LEVERAGING POP MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING TO OVERCOME LANGUAGE ANXIETY AND ENHANCE SPEAKING PERFORMANCE AMONG MALAYSIAN SECONDARY ESL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on using contemporary pop media and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as a strategy to improve both the levels of language anxiety and speaking performance among ESL learners in a suburban Malaysian secondary school setting. In this context, contemporary pop media refers to short-form video content from platforms like TikTok and YouTube, current pop songs by artists such as Taylor Swift, and widely circulated internet memes. It essentially sought to establish the impact of integrating up-to-date pop media within a CLT framework on these learners' emotional affect and oral communication skills. A quantitative approach was employed with a sample size of 90 pupils in Form 2 at a secondary school in Sabah. This study involved the use of instruments such as the ELCAS (English Language Classroom Anxiety Scale — an adaptation of the established FLCAS, also known as the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale), and a tested oral fluency rubric. Through the analysis of both descriptive and inferential statistics, including paired-sample and independent sample t-tests, it has been found that this teaching strategy does significantly reduce language anxiety and enhance speaking performance among ESL learners. These findings support the potential of integrating culturally relevant media with communicative pedagogy to create more engaging and emotionally supportive language learning environments. Ultimately, the core of this study aims to challenge the conventional assumptions about the role of pop media in language learning and its potential in the language classroom when paired with an interactive and collaborative teaching method.

INTRODUCTION

In a multilingual country like Malaysia, English proficiency is a vital asset that influences academic and career competitiveness as well as social integration. The Malaysian government recognises this denominator as a national priority — with policies and initiatives that aim for pupils to be communicatively competent in the English language. The *Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025* explicitly sets the goal for pupils nationwide to be proficient and globally competitive in English by 2025. However, despite more than a decade of reforms, many pupils

still struggle to speak English confidently in classroom settings. This ongoing challenge puts a pressing gap between policy aspirations and classroom realities — and highlights language anxiety as a denominator to this issue.

Language anxiety has been widely associated with a range of negative emotional and behavioural outcomes that directly impede pupils' oral performance (Faizah & Hamid, 2021). Horwitz et al. (1986) states that it manifests as a fear of negative evaluation and low confidence among language speakers. The study by Kashinathan and Aziz (2021) proved that Malaysian pupils felt insecure about constructing sentences and their word choices when speaking in English. When pupils fear being judged for linguistic mistakes, they often experience heightened tension, self-consciousness, and cognitive overload during speaking tasks. These affective responses can disrupt processing fluency, reduce risk-taking, and restrict the spontaneous use of language. Consequently, anxious pupils resort to avoidance behaviours such as staying quiet, memorising rehearsed phrases, or withdrawing from interaction, which prevents the meaningful practice needed to develop oral competence. In many Malaysian classrooms, this results in pupils who can complete written tasks but remain unable to communicate confidently, even when they possess sufficient linguistic knowledge.

The impact of language anxiety extends beyond individual performance and shapes the broader classroom environment. When large groups of pupils are reluctant to speak, oral activities become teacher-centred, and dominated by a small fraction of high-proficiency speakers. This dynamic limits peer negotiation of meaning, collaborative learning, and communicative experimentation — all of which are central to effective language acquisition. In areas where English is not the dominant social language, schools may become the only space for oral practice, which makes anxiety even more consequential. Hence the persistence of anxiety not only suppresses individual confidence, but also weakens the overall communicative ecosystem of the classroom. This reinforces a cycle where pupils avoid speaking because they rarely speak.

In response to this challenge, contemporary pop media combined with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) offers a compelling approach to reduce language anxiety and encourage authentic participation. Pop media — including music, films, short-form videos, and social media content — provides pupils with familiar and relatable input that they already engage with outside school. Using such media in communicative tasks can lower psychological pressure because pupils perceive the content as enjoyable rather than evaluative. When integrated into CLT activities such as presentations, discussions, or collaborative meaning-making, pop media can create low-threat opportunities for oral production that emphasise expression over accuracy. This shift towards meaningful, interest-driven communication has the potential to help anxious pupils become more willing to participate and practise spontaneously. As a result, it can help them build confidence through repeated success in a supportive context.

