apprehension (CA) is one of the major components (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986) that causes language learning anxiety, affecting learners' L2 learning and development. Strongly associated with speech and communication, according to McCroskey (1982), acquired helplessness from early experiences can lead to negative childhood experiences. In addition, theories such as Erikson's psychosocial developmental stages (Erikson, 1982) and Vygotsky's *perezhivanie* (Vygotsky, 1994) have discussed the significance on how an environment could positively or negatively affect a child's long-run development. Unsupportive learning environments of a child may lead to negative outcomes in an individual's future – the development of CA in English. Nikolov and Djigunovic (2019) pointed out that young learners have been observed to be affected by affective factors such as shyness, nervousness, and embarrassment when speaking in front of their class. Therefore, an unsupportive English as L2 learning environment could be the causative factor contributing to Malaysian older English as L2 learners' speaking apprehension.

To address the issues mentioned earlier, this paper aims to examine the causes of CA among Malaysian young learners. Nevertheless, studies on young learners' CA are still underexplored in the Malaysian context. As early learning plays a role in shaping future language development, psychological factors such as CA occurs in young learners pertaining to learning English as their L2 should be given due attention.

Literature Review

This study is based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (SCT) (1978), focusing on the concept of *perezhivanie*, which refers to the emotional-cognitive experiences in learning situations. CA, defined by McCroskey (1982) as anxiety related to communication with others, parallels to learners' *perezhivanie*. For example, negative emotional experiences, such as encountering unsupportive teachers, can lead to higher CA which hinders students' use of L2 in the classroom. Both suggest that childhood negative experiences could impact one's growth and future academic performance. The age of children in this study refers to individuals in early childhood between the ages of two and eight.

Perezhivanie

As part of Vygotsky's SCT, which emphasizes on the significance social interaction has along with one's learning and development, *perezhivanie* can be "translated as emotional experience or lived experience" (Veresov & Mok, 2018, p. 90). According to Vygotsky (1994), it is not merely an emotional experience but a more complex psychological phenomenon such as awareness and interpretation. *Perezhivanie* can be defined as a concept of which "allows us to study the role and influence of environment on the psychological development of children in the analysis of the laws of development" (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 343). In Vygotsky's *The Problem of the Environment* (1994), it is discussed that child development is tightly linked to the role of the environment. However, children's interpretation of the environment differs based on their emotional experience (*perezhivanie*) towards the environment that is built on their characteristics, degree of understanding, awareness, and insight.

In L2 learning, the relation between emotion and language learning is interwoven during the process of L2 learning. Xu and Zhang (2023) claimed that L2 learners' *perezhivanie* can be

understood as (1) the negative or positive emotions of the learning process, (2) the cognition-emotional catharsis in relation to the difficulties encountered in L2 learning, and (3) how learners traverse and foreground cognition and emotion in relation to L2 development. In terms of the cognitive-emotional dialectic in L2 development, the lack of L2 motivation or confidence is closely linked to affect and cognition (Veresov, 2017). In investigating the relevance of *perezhivanie* in language development, Li (2025) identified the reciprocal and dynamic interplay between learners' thoughts (cognition) and feelings (emotions). Within the construct of sociocultural theory (SCT) *perezhivanie*, cognition and emotion are not separate entities. They constantly influence and shape each other. For instance, negative emotions such as language learning anxiety would demotivate learners' L2 learning. An unsupportive English as L2 learning environment which a child encounters would result an unpleasant *perezhivanie*. If the *perezhivanie* such as the negative emotion of Malaysian children towards English as L2 learning is not addressed during their early learning, the emotional experiences (*perezhivanie*) towards their L2 learning could be refracted in their future English learning. As such, this may explain the plausibility of the apprehensive experiences Malaysian older learners have when speaking English. Therefore, the perception of current environment among children could influence their future learning and development. *Perezhivanie* is particularly relevant in early L2 learning because children's cognitive and emotional development is still unfolding. Their experiences with L2 learning could significantly shape their attitudes towards learning and their overall engagement with the language in the future.

From Vygotsky's SCT perspective, emotion records and describes emotional experience, traces the process of emotional development, and explores the interaction between learners and the sociocultural environment from a holistic view (Qin et al., 2022). Under the construct of *perezhivanie*, it highlights the inseparable and dynamic interaction between cognition and emotion. Negative emotional experiences, if left unaddressed, are likely to shape how young learners interpret their learning environment and may be carried forward into later stages of language development. In the context of Malaysian learners, early negative *perezhivanie* toward English may help explain the CA observed among older students.

Communication apprehension

Communication Apprehension (CA) acts as one of the major components (Horwitz et al. 1986) causing language learning anxiety that affects learners' L2 learning and development. The fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication may be due to an individual's early experiences, such as learned helplessness (McCroskey, 1982), as well as environmental factors encountered at a young age (Prusank, 1987). McCroskey (1982), focusing on the causes of CA in an individual, proposed that environment and heredity were the reasons. He made the point that the adult CA may have its roots in the interplay between environment and genes. Additionally, McCroskey proposed that the fundamental elements of CA, which comprise both trait-like and situational CA, are learned helplessness and learned negative expectations. According to McCroskey, "the interaction of the individual's behaviours and the responses of the other individuals in the environment is what produces helplessness and negative expectations (as well as positive expectations)" (p. 159). As one of the major factors of L2 learning anxiety, CA can be developed from one's negative childhood experiences (McCroskey, 1982). As a result, the CA's experience as an adult learning a L2 may be rooted in their early years learning experience.

