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**COGNISING GENDER DIFFERENCES IN LITERATURE**  
**ANXIETY**

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***Abstract***

Anxiety has been shown to have detrimental effects on the academic performance of students, thus affecting their achievement in schools as well as at other institutions of learning. As a research domain, anxiety has been the focal point for researchers seeking to associate the link between anxiety in various forms and academic settings. Literature anxiety as a construct has not been previously studied and efforts have been pursued to include this construct in the Malaysian academic context. Hence this present study introduces literature anxiety as a construct worthy to be analysed and the study explored gender differences among 403 students from 11 selected secondary schools in Kedah and Penang. These students comprised Form Four secondary students from both the Science and Arts classes. The literature anxiety scale (LITAS) was utilised in order to obtain information regarding the students' literature anxiety. This scale was also employed to ascertain whether there existed a significant relationship between literature anxiety and gender. The results of the study depict that there is a significant relationship between students' literature anxiety and gender for students from both the selected schools in Kedah and Penang. For both the selected Kedah and Penang schools, the male students recorded a higher literature anxiety scores compared to the female students.

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**Keywords:** Literature anxiety, Literature in English.



## 1. Introduction

Studies on language anxiety have been evinced in research on SLA dating from the 1970s (Dewaele, Witney, Saito, & Dewaele, 2018). The fact that negative emotions can affect L2 development, has been documented. Research has indicated that positive emotions are able to counter negative emotions and empower students to overcome challenges during their learning experiences. While research on language anxiety and language anxiety with reference to SLA have been actively disseminated, research on literature anxiety has been scarce. Moreover, studies on gender differences concerning literature anxiety are also lacking.

Gender differences in academic achievement comprise several different domains. In certain educational contexts, male students perform lower than female students on gauges of academic performance in reading and female students indicate lower performance in areas linked to mathematics (Kessels, Heyder, Latsch, & Hannover 2014). Kessels et al. (2014) stipulated that female students are less self-assured of their mathematics and science related competencies on the one hand but on the other hand, possess stronger confidence in their language abilities. Male students however, demonstrate more confident attitudes towards their STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects. Research has depicted that an individual's self-concept begins in the early years of her/his life. As life progresses, one's knowledge and concept of one's self are impacted upon by our daily social interface with others and our interpretation of this interface. For young people, the learning opportunities afforded by educational insitutions also act and impact upon youths' conceptualisation of their individual selves (Kessels et al., 2014). Hence, in the face of low achievement and passive student participation, increasing active student engagement has been a priority in efforts to attain improvements in academic achievement.

For this study, we intend to explore whether there exists any significant gender differences between male and female students in experiencing literature anxiety. The English Language is taught in Malaysian schools as a second language in both primary and secondary schools. In 2000, the Literature in English component was included as a component of the English Language subject. The National Philosophy of Education was revamped by the Ministry of Education in order to generate students to be able to think holistically with a keener sense of appreciation for cultures other their own. However it has been recorded that there are problems that could have hindered the smooth and succesful inclusion of this literature component in the English Language subject. There are students who are unable to respond critically to the literary texts prescribed and this could have induced negative perceptions on their part. In view of this, possible student disengagement and other emotional challenges could surface to negatively impact student achievement especially with regards to the literature component. Hence, this study seeks to explore firstly whether these students do experience literature anxiety while studying the literature component as well as to delineate the differences between male and female students in terms of their experience of literature anxiety.