With this context in mind, this study aims to investigate the impact of integrating contemporary pop media within a CLT framework on language anxiety and speaking performance among Form 2 ESL pupils in a Malaysian secondary school. Therefore, the study addresses two research questions:

1. What is the difference in levels of language anxiety among Form 2 pupils after using pop media and CLT in the English language classroom as an intervention?
2. What is the difference in levels of speaking performance among Form 2 pupils after using pop media and CLT in the English language classroom as an intervention?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language anxiety is a recognised barrier in second language acquisition among Malaysian ESL learners because it interferes with their ability to communicate confidently. This was the case for the participants in the study by Faizah and Hamid (2021), who found that the majority of

them experienced moderate to high levels of speaking anxiety. These issues were related to Krashen's Affective Filter Theory (1982), which discussed how high anxiety impedes pupils' abilities to process and utilise language effectively in speaking situations. In a separate study by Nadesan and Shah (2020), it was found that anxiety, shyness, the lack of confidence, and the fear of making mistakes significantly affected Malaysian pupils' speaking skills. The psychology behind this phenomenon is explained by Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (AFH), which states that high anxiety acts as a filter that blocks input from being effectively processed (Krashen, 1982). Essentially, it suggests that high anxiety is the reason why pupils lack the abilities to process and utilise language effectively in speaking situations.

To encourage pupil engagement in classroom speaking tasks, Nadesan and Shah (2020) recommended that teachers implement task-based activities in their lessons — a practice that is also vouched for by the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. While their study specifically highlighted the benefits of using Task-Based Language Teaching, the current study adopts CLT as the primary pedagogical framework. Both approaches share a common principle for using meaningful task-oriented activities that reflect the human need for natural communication. This aligns well with the study's intention to create authentic and low-pressure speaking opportunities that motivate pupils to participate more willingly. In retrospect, CLT itself has been widely implemented in Malaysian ESL classrooms because it promotes authentic communication, fluency, and interaction. Mangaleswaran and Aziz (2019) found that the approach had significantly improved Malaysian pupils' speaking skills, specifically when they practice higher order thinking skills in their oral presentations. Eddie and Aziz (2020) also confirmed that the engaging nature of CLT activities were able to contribute to a positive learning environment for pupils in the Malaysian context. Additionally, the outcomes in result of using CLT in the classroom aligns well with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis as it encourages learner-centred participation, which helps reduce affective barriers especially in low-pressure settings. CLT accordingly serves as an appropriate foundation for this study to support authentic oral communication while addressing the affective barriers that inhibit pupil participation.

Although CLT proves itself to be a worthy pedagogical approach, its effectiveness is often contingent on the quality of the input and the level of engagement pupils experience when participating in communicative tasks. Without appealing content, classroom speaking activities can still feel artificial or intimidating especially for pupils who experience language anxiety. Therefore, pairing CLT with contemporary pop media theoretically offers an opportunity to make communicative tasks more relevant and enjoyable, which may help reduce anxiety and promote spontaneous oral participation. The integration of contemporary pop media — such as short-form videos, trending songs, and internet memes — offers a culturally relevant way to enhance engagement and reduce language anxiety. Pop media resonates with pupils' digital lifestyles and daily experiences; which potentially creates a low-pressure environment conducive to oral practice, once again resurfacing AFH's emphasis on reducing emotional barriers. In line with this, Ejeng et al. (2020) and Kim et al. (2022) found that media-based learning improved fluency and motivation for Malaysian pupils. Furthermore, Charles and Soekarno (2024) demonstrated that tasks using interactive TikTok roleplay videos enhanced speaking proficiency in rural Sabah. Regardless of these promising outcomes, research on the combined use of CLT and pop media in suburban Malaysian secondary schools still remain limited. Therefore, the present study seeks to address this gap by examining whether culturally relevant media-enhanced CLT lessons can simultaneously reduce language anxiety and improve oral performance.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quasi-experimental quantitative design to investigate the effect of integrating contemporary pop media within a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) framework on the levels of language anxiety and speaking performance among Malaysian secondary school pupils. It employed a single-group pre-test and post-test design to measure changes in the two dependent variables. This design was selected because it allowed the researcher to study the direct impact of the intervention on the same group of participants while maintaining feasibility in a natural classroom environment. Consequently, the design aligned with the study's aim of determining whether this targeted strategy could reduce language anxiety and promote speaking performance among participants.