Paralleled to Vygotsky's *perezhivanie*, as a key source of L2 learning anxiety, CA is often a result of early childhood experiences shaped by both environmental influences and individual predispositions. Therefore, negative interactions and learned helplessness in the early L2

experiences can form lasting expectations that later manifest as CA in adult L2 learning. It highlights the long-term impact of early emotional and social experiences on later L2 language development.

Communication apprehension in young learners

Studies pertaining to the factors influencing young learners' L2 learning include motivation, anxiety, teacher and parental role, and instructional methods (Alawi, 2016; Cabrera-Solano et al., 2019; Choi, Sheo, & Kang, 2020; Hanus, 2016; Ozfidan & Burlbaw, 2019). As part of the factors in L2 learning anxiety, the occurrence of CA among young learners may affect classroom learning. McCroskey (1977) pointed out two effects of CA in an elementary classroom: a) avoidance in class and b) unsuccessful completion of assignments. Several studies (Alawi, 2016; Aydin et al., 2017; Aydin et al., 2018) indicate the L2 learning anxiety among young learners. However, CA is not the focus. As CA can be developed from one's childhood experiences, the cause of CA in early years L2 learning should be addressed.

Although it may appear that children are more successful at learning a new language than adults, Cameron (2018) pointed out that these generalisations should be unpacked. Nilson (2019) pointed out that young learners do encounter L2 learning anxiety and it would put a negative impact on children's self-concept. Aydin et al. (2017) revealed that younger students were more worried during speaking activities, examinations, and teachers' corrections compared to older students. Children's learning context and relationship with teachers and parents play a crucial role.

The more situationally specific the helplessness or negative expectations, the more situational the CA. It should be stressed that helplessness and negative expectations are the product of an interaction of the behaviours of the individual and the responses of the other individuals in the environment. (McCroskey, 1982, p. 159)

This could explain why certain negative experiences in English learning among children could be prolonged to future learning stage.

Research shows that while children are often assumed to learn a L2 easily, many still experience L2 learning anxiety, and CA can emerge from early negative interactions in their learning environment. Factors such as teacher behaviour, parental responses, and classroom experiences play a crucial role in shaping children's expectations and emotional reactions (Djigunovic & Nikolov, 2019), suggesting that early sources of CA must be addressed to prevent long-term impacts on learners' confidence and language development.

Interrelation between *perezhivanie* and communication apprehension

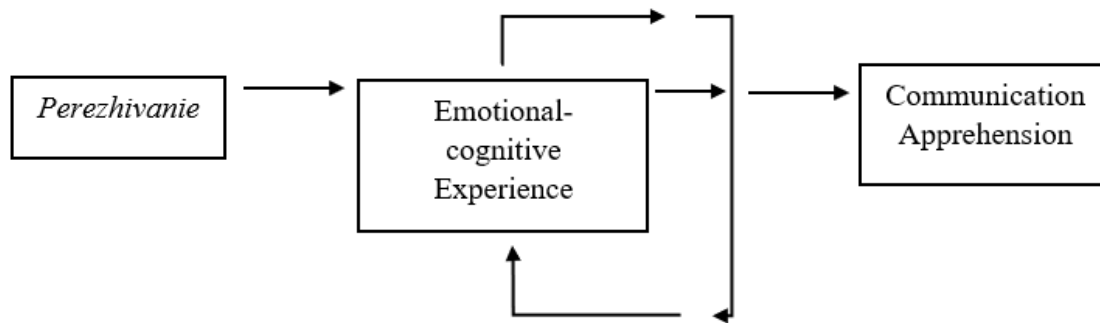
This section explores the connection between *perezhivanie* and the learning of English as a L2 by children. According to Vygotsky (1994), *perezhivanie* acts as a lens through which environmental influences on learning are filtered, potentially facilitating or hindering the learning process where the negative experiences from childhood might significantly impact on an individual's development and learning outcomes. In McCroskey (1982), it is suggested that learned helplessness serves as the "causal explanation" (p. 27) for all types of CA. Learned helplessness, according to McCroskey (1982), is produced by inconsistent receipt of reward and punishment. CA could not only be triggered situationally, such as when asked to speak, but also by how learners interpret and experience these situations.

Perezhivanie under the SCT construct is an emotional-cognitive experience where individuals interpret and refract their social environment into their *perezhivanie*. Negative *perezhivanie*

causes CA, while positive *perezhivanie* lowers anxiety and supports the use of L2 to communicate. Figure 1 shows the interrelationship between *perezhivanie* and CA. For instance, young learners' negative *perezhivanie* caused by external factors would be interpreted and refracted to develop CA in their English as L2 learning. *Perezhivanie* serves as a holistic process in which learners' emotions and cognition are united and affect each other (Bodrova & Leong, 2003). *Perezhivanie* plays a significant role in shaping young learners' emotional and cognitive responses to their environment, which in turn results in their CA in English as L2 learning. That is, positive *perezhivanie* can reduce anxiety such as CA and support engagement, while negative experiences can foster CA and hinder development. This interrelationship highlights the importance of understanding learners' holistic emotional-cognitive experiences.