## 2. Problem Statement

Anxiety can be regarded as one of the commonest instances of psychological distress in youths. Furthermore studies have indicated that the average age for the emergence of proven anxiety symptoms is 11 years (Duchesne & Ratelle, 2016). More disturbingly, anxiety indicators can impact the youths'

abilities to function normally in society and if left unchecked and unattended to, the presence of anxiety may even challenge the youths' acclimatisation into life's diverse situations as they grow up (Duchesne & Ratelle, 2016) thus hindering their ability to function optimally. Generally, individuals with anxiety are extremely sensitive towards contexts they regard as intimidating and this anxiety induces them to overly assess each challenging situation for indications of danger (Cheng & McCarthy, 2018). Individuals with anxiety are also inclined to "...attend to threat-related stimuli, construe threat from ambiguous stimuli, and recall threat-related information (Cheng & McCarthy, 2018, p. 1). Empirically there exists a negative relationship between anxiety and performance over an array of contexts, thus strengthening the debilitating effect/s of anxiety on individuals. Anxiety disorders mark one of the commonest mental illnesses and forms of psychological agony. Suffering from anxiety brings repercussions both slight and severe. Hence the importance and necessity of understanding individuals' propensities to become anxious and to ascertain in which situation these propensities are more likely to surface.

For the purpose of this study, the term anxiety refers to a state of increased emotional arousal comprising a feeling of apprehension or dread. Anxiety reactions to academic subjects such as mathematics and science have been well acknowledged in educational research. In the area of language anxiety, Horwitz (2000) states that cognitive deficits are not the sole cause of language anxiety. Horwitz (2000) also stressed that "to deny the reality of foreign language anxiety is illogical as well as insensitive to the experience and needs of many language learners and teachers" (p. 258). In this study, literature anxiety as an occurrence, refers to the students' feelings of anxiety that they experience while studying Literature in English and in completing literary tasks. Literature anxiety is an anxiety reaction to circumstances where the students encounter various academic contexts in Literature in English learning. Literature anxiety can be an impairment to the Literature in English student if not inhibited and remedied.

In Malaysia, both male and female students in secondary schools study the Literature in English component of the English Language subject. This study aims to underscore the gender differences that emerge between male and female students studying this Literature in English component so as to enable the accumulation of information about gender differences and literature anxiety. The research also discussed educational implications of the findings and the importance of recognising literature anxiety amidst these Form Four students as well as alerting educators to the necessity of addressing this phenomenon.

### **3. Research Questions**

In order to elicit further information on gender differences in literature anxiety, these research questions were addressed in the study:

1. What was the level of literature anxiety experienced by the female students?
2. What was the level of literature anxiety experienced by the male students?
3. Was the demographic variable gender related to the literature anxiety experienced by the students?

## 4. Purpose of the Study

This study aims to explore whether the male and female students of selected Malaysian secondary schools experience literature anxiety. This study also intends to ascertain whether gender has any significant relationship with literature anxiety

## 5. Research Methods

### 5.1 Participants

Empirical data were obtained from 403 female and male students of 11 secondary schools in Kedah and Penang. Participants comprised students from both the Science and the Arts classes. In view of the time constraint faced by the researchers, the researchers were unable to visit all the schools in Kedah and Penang. Instead, the researchers chose schools in the urban areas of Kulim and Penang and requested that at each school visited, students from two classes of the school concerned participate in answering the questionnaire.

### 5.2 Instrument

The study utilised the LITAS (Literature Anxiety Scale) designed by one of the researchers. This questionnaire measures the literature anxiety levels of the students and comprises 48 items. Each item had a 5-point Likert scale where the students were required to choose what they felt best was their response to a particular item. The LITAS was also utilised to explore whether there is a significant relationship between literature anxiety and the students' gender.

### 5.3 Procedure and Analysis

The questionnaires were distributed to the students in their respective classrooms. The students were advised to complete the questionnaires as honestly as possible. The questionnaires yielded the quantitative data needed for this study. This data were analysed using the SPSS programme and the results indicated the literature anxiety levels of the students as well as confirming whether the dependent variables of gender had any effect on the literature anxiety levels of the students.