The participants were 90 Form 2 pupils aged 14 from a suburban Malaysian secondary school located in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. There were a number of 44 and 46 pupils in Class A and Class B respectively, and among them were 52 males and 32 females. The participants were selected using a non-random sampling method, and they reflected the school's typical ESL learner profile, which included pupils with varying levels of English proficiency.

Throughout the process, data were collected using two research instruments: the English Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (ELCAS) and a speaking test scored using a researcher-developed oral fluency rubric. It should be noted that the ELCAS is an adaptation of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by Horwitz (1986) and consists of 33 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The scale measures three constructs of language anxiety: *Communicative Apprehension* (CA), *Fear of Negative Evaluation* (FNE), and *Test Anxiety* (TA). The questionnaire was made available in both English and Bahasa Malaysia to ensure clarity of items for all participants. Meanwhile, the speaking test used an oral fluency rubric which had been adapted from CEFR-aligned descriptors. Pupils' speaking performance were scored based on three criteria: *speech rate, pauses and fillers,* and *flow of speech*. The rubric rated performance on a 4-point scale (poor, satisfactory, good, and excellent) which allowed the researcher to track measurable changes in oral fluency during the intervention.

The validity and reliability of the study were ensured through several procedures. Although minor modifications were made to fit the context of ESL Malaysian classrooms, the ELCAS retained the validated constructs of the original FLCAS. It also underwent content and face validation by two experienced TESL lecturers in University Malaysia Sabah who assessed the appropriateness of each item for Malaysian secondary pupils. To confirm the internal consistency of the questionnaire, the Cronbach's Alpha (a) was calculated for each of the constructs (CA = 0.74, FNE = 0.80, and TA = 0.63) using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29. However, it should be noted that one item was removed from each construct to improve the reliability scores, as the initial scores were below the generally accepted threshold of 0.70. Upon item reduction, the first two mentioned subscales indicate acceptable and good internal consistencies. The third subscale is fell slightly below 0.70. Despite this, it is also deemed acceptable for exploratory research (Taber, 2018). Similarly, the oral fluency rubric underwent testing via IBM SPSS Statistics analysis by using feedback from two English language teachers in the selected school. The researcher confirmed inter-rater reliability using the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient *(ICC),* in which it yielded an *ICC* value of 0.96 with a 95% confidence interval. This number indicated a strong agreement between independent raters (Koo & Li, 2016).

The researcher collected data for the study in two phases: pre-intervention (pre-test) and post-intervention (post-test). Data on pupils' language anxiety have been collected through the ELCAS questionnaire during both phases, and participants spent about 20 minutes completing their responses each time. Meanwhile, for their speaking performance, it was measured through partnered speaking tests, in which each pair of pupils performed short dialogues and picture-based descriptions within three minutes.

The intervention took place over the course of five weeks, with one communicative language teaching (CLT)-based lesson conducted for each class per week. Each lesson lasted approximately 60 minutes. The intervention used a variety of communicative activities to promote authentic oral language use and peer interaction. In the first week, pupils held group discussions based on animated film clips and short videos, which exposed them to spontaneous dialogue in a collaborative context. In the second week, pupils performed gallery walks. This involved them creating visual presentations inspired by short clips of popular films and presenting them to their peers, which encouraged authentic communication. After the school mid-term examinations, the third week focused on information-gap activities using social media posts, where pupils asked and answered questions to complete missing information. This was to support the active negotiation of meaning, which is crucial for authentic conversation. In the fourth week, pupils conducted group presentations using short-form TikTok videos that integrated multimedia content into structured oral tasks and emphasising fluency and audience engagement. In the fifth and final week, pupils carried out peer interviews inspired by pop songs that combined descriptive, narrative, and conversational skills in a low-pressure setting. The use of pop media in all sessions provided culturally relevant and relatable input.