Figure 1

Interrelationship between Perezhivanie and CA



Methodology

Qualitative research methods were used to study the emotional-cognitive phenomena of Malaysian young learners in capturing the depth, context, and subjective nature of their English as L2 learning experiences. Therefore, methods such as semi-structured interviews and observation were utilized in this study to provide deep insights into the research objectives.

Research setting

The study focused on Malaysian children learning English as their second language and was conducted at a kindergarten utilizing the National Standard Preschool Curriculum - *Kurikulum Standard Pra-sekolah Kebangsaan* (KSPK) (Ministry of Education, 2017) in Klang Valley. The selection of this specific kindergarten was based on criteria including the study's relevance, accessibility, and the willingness of school authorities, teachers, and students to participate.

Research instruments

Case study was used as the method for the present study to penetrate situations. Semi-structured interviews and classroom observation were used to gain insight and an in-depth understanding of CA faced by young learners. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with experienced early learning English teachers and children. One-month long classroom participant observation (five days a week, each lesson of 45 minutes) was conducted as this approach has been widely adopted for child-centered research (Clark, 2011). By observing children in the classroom, it allowed a close-at-hand scrutiny of children's behavior and interactions with their peers and teacher during their English lessons. Observation checklists (*Appendix 1*) were developed to identify children's CA. Field notetaking and audio-recording were used. The researcher participated in the observation as an observer.

Participant sampling

The study aimed to understand CA among six-year-old Malaysian learners during their study of English as a L2. The research used purposive sampling, selecting participants based on specific criteria:

- Six-year-old Malaysian bilingual children studying in local kindergartens that follow the Malaysian KSPK curriculum.
- Experienced English teachers (at least 3 years of teaching experience) in the early childhood sector.

The choice of young participants' age group was informed by Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development (Erikson, 1982), where six-year-olds are at the stage of industry versus inferiority, experiencing social and emotional challenges that can have lasting impacts.

To help gain insight pertaining to the research purpose from the children's perspectives, they were invited as participants to be observed and interviewed. Before inclusion, the researcher confirmed suitability of the potential participants with the assistance of the principal from the kindergarten. Their demographic details are as follows:

- Age: Six years old
- Gender: Three boys and one girl
- Socioeconomic class: Middle class
- Ethnicity: Malaysian Chinese
- Language Background:
 - : Mandarin - Native language (L1)
 - : English – L2
 - : Malay – L2

As Malay is the national language and is compulsory to be learned in all levels of school, the Malay language had been learned by the young participants as their additional L2. In this study, children in the same classroom, whose English is their L1 were not included.

To gain insight through the teachers' lens from different teaching backgrounds, experienced English teachers from diverse teaching backgrounds in the early childhood sector were selected for semi-structured interviews. A total of four teachers (each provided a pseudonym T1, T2, etc.), including children's English teacher (T3), were selected for interviews. T3 had been the homeroom teacher and English teacher for the same group of children since they were 5 years old. The teaching background of each teacher is given in Table 1 and the profile of each young participant is shown in Table 2.

Data analysis

Thematic Analysis (TA) was employed to analyse collected data using a deductive approach. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), TA identifies, analyses, and reports patterns (themes) within data, enabling researchers to view the phenomenon holistically and discern themes from the content, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of participants' experiences (Bengtsson & Anderson, 2020).

Validity and reliability

To ensure validity and reliability, the study employed triangulation, prolonged engagement in the field, and field notes. Data collected from teacher interviews (*Appendix 2*) were compared with classroom observations and interviews from the young learners to reduce adult-driven bias. Classroom observations were conducted to capture the nuances of young learners'

behaviors in the classroom. An observation checklist, interview guides, and audit trail (*Appendix 3*) addressed the reliability of the data. Member checking was conducted during the interviews with the teachers to confirm participants' responses. To ensure the credibility of the present research, peer debriefing was conducted. An experienced kindergarten principal and early childhood teacher who possesses a child psychology educational background were selected to review and validate the data collected which is in line with their expertise in educating young children and teachers managing the early years education sector. Several aspects were investigated and discussed during the peer debriefing sessions to gain feedback from the debriefers:

- Participants' perspectives that might be overlooked
- Interpretation of children's interviews
- Appropriateness of descriptions
- Reviewing overall research findings
- Possible bias (if any)

Table 1
Teachers' Teaching Experience and Background

Teachers' Names (pseudonyms)	Teaching Experience and Background
T1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 30 years of experience in teaching English in the early childhood sector. - Experienced in teaching both national and international students learning English as their L2.
T2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Approximately 20 years of experience in teaching English in the early childhood sector. - Owned a kid's learning center in Klang Valley. - Embeds fun-filled learning and learn through play concepts in her teaching. - Experienced in teaching in different early childhood institutions (Catholic kindergarten, asylum Kindergarten, and secular kindergarten) - Experienced in teaching English to children from different language backgrounds.
T3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Approximately 7 years of experience in teaching English in the early childhood sector. - Experienced in teaching English to local (Malaysian) children.
T4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Approximately 6 years of experience of teaching English in the early childhood sector. - Experienced in teaching English to mainly local students (Malay ethnicity) in the government fully funded public preschools.

