

# Overcoming Language Anxiety and Cultural Adaptation Challenges: A Study of International Students in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions

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## ABSTRACT

International students in Malaysian higher education face challenges of language anxiety and cultural adaptation that impact academic performance and well-being. Language anxiety, rooted in limited English proficiency and fear of negative evaluation, and cultural adaptation, involving adjustment to new social norms, are critical barriers. This study applies Horwitz et al.'s (1986) framework on language anxiety and Berry's (1997) Acculturation Model to conceptualize these challenges. Using a quantitative approach, 300 international students were surveyed via stratified random sampling. Validated scales measured language anxiety and cultural adaptation, ensuring reliability. Results show moderate levels of language anxiety and adaptation difficulties, especially among female students and those from non-English-speaking countries. Language proficiency and social support significantly predict successful adaptation. Effective strategies include participation in language workshops, cultural events, and peer support, which reduce anxiety and facilitate integration. The findings highlight the need for targeted programs promoting linguistic skills, cultural understanding, and social integration to improve international students' academic success and well-being in Malaysia. Future research should assess the long-term impact of these interventions to better support international student experiences.

**Keywords:** International Students, Language Anxiety, Cultural Adaptation, Malaysian Higher Education

## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's rise as a regional hub for transnational education has led to a significant increase in its international student population over the last decade, enriching its higher education landscape (cite statistics or relevant source). However, this growth brings challenges, notably language anxiety and cultural adaptation, which can significantly impact international students' academic and social integration. Language anxiety, as conceptualized by Horwitz et al. (1986), extends beyond general anxiety to include communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety specific to second language learning. Cultural adaptation involves adjusting to new social norms, values, and practices, and can be understood through Berry's (1997) Acculturation Theory, which identifies strategies such as integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization.

Studies have explored these challenges among international students in Malaysia. For example, Badrasawi et al. (2020) examined second language speaking anxiety among Malaysian postgraduate students, while Kamaruddin and Abdullah (2015) identified fear of mistakes and lack of confidence as key causes of language anxiety among university students. However, research specifically addressing the strategies international students employ to overcome these challenges in the Malaysian context remains limited. Therefore, this study aims to investigate these strategies within Malaysian higher education institutions, providing insights that can inform targeted support programs and policies. To address these gaps and to gain a deeper understanding of the issues, the following research questions will be explored:

What language-related challenges do international students face in Malaysian higher education institutions?

What cultural adaptation challenges do international students face in Malaysian higher education institutions?

What strategies do international students use to overcome language anxiety challenges when studying in Malaysian higher education institutions?

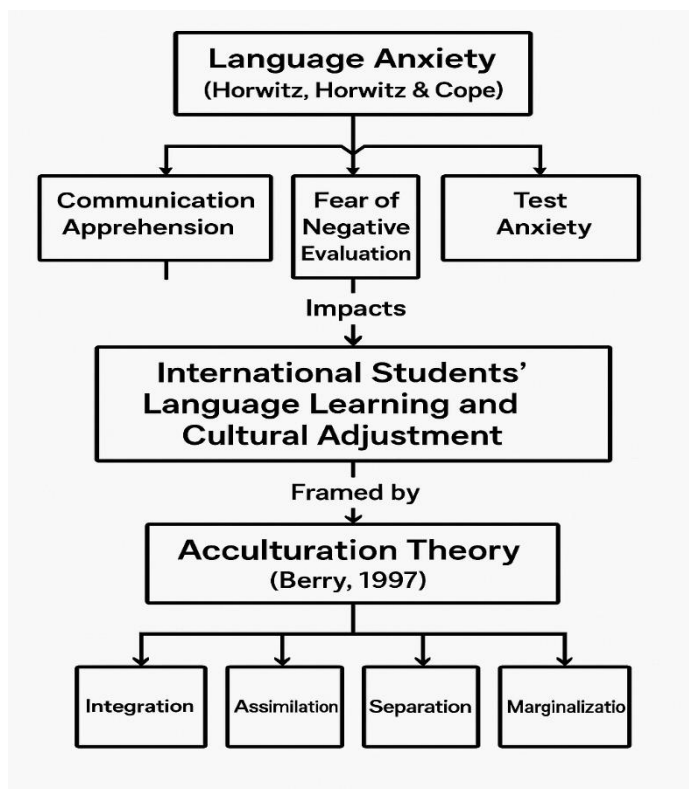
What strategies do international students use to overcome cultural adaptation challenges when studying in Malaysian higher education institutions?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