The data collected throughout the study were analysed with the same software used for the reliability of the instruments — IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the pre-test and post-test scores for both levels of language anxiety and levels of speaking performance. Then, paired-sample t-tests determined whether the changes between the pre- and post-intervention results were statistically significant. Hence, the combination of descriptive and inferential analysis was utilised to directly address the two research questions. Overall, the use of validated instruments, a systematic intervention design, and rigorous statistical procedures ensured that the study's findings were both credible and reliable.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Levels of Language Anxiety

To begin addressing the first research question, the total scores for each participant were calculated by summing the values in participant responses to all 33 items on the ELCAS. The total scores are then categorised into three different levels, which are interpreted as follows: a total cumulative score ranging between *33 to 77* is categorised with a *low level of anxiety*, and scores ranging from *78 to 121* are categorised with a *medium level of anxiety*, while scores ranging from *122 to 165* are categorised with a *high level of anxiety*.

As seen in the descriptive statistics bar chart in Figure 1, prior to the intervention, there were 9 pupils who experienced low levels of anxiety (10.0% of total participants), 68 pupils who experienced medium levels of anxiety (75.6% of total participants), and 13 pupils who experienced high levels of anxiety (14.4% of total participants). These statistics would improve following the intervention, as the number of pupils experiencing low anxiety levels increased to 21 (23.3%), medium anxiety levels decreased to 64 (71.1%) and high anxiety levels decreased to 5 (5.6%).

In terms of inferential statistics, the mean language anxiety score decreased from 93.99 (SD = 15.207) in the pre-test to 89.02 (SD = 14.976) in the post-test, $t(89) = 3.399, p < .001$ (one-tailed). Hence, the hypothesis for the first research question is accepted: pupils did experience significantly lower levels of language anxiety post-intervention compared to pre-intervention. This statistically significant decrease also indicates that the intervention successfully created a more supportive, low-anxiety environment for learners, which align with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis.
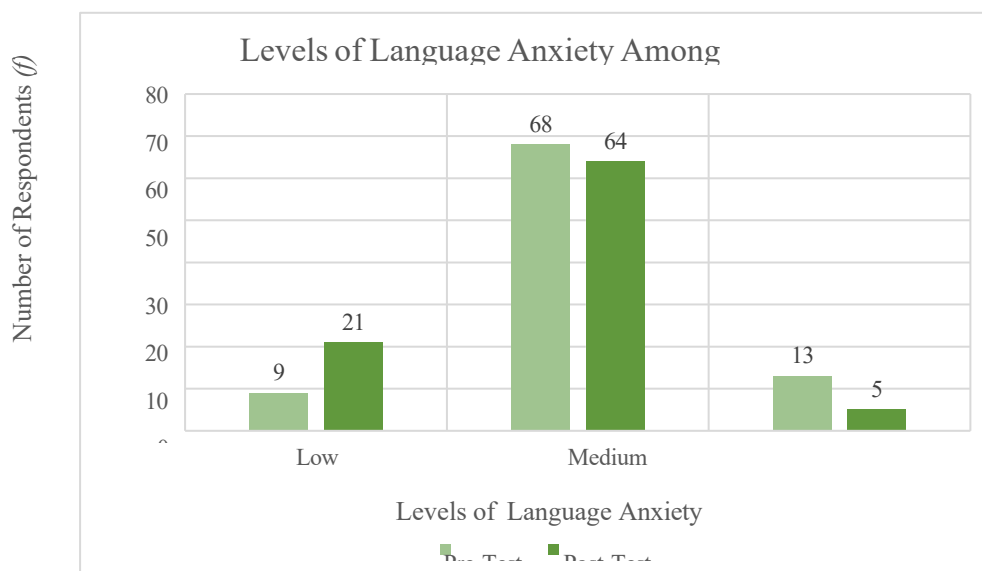
Figure 1: Bar Chart for Levels of Language Anxiety Among Participants

This result is consistent with previous research in Malaysian ESL contexts, which emphasises that language anxiety is a key barrier to oral proficiency. For example, Faizah and Hamid (2021) and Nadesan and Shah (2020) reported that pupils often avoid speaking tasks because of fear of negative evaluation and low self-confidence. Hence, the current findings confirm that reducing affective barriers can promote classroom participation and reduce avoidance behaviours. Nonetheless, the contribution of this study lies in showing that contemporary pop media can be integrated into communicative tasks to reduce anxiety in a formal classroom setting.