## 6. Findings

### *Research Question One: What was the level of literature anxiety experienced by these students?*

Three secondary schools were selected in Kedah. The schools were:

1. Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan KA
2. Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan KB
3. Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan KC

### 6.1. Kulim

For the selected schools in Kulim, there were 59 male students and 71 female students. The majority of the students were Malays (51%), followed by Indians (39%) with a small percentage of

Chinese students at 5.1% and 4% of the other students were from the category featuring other ethnic groups. One student did not disclose his/her gender. The mean literature anxiety score for the students from the selected Kulim secondary schools is 138.9. The students' scores ranged from 210 to 90 on the LITAS. Based on the literature anxiety scores, the mean score for literature anxiety was 138.9. Table 01 indicates the Kulim Combined Secondary School Students' literature anxiety score ranges. The literature anxiety score ranges depict the scores recorded by High Literature Anxiety, Mid-Literature Anxiety and Low Literature Anxiety Groups.

**Table 01.** Kulim combined secondary schools' students' literature anxiety score range

Group	Score Range
High Literature Anxiety	$\geq 158.5$
Mid-Literature Anxiety	119.3-158.5
Low Literature Anxiety	$\leq 119.3$

## 6.2. Penang

Seven secondary schools were selected in Penang. The schools were:

1. Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan PA
2. Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan PB
3. Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan PC
4. Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan PD
5. Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan PE
6. Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan PF
7. Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan PG

**Table 02.** Penang combined secondary schools' students' literature anxiety score range

Group	Score Range
High Literature Anxiety	$\geq 167.9$
Mid-Literature Anxiety	167.9 - 128.9
Low Literature Anxiety	$\leq 128.9$

For the combined selected schools in Penang, the mean literature anxiety score for the students is 148.4. Table 02 presents the Penang Combined Secondary School Students' literature anxiety score ranges. The literature anxiety score ranges depict the scores recorded by High Literature Anxiety, Mid-Literature Anxiety and Low Literature Anxiety Groups.

### 6.3. Literature anxiety scores from Individual Penang Schools

#### 6.4.

##### 6.4.1. SMK PA

Table 03 depicts the literature anxiety scores of the students from the school named SMK PA. The mean literature anxiety score is 146.6. Based on the results, most of the students in SMK PA were in the mid-range literature anxiety group.

**Table 03.** SMK PA students' literature anxiety score range

Group	Score Range
High Literature Anxiety	>163.3
Mid-Literature Anxiety	163.3 - 129.9
Low Literature Anxiety	< 129.9

##### 6.4.2. SMK PB

Table 04 indicates the literature anxiety scores of the SMK PB school students. The mean literature anxiety score is 150.2. Based on these findings, most students in SMK PB were in the mid-range literature anxiety group.

**Table 04.** SMK PB students' literature anxiety score range

Group	Score Range
High Literature Anxiety	>167.7
Mid-Literature Anxiety	167.7 - 132.7
Low Literature Anxiety	< 132.7

##### 6.4.3. SMK PC

Table 05 shows the literature anxiety scores of the SMK PC school students. The mean literature anxiety score is 155.8. Based on the findings, the students from SMK PC were mainly experiencing a mid-range of literature anxiety.

**Table 05.** SMK PC students' literature anxiety score range

Group	Score Range
High Literature Anxiety	>179.3
Mid-Literature Anxiety	179.3 -132.3
Low Literature Anxiety	< 132.3

##### 6.4.4. SMK PD

Table 06 records the literature anxiety scores of the SMK PD school students. The mean literature anxiety score is 138.8. Based on the findings, the students from SMK PD were mainly experiencing mid-range literature anxiety.

**Table 06.** SMK PD students' literature anxiety score range

Group	Score Range
High Literature Anxiety	>159.5
Mid-Literature Anxiety	159.5 - 117.1
Low Literature Anxiety	< 117.1