Table 2
Young Participants' Profiles

Children's Names (pseudonyms)	Gender	Background
C1	Boy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 6-year-old kindergartener. - Mandarin as native language and as a dominant language used at home. - Learning English as L2 at the kindergarten.
C2	Girl	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 6-year-old kindergartener. - Mandarin as native language and as a dominant language used at home. - Learning English as L2 at the kindergarten.
C4	Boy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 6-year-old kindergartener. - Mandarin as native language and as a dominant language used at home. - Learning English as L2 at the kindergarten.
C7	Boy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 6-year-old kindergartener. - Mandarin as native language and as a dominant language use at home. - Learning English as L2 at the kindergarten.

Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the Scientific and Ethical Review Committee under expedited review. Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC) (Graham et al., 2013) Guidance was adopted to ensure the respectful study on children underpinning the ethical issues such as harms and benefits, informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality.

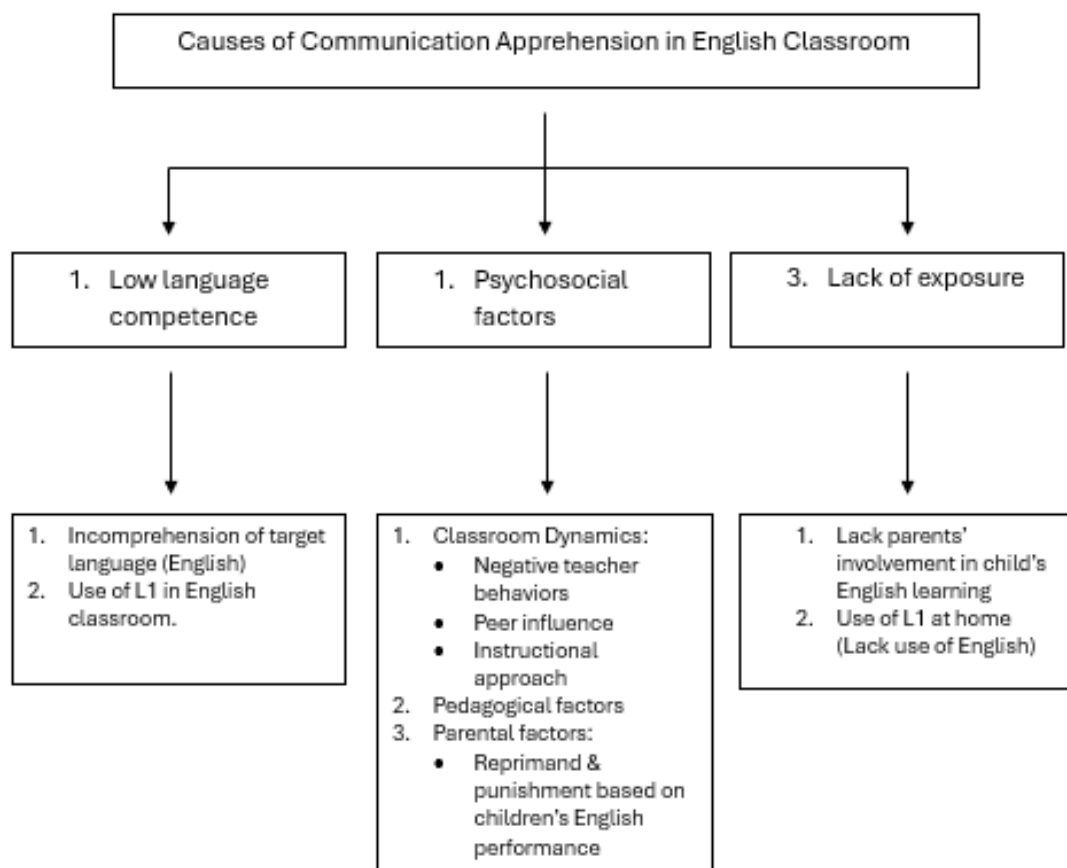
To ensure confidentiality, all participants (adult and young participants) were anonymized. Data, including audio recordings and transcripts, were stored securely on encrypted devices. Participants were informed of the purposes and objectives of the study. Young participants were informed about the presence of the researcher in the classroom. Their parents were informed of and explained the study's purposes. A consent letter with the requirement of parents' signatures was sent to the parents through the school.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the study. Data were coded and analysed under the thematic approach. Main themes and subthemes are discussed. Findings reveal the occurrence of CA among children. Teachers being interviewed shared and expressed their perspectives with regards to the CA that occurred in their classroom. They agreed that their students showed CA in the classroom. For instance, T2 expressed, "*Ya. Actually a lot*" (Interview, line 53) and T3 affirmed, "*Yes, many, many, many*" (Interview, line 76). In the interviews, children expressed that they liked English, but they faced negative affectivity such as worry and fear in the class.

The manifestations of CA were observed during the classroom observations, including non-verbal cues such as rubbing their fingers, grabbing their clothes, replying softly, giving short responses, and remaining silent. They were shown during oral presentations (individual sharing sessions) and when the teacher asked questions. Children were observed to rub their fingers, fidget, speak softly, remain silent, and give short responses during the lessons. The factors that caused children's CA are themed as follows (Figure 2). Notably, despite the occurrence of CA in Malaysian young learners, all four young participants agreed that English was their most favorite subject in school. The causes contributed to children's CA resulted in them staying unresponsive in the classroom. The causes of CA faced by the children were (1) low language competence, (2) psychosocial factors, and (3) lack of exposure.