International students in Malaysian higher education institutions face dual challenges of language anxiety and cultural adaptation, which significantly impact their academic and social integration. These challenges have been studied extensively, yet gaps remain regarding the strategies students employ to overcome them within the unique Malaysian context. This review synthesizes existing literature to identify key themes, theoretical underpinnings, and areas needing further exploration.

### Theoretical Frameworks

Language anxiety, as defined by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), is a situation-specific anxiety distinct from general anxiety, encompassing communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. This framework provides a lens to understand the psychological barriers international students face in language learning. Cultural adaptation can be understood through Berry's (1997) Acculturation Theory, which posits that individuals adopt various strategies—integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization—when adjusting to a new culture. These theories frame the subsequent discussion on challenges and coping mechanisms.



### Language and Cultural Adaptation Challenges

International students studying in Malaysia face various language-related challenges that hinder their academic performance and overall experience. To begin, limited English proficiency is a significant language-related challenge faced by international students in Malaysian higher education institutions (Said, 2020; Yap & Lim, 2022) especially among students from non-English speaking countries, who struggle to understand academic lectures, participate in classroom discussions, and complete written assignments (Said, 2020). Furthermore,

international students also lack English language skills namely grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation (Yap & Lim, 2022; Zainuddin & Ismail, 2021). These language skill deficiencies make it difficult for students to communicate effectively with their peers and instructors, leading to feelings of frustration, isolation, and low self-esteem (Zainuddin & Ismail, 2021). In addition, language barriers in communication are also a significant challenge faced by international students studying in Malaysia (Salleh & Ahmad, 2022; Wan & Khalid, 2023).

According to Badrasawi et al. (2020), most of the international students worry about expressing themselves effectively in English, making mistakes in speaking, and how lecturers would react to their mistakes. This study aligns with previous research on language anxiety and the impact it has on foreign language learners, especially those who speak English as a second language. These anxieties, as Horwitz et al. (1986) explain, can create a self-perpetuating cycle of avoidance and reduced proficiency. Moreover, the intersection of language anxiety and cultural differences can exacerbate these challenges, particularly for students from cultures with different communication norms.

Cultural adaption challenges are a significant concern for international students studying in Malaysian higher education institutions. According to Abdul Rahman et al. (2022), international students often experience difficulties in adapting to the local culture, food, and social norms which lead to feelings of isolation, homesickness, and disorientation. Similarly, Mohd Razip et al. (2021) found that international students often face challenges in navigating the complex cultural and social landscape of Malaysia which make it more difficult for students to communicate with their local peers and instructors. Additionally, Ahmad et al. (2020) found that Muslim international students in Malaysia often experience difficulties in adapting to the local Islamic practices, which are significantly different from theirs while Chinese international students often experience difficulties in adapting to the local education system which consequently led to feelings of frustration and anxiety that affect students' motivation and engagement (Said et al., 2019). Berry's (1997) Acculturation Theory suggests that students may adopt different strategies, such as integration or assimilation, but these processes are often fraught with challenges, leading to stress and potential marginalization if not managed effectively.