Levels of Speaking Performance

The second research question is addressed first by summing up participants' speaking performance scores from the speaking test as marked using the oral fluency rubric. Pupils who attained a score ranging between 3 to 5 is categorised with a *poor level of speaking performance*; a score ranging between 6 to 8 is categorised with a *satisfactory level of speaking performance*; a score ranging between 9 and 10 is categorised with a *good level of speaking performance*; and finally, a score ranging between 11 and 12 is categorised with an *excellent level of speaking performance.*

Based on Figure 2, the pre-test data revealed that the majority of participants (n = 63, 70.0%) fell under the poor category, followed by satisfactory (n = 20, 22.2%), good (n = 6, 6.7%), and excellent (n = 1, 1.1%). This distribution indicates that most pupils demonstrated low speaking performance at the baseline level. Meanwhile, post-test results showed a noticeable shift in performance levels. The number of participants categorised under poor decreased to n = 33 (36.7%), and the satisfactory group increased to n = 36 participants (40.0%). Similarly, there was an increase in the good category (n = 16, 17.8%) and the excellent category (n = 5, 5.6%). These figures suggest an overall improvement in speaking performance across the sample following the intervention, with fewer pupils falling under the lowest performance category and a higher proportion attaining satisfactory to excellent levels.
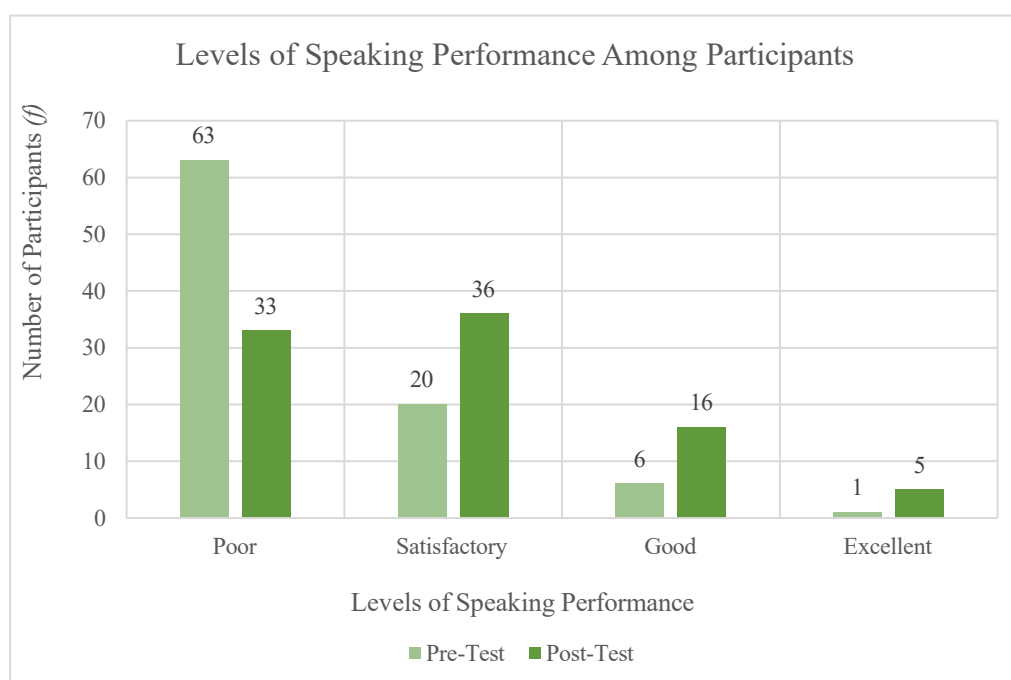
Figure 2: Bar Chart for The Levels of Speaking Performance Among Participants