Figure 2
Causes of CA among Malaysian Children



Low language competence

Young learners' low language competence was identified in the findings that reveal their inability to effectively use English as their L2 to sustain classroom communication. Two subthemes emerged under young learners' low language competence, namely, incomprehension of target language (English) and the use of L1 in the English classroom.

Incomprehension of target language (English)

Young learners' low language competence causes their incomprehension of the target language – English that eventually results in CA. Incomprehension of target language refers to young learners' inability to comprehend input in the English language. In the interviews, teachers expressed that the unfamiliarity and the lack of proficiency of the L2 (English) they were

learning caused their students CA. Teachers shared that children remained quiet because they did not understand the language (English) and they had to use their L1 to communicate with their students. T1 (interview, line 43-45), who is experienced in teaching English to international and national children (Malaysian), shared her experience in teaching international students (at the early childhood age) and the negative affectivities the students encountered in English lessons: “they will be very scared because they don’t know what we are asking them to do. There’s fear in them because they don’t understand what we want them to do.”

Likewise, talking specifically about Malaysian preschool aged students, T1 (interview, line 53-54) shared a similar opinion that negative affect existed because the students did not understand the language during class: “shy and there’s fear all the time. There’s fear. Because they don’t know where they’re going... you see... what they’re doing and what we want them to do.”

Some young children agreed that they would feel nervous when they did not understand what the teacher was teaching. However, some children (C2 and C4) expressed that they did not encounter any negative emotions as they could understand what the teacher said in the classroom. This reveals the diversity of English proficiency levels that leads to different levels of psychological barriers among children in a classroom. C1 shared that his CA was caused by parental factors, while C4 shared that he would raise up his hand and “*tell teacher that I didn’t know*”.

Use of L1 in the English classroom

Findings revealed the reluctance of using the target language among young learners in the English classroom. The use of L1 is in consequence of young learners’ low competence of the target language. Being unresponsive is one of the manifestations of CA. Children showed behavioral patterns of CA during the English lessons if English was used according to the expression of the teachers during the interviews as well as the classroom observations. From the interview, T4, a preschool teacher who had been teaching in a local preschool setting whose students were mainly from a Malay language background, shared that her Malay native students did not interact if English during the lesson “because they are not familiar with English” (Interview, line 61). Based on T4’s response, young learners’ unfamiliarity of the English language was closely linked to their English proficiency level. Because English is not used regularly at home, the lack of exposure causes young learners’ low linguistic competence and incapability in language functions. “At home pun (also) speak in Malay. So when they come to school, I speak in English, they do not know how to answer, to interact” (Interview, line 62-63). Hence, L1 was used as the medium of classroom interaction and communication.

Paralleled, students’ inability to respond to the teacher’s questions was observed. Students were observed to respond only when their L1 (Mandarin) was used, and the English teacher had to switch to Mandarin (students’ L1) to ensure the students’ understanding. The responsiveness of children when the teacher switched to their native language showed their confidence and higher L1 proficiency that allowed them to sustain communication and interaction. This indicates that the students’ lower L2 proficiency compared to L1 resulted in the use of the students’ L1.

Psychosocial factors

Psychosocial, according to Loughry and Eyber (2003) refers to the “influence that social factors have on human thoughts and behavior and, in turn, the influence of thoughts and behaviors on people’s social world” (p. 2). From the perspective of SCT, individuals’ emotion could be affected by external experiences such as the social environment (Vygotsky, 1994). Responses

from both the teachers and the young learners showed classroom dynamics, such as the role of teachers, peers, and pedagogical factors act as the social factors that contributed to young learners' emotion refraction. Findings indicate that the social environment such as teachers, peers, pedagogical factors, and parents contributes to Malaysian young learners CA.

Classroom dynamics

Findings of the present study revealed that the teacher's and peers' behavior as well as instructional approach were part of the causes of young learners' CA. It showed that teachers' attitudes and behaviors play a pivotal role in affecting students' learning. T3 (Interview, line 382) revealed the authoritative role a teacher held in students' behaviors in the classroom: "They know my expectation and what is not supposed to do." Furthermore, on teacher's attitudes towards students' English learning, T3 shared that an encouraging teacher would promote young learners' use of English language. Similarly, T2 shared the impact teachers had on young learners: "...children can sense what you thought, what you teach" (Interview, line 285). Responses from the teachers showed that their students' emotions corresponded to teachers' attitude in the classroom. T3 expressed that young learners' fear of being scolded by their teachers. The fear of making mistakes and getting reprimanded resulted in them becoming reserved and worried. As a result, they chose to remain silent or withdraw from communicating in the class to avoid making any mistakes during the lessons.