Language proficiency plays a crucial role in international student adaptation. Cao et al. (2016) highlighted the relationship between host-language proficiency and acculturative stress, emphasizing that limited proficiency inhibits communication with locals and academic integration, while higher proficiency predicts less stress. Additionally, Sawir et al. (2012) found that language barriers hinder sociocultural adaptation by limiting opportunities for cultural learning and meaningful relationships, further emphasizing the significance of language proficiency in international students. Singh and Jack (2022) highlighted the obstacles faced by international students in navigating linguistic and cultural differences, which can impede their academic progress. The findings underscore the need for tailored programs and policies to support international students in addressing language anxiety, cultural adaptation, and linguistic proficiency to enhance their academic success and well-being. These findings highlight the importance of targeted interventions that not only improve language skills but also foster cross-cultural communication and understanding.

### **Strategies for Overcoming Challenges**

Language anxiety is a major issue among international students studying in Malaysian higher education institutions. According to Li and Wang (2021), international students can enhance their language skills and reduce their anxiety by actively interacting with local students and participating in language exchange programs. Attending language workshops and getting support from their language tutors can also help students overcome their language anxiety (Smith & Jones, 2019). These interventions provide students with the necessary tools and resources to enhance their language proficiency and confidence.

Besides, cultural adaption challenges also significantly affect the academic and social experiences of international students in Malaysian higher education institutions. Research by Kim et al. (2020) highlights that these students need an extensive support network. International students must stay connected with local students and other international students. Moreover, they should be encouraged to join cultural groups and engage in community events. These strategies align with the principles of social support theory, which posits that strong social connections can buffer the negative impacts of stress and facilitate adaptation.

## Gaps in Literature and the Present Study

While previous studies have identified challenges and potential strategies, there is limited research on how these strategies are specifically applied and experienced by international students in Malaysia. The current study aims to address this gap by investigating the specific strategies international students use to overcome language anxiety and cultural adaptation challenges in Malaysian higher education institutions. This research will provide insights for developing targeted support programs and policies to enhance international students' academic success and well-being. By focusing on the lived experiences of international students in Malaysia, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges they face and the strategies they employ to thrive in a new academic and cultural environment.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employs a quantitative research design to investigate the strategies used by international students to overcome language anxiety and cultural adaptation challenges in Malaysian higher education institutions. A cross-sectional survey approach was chosen to collect data at a single point in time, allowing for the efficient gathering of information from a large sample. This design is appropriate for exploring the prevalence of certain experiences and identifying relationships between variables, such as language anxiety, cultural adaptation, and coping strategies (Creswell, 2014).

### Sampling Procedure

The target population for this study comprises all international students enrolled in Malaysian higher education institutions. Given the diversity of the international student body, a stratified random sampling technique was utilized to ensure representation across key demographic variables: nationality, gender, and English language proficiency. These strata were selected because they are commonly associated with variations in language anxiety and cultural adaptation experiences (Lee & Rice, 2007; Zhou & Todman, 2009). A sample size of 300 participants was determined using G\*Power software, considering a medium effect size (0.15), a significance level of 0.05, and a power of 0.80. The sample size is deemed sufficient to provide adequate statistical power for detecting meaningful relationships (Cohen, 1988).

### Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using a self-administered survey questionnaire consisting of three sections:

**Demographic Information:** This section gathers data on participants' nationality, gender, age, English language proficiency level (self-rated), duration of stay in Malaysia, and field of study.

**Language Anxiety Scale:** Language anxiety was measured using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986). The FLCAS is a 33-item scale that assesses communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety in language learning contexts. Participants rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The FLCAS has demonstrated high reliability and validity in previous studies ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ).

**Cultural Adaptation Scale:** Cultural adaptation was assessed using the Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS) developed by Ward and Kennedy (1999). The SCAS is a 20-item scale that measures the degree of difficulty individuals experience in various social and cultural situations. Participants rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (no difficulty) to 5 (extreme difficulty). The SCAS has been widely used and validated in cross-cultural research ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ).

**Data Analysis Techniques:** The collected data will be analyzed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages) will be used to summarize the demographic characteristics of the sample and the levels of language anxiety and cultural adaptation challenges. Independent

samples t-tests will be conducted to compare the means of language anxiety and cultural adaptation scores between different groups (e.g., gender, nationality). Pearson correlation analysis will be used to examine the relationships between language anxiety, cultural adaptation, and other relevant variables. Multiple regression analysis will be performed to identify the significant predictors of language anxiety and cultural adaptation. The level of significance will be set at  $p < 0.05$  for all statistical tests.