The further analysis of oral fluency scores revealed a clear improvement in pupils' speaking performance after the intervention. The pre-test mean score was 5.02 (SD = 1.902), with most pupils falling in the "poor" or "satisfactory" categories. The post-test mean increased to 6.19 (SD = 2.233), $t(89) = -9.003, p < .001$ (one-tailed), and the distribution shifted as more pupils achieved "good" or "excellent" ratings. These results indicate that the integration of pop media within CLT-based tasks enhanced oral fluency, as pupils produced longer utterances, demonstrated fewer hesitations, and displayed a more natural flow of speech.

The improvement in oral performance aligns with studies that highlight the benefits of culturally relevant and media-rich instruction. This is similar to Charles and Soekarno (2024)who reported that TikTok-based speaking activities increased engagement and fluency in rural Sabah, and Kim et al. (2022) who found similar gains using short-form video platforms in ESL learning. Therefore, the current study reinforces the idea that media-integrated communicative activities not only lower anxiety but also provide meaningful opportunities for authentic speech production. In addition, the results demonstrate that pupils are more willing to participate and perform better when lessons incorporate familiar digital media that reflect their everyday experiences.

Overall Discussion and Study Limitations

The combined results suggest that lowering language anxiety and improving speaking performance are closely interconnected. Pupils who felt more at ease during the intervention were able to engage more actively in communicative tasks, which led to measurable fluency gains. These findings support the theoretical foundation of the study because Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis predicts that a low-anxiety environment enhances language acquisition. Nonetheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study involved only 90 pupils from one suburban school, which limits generalisability. In addition, the reliance on self-report measures for language anxiety introduces potential response bias, and the short duration of the intervention restricted the ability to observe long-term retention. Regardless, this study provides valuable evidence supporting the integration of pop media into CLT lessons

and paves the way for future research with larger, more diverse samples and longitudinal designs.

CONCLUSION

In short, this study investigated the impact of integrating contemporary pop media within a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) framework on language anxiety and speaking performance among Form 2 ESL pupils in a Malaysian secondary school. The findings showed that the intervention significantly reduced language anxiety and improved speaking performance. The study answered both research questions by demonstrating that contemporary and culturally relevant media-enhanced communicative lessons can create low-anxiety environments that support oral fluency development. It further confirms that engaging instructional strategies can enhance language performance among learners and also address affective barriers that commonly inhibit second language learning.

The broader implications of these findings suggest that ESL instruction can benefit from combining communicative approaches with materials that reflect pupils' digital and cultural experiences. Hence, language teachers can incorporate pop media into task-based speaking activities to reduce anxiety and encourage authentic communication. The study also reinforces Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, as the reduction in anxiety appeared to facilitate better oral performance. In addition, the positive results highlight the potential for schools to adopt creative, media-driven practices without compromising learning outcomes.

Despite these encouraging outcomes, the study had several limitations. First, the integration of technology in the classrooms was restricted due to the unavailability of equipment such as an LCD projector and functional wall plugs. This was a slight disadvantage as most pop media exist in the form of online content and rely heavily on the use of technology. The researcher brought her own projector and extension cord, but strong ambient light and the lack of blackout curtains in the classrooms prevented clear display of materials. Second, the self-reported nature of the ELCAS may have introduced bias, as pupils might not have accurately reflected their true levels of anxiety.

Finally, time constraints limited the intervention and data collection to less than ten weeks, which may have affected the magnitude of the results. Nonetheless, the findings provide a meaningful foundation for understanding how media-integrated CLT lessons can support ESL learning in similar contexts.

Future studies can try adopting longitudinal designs to explore the long-term effects of pop media integration in language instruction. Researchers could also examine the intervention's effectiveness on other language skills, such as reading, writing, and listening. In doing so, subsequent studies can deepen understanding of how contextually relevant media and communicative approaches can transform second language teaching and learning, which can strengthen the need for curriculum designs to be more dynamic and learner-centred.

Ethics Statement
This study was conducted following ethical guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the collection of research data.

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