"Yes. It's not just English, it will be overall, even in anything that they do because, um, when they are so reserved and they are so worried that if they are saying the wrong thing, they will get punished. It makes them become very reserved... Most of the time. They are so worried that they are wrong. And would be scolded by the teacher... Yeah, because some teachers, right. What the students shared with me is that when they say the answer wrongly, the teacher will scream at them. From their previous experience or that so, oh, they are worried that they say the wrong thing." (Interview, line 89-105)

Children feared being scolded by the teachers, and they shared that they feared of being laughed at by their peers during their oral presentation in English lessons. From the perspectives of young learners, the causes that trigger their nervousness in communicating in English was the fear of being scolded by the teacher. One of the children (C7) expressed that he was afraid that the teacher would be angry if he did something wrong or made mistakes: "I'm afraid. I'm afraid of teacher will be angry" (Interview, line 138). Besides, when being asked why he stayed quiet during English class, the child expressed: "Worried that teacher says... [I'm] naughty" (Interview, line 156). Similarly, another student (C2) expressed that she would remain quiet in English class because she was worried that she might make mistakes and get scolded by the teacher: "I'm scared that teacher will scold me" (Interview, line 125). C4, on the other hand, shared a different insight. C4 shared that he would feel scared if the teacher was angry, however, instead of remaining silent and not participating in the classroom interaction, C4 shared that he would "raise up your (my) hand" (Interview, line 73) and "just try" (Interview, line 145) when teacher asked a question that he could not answer and might make a mistake in the classroom.

Tense learning environments such as those observed during classroom observations even caused a child to cry. For instance, during a classroom sharing session, it was observed that students were behaving quietly and not responding much. The teacher got angry and scolded the students due to their unresponsiveness in the classroom. A student was seen crying. In another classroom observation, the teacher raised her voice during the lesson because only the students whose L1 is English responded in the class.

The rest of the class remained quiet. The teacher got upset and raised her voice. She then tapped on C8 and said, "Hello! Talk!" (Field note, March 30, 2023)

In terms of teachers' attitude, T2 stressed on the positive attitude of teachers towards young learners' CA in the English classroom: "...because for me, I encourage my children and say you need to be yourself. I respect everything. If they don't want to speak, I won't force them" (Interview, line 223-225). A firm believer of play-based learning, T2 expressed that a fun-filled and interactive learning environment would reduce students' anxiety and impact young learners positively. T2 expressed that the teaching approach used in English lessons could be the cause of contributing to the CA among Malaysian children. A more child-friendly and anxiety-free learning context could reduce the anxiety level among the children by not forcing but encouraging them throughout the learning process.

However, in contrast, one of the children (C7), shared that he would feel worried that his classmates would laugh at him if he made any mistakes during the oral presentation. During a classroom observation, after an oral presentation, the teacher asked her students if they were scared to do the presentation, C7 agreed and replied that it was because his friends were in the class, and he was worried that they would laugh at him.

Pedagogical factors

The interviewed teachers suggested that pedagogical approach would reduce young learners' English as L2 learning anxiety. T2 shared that a language rich and interactive learning environment would reduce children's anxiety in English learning and promote children's oral language. Besides, T2 believed that by allowing translanguaging in English classrooms such as the use of students' L1 would create a supportive environment that scaffolds children to practice daily conversation in English. This would expose young learners to a variety of language functions such as asking questions, "teacher, what is, how to say this in English. So for me that is learning also" (Interview, 216-217).

Moreover, a fun-filled and activity based English learning environment is crucial. T2 shared that young learners would be willing to use the language (English) freely during the lessons: "... if we create a... if we teach English in a fun way, I mean like play or anything, in my experience, all my kids... My kids will be learning and will be brave to speak out" (Interview, line 23-25). To support this, T4 (Interview, line 149-150) shared that young learners' preference on activity-based lessons such as the integration of arts and crafts which encouraged the use of English oral language: "students of all ages enjoy making things and being active. Incorporating English into arts and crafts, it can motivate children to express themselves in English."

Parental influences

Findings showed that parental influences play a role in causing CA among children in learning English. A teacher (T3) expressed that the home environment such as the punishment at home, may be brought to school, which hurdles the involvement or interaction of children during the class due to the feeling of being scared to be punished when mistakes are made.

"This is also not just the teacher, but from home. Most of the time from home. When, at home, when they say, the wrong thing, they'll get it from their parents. So, it becomes a, becomes a norm to them. Is that if I say wrongly, teacher might scold me. Yeah. Because this was what being taught at home... So, they bring the home environment to the school." (Interview, 91-98)

Likewise, during the interview, one child (C1) (Interview, line 144) expressed that his worry and nervousness occur during oral presentation in English lessons because he was afraid of

getting scolded by his parents: “I dared not to speak. Because daddy will be angry with me. And mummy too.”

Lack of exposure

Further, teachers expressed that environmental factors such as lack of target language exposure could be the cause of contributing to the CA among Malaysian children. Closely connected to young learners’ target language proficiency level, two emerged subthemes, namely lack of parents’ involvement and use of L1 at home could cause a deficit in children’s English exposure. Teachers expressed how home context could be the cause of CA among children and how it could be reduced/eliminated.

Lack of parents’ involvement

This theme revealed the parents’ engagement in their child’s English learning in school. Teachers emphasized the significant role of parents in helping to expose their children to English. In the interview, T2 emphasized that learning English is not solely the school’s responsibility; parental involvement is essential for maintaining a child’s constant exposure to the target language outside of school. For this, T2 expressed the importance of effective communication between parents and the school in children’s learning. This is supported by T3’s claim in the interview that despite children’s exposure to English language at a very young age often through English videos, there was no social interaction. “... (parents) switch on YouTube and let them watch. And the parents will go do their own thing” (Interview, line 27-30).