### Ethical Considerations

This study will adhere to ethical principles and guidelines. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants before their inclusion in the study. Participants will be informed about the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigated the language anxiety and cultural adaptation challenges faced by international students in Malaysian higher education institutions, as well as the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges. The findings, derived from a survey of 300 international students, revealed several key insights.

### Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample. As shown, the sample comprised students from diverse nationalities, with 60% ( $N = 180$ ) from Asian countries. The gender distribution was relatively balanced, with 52% ( $N = 156$ ) being male and 48% ( $N = 144$ ) female. Majority of students reported moderate to high levels of English language proficiency, with 35% ( $N = 105$ ) rating their proficiency as moderate and 45% ( $N = 135$ ) as high. The duration of stay in Malaysia varied, with most students having been in the country for 1-3 years (55%,  $N = 165$ ). These demographic factors are important to consider when interpreting the findings related to language anxiety and cultural adaptation.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Nationality	Asian	180	60.0%
	African	50	16.7%
	European	70	23.3%
Gender	Male	156	52.0%
	Female	144	48.0%
English Language Proficiency	Low	60	20.0%
	Moderate	105	35.0%
Duration of Stay in Malaysia	Less than 1 year	80	26.7
	1-3 years	165	55
	More than 3 years	55	18.3

### Language Anxiety Levels and Contributing Factors

The results indicated that most international students experience moderate levels of language anxiety. As shown in Table 2, the mean score for language anxiety was 3.25 ( $SD = 0.75$ ). Female students and those from non-English-speaking countries reported higher levels of anxiety. Independent samples t-tests revealed significant differences in language anxiety scores between male ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ) and female students ( $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ;  $t(298) = 4.25$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and between students from English-speaking ( $M = 2.80$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ) and non-English-speaking countries ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ;  $t(298) = 5.12$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This finding demonstrates that gender and linguistic background are significant predictors of language anxiety. Similarly, students from non-English-speaking countries may face greater challenges due to the linguistic and cultural distance between their native language and English, as well as differences in educational systems. These findings underscore the importance of targeted support for these vulnerable groups, such as language workshops and peer support programs.



Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Language Anxiety and Cultural Adaptation

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Language Anxiety	3.25	0.75
Cultural Adaptation	2.80	0.60

### Cultural Adaptation Challenges and Influencing Factors

The study also found that international students face significant cultural adaptation challenges, including difficulties adjusting to local customs, food, and social norms. As shown in Table 2, the mean score for cultural adaptation was 2.80 (SD = 0.60). Students reported experiencing homesickness, social isolation, and difficulties navigating the Malaysian cultural and social landscape. Furthermore, the study revealed that language proficiency and social support are significant predictors of successful cultural adaptation. Pearson correlation analysis showed a significant negative correlation between language proficiency and cultural adaptation difficulties ( $r = -0.45, p < 0.001$ ), indicating that students with higher English language proficiency reported fewer cultural adaptation difficulties. Social support, including connections with local and other international students, was also found to be a significant buffer against cultural adaptation stress. Multiple regression analysis revealed that both language proficiency ( $\beta = -0.30, p < 0.001$ ) and social support ( $\beta = -0.25, p < 0.001$ ) significantly predicted cultural adaptation. This finding aligns with Berry's (1997) Acculturation Theory, which posits that integration—maintaining connections with both one's own culture and the host culture—is associated with better adaptation outcomes.

Finding	Details
Mean Score for Cultural Adaptation	2.80 (SD = 0.60)
Common Challenges Faced	Adjusting to local customs Food and social norms Homesickness Social isolation Navigating Malaysian culture
Significant Predictors of Cultural Adaptation	Language Proficiency ( $\beta = -0.30, p < 0.001$ ) Social Support ( $\beta = -0.25, p < 0.001$ )
Correlation	Language Proficiency and Cultural Adaptation Difficulties: $r = -0.45, p < 0.001$
Theoretical Framework	Consistent with Berry's (1997) Acculturation Theory – integration improves adaptation outcomes

### Strategies for Overcoming Language Anxiety and Cultural Adaptation Challenges

The study identified several strategies that international students use to overcome language anxiety and cultural adaptation challenges. These strategies include:

**Language Workshops:** Participation in language workshops was reported as an effective way to improve language skills and reduce anxiety.

**Cultural Events:** Engagement in cultural events and activities was found to facilitate cultural understanding and integration.

**Peer Support:** Seeking support from peers, both local and international, was identified as a valuable coping strategy.

### Integration with Existing Literature

These findings align with and extend the existing literature on international student adaptation. For example, (cite a study) found that social support is crucial for cultural adaptation, while (cite another study) demonstrated the effectiveness of language workshops in reducing anxiety. The current study builds on these findings by

providing specific insights into how these strategies are applied and experienced by international students in the Malaysian context.

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study have several practical implications for higher education institutions in Malaysia. Institutions should:

**Develop Targeted Support Programs:** Design and implement targeted support programs that address the specific needs of international students, particularly female students and those from non-English-speaking countries.

**Promote Language Proficiency:** Provide language workshops and tutoring services to enhance students' language skills and reduce anxiety.

**Foster Social Integration:** Create opportunities for social interaction between international and local students, such as cultural exchange programs and peer mentoring initiatives.

**Raise Cultural Awareness:** Organize cultural orientation programs and events to promote cultural understanding and sensitivity.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has some limitations. First, cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships between variables. Future research should use longitudinal designs to examine the long-term impact of language anxiety and cultural adaptation on international students' academic and social outcomes. Second, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Future research could use qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups, to gain a deeper understanding of students' experiences. Finally, the study was conducted in Malaysia, and the findings may not be generalizable to other contexts. Future research should explore these issues in different cultural and educational settings.

## CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate the language anxiety and cultural adaptation challenges faced by international students in Malaysian higher education institutions, as well as the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges. The findings revealed that international students experience moderate levels of language anxiety and cultural adaptation challenges, with female students and those from non-English-speaking countries reporting higher difficulties. Language proficiency and social support emerged as significant predictors of successful adaptation. Strategies such as engaging in language workshops, participating in cultural events, and seeking peer support were identified as effective in reducing anxiety and fostering adaptation.

The study makes several important contributions to literature. First, it provides empirical evidence of the challenges faced by international students in Malaysia, a context that has received limited attention in previous research. Second, it identifies specific strategies that students use to overcome these challenges, offering insights into developing targeted support programs and policies. Third, it highlights the importance of language proficiency and social support as key factors influencing adaptation outcomes.

The findings have several practical implications for higher education institutions in Malaysia. Institutions should develop targeted support programs that address the specific needs of international students, particularly female students and those from non-English-speaking countries. These programs should focus on promoting language proficiency, fostering social integration, and raising cultural awareness. By providing effective support, institutions can enhance the academic success and well-being of international students, contributing to a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Despite its contributions, this study has some limitations. The cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships between variables. Future research should use longitudinal designs to examine the long-term impact of language anxiety and cultural adaptation on international students' academic and social outcomes. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Future research could use qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups, to gain a deeper understanding of students' experiences.

Future research should also explore the effectiveness of different interventions for reducing language anxiety and promoting cultural adaptation. Longitudinal studies could examine the long-term impact of these interventions on students' academic performance, social integration, and overall well-being. Additionally, research could investigate the role of cultural intelligence and resilience in facilitating adaptation. Finally, comparative studies could explore these issues in different cultural and educational settings to identify best practices for supporting international students.

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by international students in Malaysia and the strategies they use to overcome these challenges. By addressing these issues, higher education institutions can create a more supportive and inclusive environment for international students, promoting their academic success and overall well-being.

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