Use of L1 at home (Lack of English use)

T4 felt that if learners became familiar with the English language and used it in the home context, this would alleviate the CA: “I think it’s very important the parents start at home...” (interview, line 244). As such, young learners would not be scared or “frightened” (*terkejut*) (interview, line 246) when being sent to school (kindergarten) which could impede their English as a L2 learning progress. By building the foundation at home, it would encourage young learners to use English in the school context. The foundation at home would build up young learners’ confidence and eliminate their shyness. These findings echo Vygotsky’s view that learning occurs in social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). Due to the lack of parental involvement and use of English in the home context, the absence of social mediation and collaborative meaning-making might limit young learners’ English ability and language development.

Notably, some of the responses from the children were inconsistent. For instance, both C2 and C4 shared that oral presentation and communicating in English in the classroom did not cause negative emotions in them. However, they were observed remaining quiet in the classroom. When they were asked in the interview about their behavior, C2 shared that the reason for her remaining quiet was due to the fear of making mistakes in the classroom. Her fear was caused by her teacher. This shows the plausible underlying reason of children’s negative environmental experiences (*perezhivanie*) in English learning is rooted in teacher behavior. C4, however, remained silent most of the time during the interview and agreed that he was not ready to tell the answers to some of the questions. For this, C4 might view this as a stressful situation as he was observed to be punished and reprimanded frequently by the teacher in the classroom due to his misbehaviors.

Discussion

The findings underscore the psychological influences of the social environment on the English learning of Malaysian children. Aligning with Vygotsky's SCT framework - SCT *perezhivanie* (emotionally and cognitively experience of a situation), negative learning environments lead to negative *perezhivanie*. Findings of the present study indicated children refracted their past negative learning experiences to their current English learning. For instance, young learners' fear of being reprimanded (negative *perezhivanie*) was refracted to their English as L2 learning. That is, the social environment (causes of CA) could be refracted and interpreted differently based on children's *perezhivanie* (effect of CA in English). The apprehensive feelings C2 had is aligned with studies carried out by Aydin et al. (2017) and Aydin, et al. (2018) on young learners' fear of making mistakes in the English classroom. Nevertheless, this study contrasts with Aydin et al. (2017) and Aydin, et al. (2018) as three of the young learners shared that they like to do oral presentations. Rather, they remained unresponsive because of the fear of being scolded and laughed at. This could be due to the quantitative nature of the previous studies in which the causes of oral presentation anxiety of young children were not further investigated.

Low language competence and lack of exposure

Findings revealed the corresponding relation between the causes of CA. For instance, the lack of exposure is related to their low language competence. Besides, findings reveal that due to the low language competence of young learners, teachers tended to rely on L1 in the classroom. This contrasts the advantages of language exposure that MacIntyre and Charos (1996) claimed L2 learners need to use the L2 to increase their competence (or "talk to learn" [p. 3]). This is supported by the empirical discovery by De Carli et al. (2015) that proficiency is impacted by language use and is derived from a cognitive approach. Pertinent studies indicate students' lack of vocabulary would cause CA in them (Aeni et al., 2017; Hardi, 2017). Besides, parental involvement and support play a significant role in young learners' L2 vocabulary development (Bani et al., 2022).

Psychosocial factors

In addition, findings revealed that the psychosocial factors play a significant role in causing CA in Malaysian children. It echoes with Cabrera-Solano et al. (2019) and Hanus (2016) of which teacher and parental influence serve as the factor influencing young learners L2 learning. From the lens of Vygotsky's *perezhivanie*, the psychosocial factors shaped young learners' *perezhivanie* in the classroom. The negative classroom dynamics (harsh teacher's behaviour and peer influence), pedagogical approach, and parental influences were interpreted and refracted by the young learners as their negative *perezhivanie* though differently. The varied children's interpretations, along with Vygotsky's perspective on environmental interpretation and emotional experience (*perezhivanie*), may be constructed based on a child's characteristics as well as the degree of understanding, awareness, and insight.

The negative *perezhivanie* magnifies CA in the classroom that further hinder their willingness to speak in the target language. The negative *perezhivanie* young learners experienced were refracted from their previous experiences. If these problems are not addressed, the current *perezhivanie* could have an impact on how individuals experience the new environment in the future. Within the construct of SCT *perezhivanie*, childhood *perezhivanie* has the potential to have a robust and lasting influence on adolescence and adulthood. It could create emotional associations that persist. This could explain the plausible reasons of CA occurrence among Malaysian older L2 learners despite more than a decade of English learning. Positive *perezhivanie*, on the other hand, could potentially produce the inverse result. For example,

some of the teachers suggested potential benefits of fun-filled learning. The lived experience and the environmental characteristics do impact young learners.

Findings further revealed that young learners demonstrated dynamic responses to the same classroom situations. Therefore, it is crucial to address young learners' *perezhivanie* as this could be interpreted and anticipated emotionally and cognitively in their future learning and development. This "interaction in a social environment should be an important consideration" in creating a learner-centred teaching-learning environment (Mahn, 2003, p.129).

Implications

The findings of this study provide insight into the attitudes of Malaysian young learners in learning English as their L2. The results indicate that young learners have varied psychological and emotional responses to the same classroom situations. Findings suggest that the social environment plays a crucial role in children's L2 learning, which has a significant psychological impact on them.

As such, continuous training and teacher developmental courses should be provided by respective stakeholders, such as the Ministry of Education, for both pre-service and in-service educators to equip them with the knowledge and skills to address the psychological needs of young L2 learners through appropriate instructional methods. For instance, psychological programs such as educational and child psychology can be introduced in teacher training courses to aid effective teaching and learning, facilitating successful L2 learning in Malaysia and helping young learners achieve their L2 learning goals. While children's psychological needs are addressed, in return, children will benefit from being provided with a supportive L2 learning environment.

Conclusion

The study investigated the causes of CA among kindergarten-aged Malaysian children and identifies three main contributing factors: low competence, psychosocial factors, and lack of exposure. To address the study's limitations, future research could incorporate observations in the home context alongside with the school context to address environmental factors (such as a lack of exposure to the target language) that contribute to Malaysian young learners' CA. Future studies could expand the scope of research to include children from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, sociocultural contexts, and curriculum philosophies. Large-scale quantitative studies can be conducted to investigate Malaysian children's psychological factors, such as CA in English as L2 learning. Additionally, a longitudinal study could be conducted to investigate how the psychological factors of individuals' early L2 learning experiences affect their future L2 learning.

Appendix 1

Observation Checklist

Questions to be Answered During Observations

Withdrawal or Willingness to Communicate	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do children participate in classroom interaction? 2. Do children communicate orally in English? Or in L1? 3. How frequent do children participate in classroom oral communication? 4. Do children interact with the teacher in L2? Is it a short response? 5. Do children interact with peers in L2? Is it a short response?
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Disruption (dis-fluency – stuttering)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do children stutter during the oral communication in English class (when children are asked to answered questions by the teacher)? 2. Do children stutter during the oral communication in English class (when children are talking with peers)? 3. Do children stay silent when in need of communicating orally?
Non-verbal cue: Positive or negative emotions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Enjoyment (Laughing / smiling) 2. Remaining Silent

Appendix 2

Interview Questions (young children)

1. What is your name? How old are you?
2. How many languages do/can you know/speak?
3. How many languages do you learn in school?
Which language do you like the most? Can you tell me why?
Which language do you not like the most? Can you tell me why?
4. Do you learn English in school?
5. Do you look forward to / wish to go for English class every day?
6. Do you understand what the English teacher is talking about in the class?
Extended questions:
What do you do when you do not understand what the teacher is talking about (when the teacher is speaking in English)?
7. Do you speak English with your friends / teachers in the class / school?
8. Tell me, how do you feel when you're speaking English? Do you like it? Do you feel nervous / worried when talking to / with your teacher and friends?
Extended question:
Do you feel confident when you speak English in the class?
Do you feel fear / nervous / afraid speaking up in conversations (expressing yourself) during English class? Why (what makes you feel so)?
(Sometimes, I see you being silent / quiet) What makes you stay silent during English class?
9. How do you feel when the teacher asks you to speak in English in the class? For example, standing in front of the class and sharing, or reading, do you feel nervous (scared or worried or shy)?
(May provide pictorial prompt cards that show different feelings and emotions to facilitate children's communication.)
Extended questions:
Do you like participating in oral speaking activities in English class (individual oral presentation and communicating in a group – sitting down at own's seat)?
10. Do you feel nervous when the teacher asks you questions in the English class?
11. Will you volunteer to answer the teacher's question in the class?
12. Will you feel upset / sad when the teacher corrects you in the class after you tell the answer or say something?
13. Do you feel worried about making mistakes in English class? What makes you feel worried?
(May provide pictorial prompt cards that show different feelings and emotions to facilitate children's communication.)

14. Do you feel worried / afraid that your friends will laugh at you when you're speaking in front of the class or when you're telling answers?
15. Do you get nervous when you don't understand what the teacher says in English class? What makes you feel worried?
(*May provide pictorial prompt cards that show different feelings and emotions to facilitate children's communication.*)

Interview Questions (teachers)

1. How long have you been teaching in the early childhood education sector?
2. How many years have you taught English to young learners at preschool age?
3. What do you think about the children's perception(s) towards English? How's the children's willingness to learn English?
4. Could you share your experience of how children usually behave during English lessons?
5. How's the interaction of using English in the classroom during the English lesson (with peers and the teacher)?
6. Are they willing to participate in the conversation in English?
7. Do any of the students show "shyness" or "unwillingness" (worried / scared) while interacting / speaking in English in the classroom?
8. Why do you think students are shy or worried when speaking in English? Could you share your opinion? Would it affect their English learning?
(*E.g., If children are shy or unwilling to speak in English, would it affect their English development in the future?*)
9. The declining standard of English oral communication skill among Malaysian students (older students) has raised concerns. Could you share your opinion(s) on this? Why? Would the foundation of English oral language skills in preschool years play a role in this matter?

Appendix 3

Audit Trail Summary

Stage	Key Actions	Evidence
Design & Planning	Semi-structured interviews to explore participants' experience	Methodology
Sampling	Purposive sampling	Sampling criteria
Data Collection	Conducted and audio-recorded interviews; verbatim transcription	Interview guide; audio files; transcripts
Data analysis	Thematic analysis	Codebook; coded transcripts
Trustworthiness	Member checking and peer debriefing	Participant feedback

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