#### 6.4.5. SMK PE

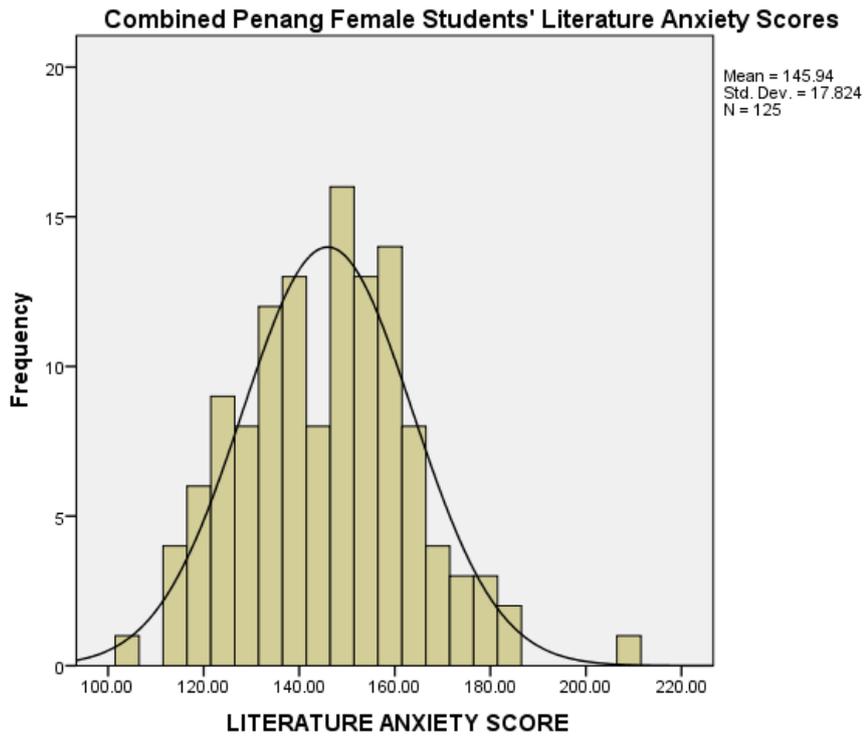
Table 07 illustrates the literature anxiety scores of the SMK PE school students. The mean literature anxiety score is 148.2. Based on the findings, most of the SMK PE students were from the mid-range literature anxiety group.

**Table 07.** SMK PE students' literature anxiety score range

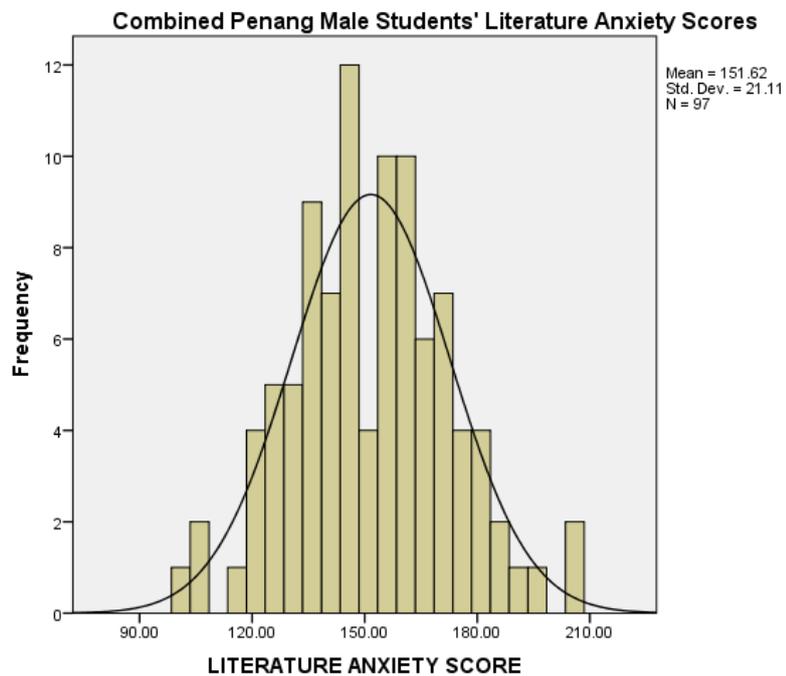
Group	Score Range
High Literature Anxiety	>166.5
Mid-Literature Anxiety	166.5 - 129.9
Low Literature Anxiety	< 129.9

#### 6.5. Combined Penang Female Secondary School Students' Literature Anxiety Scores

Figure 01 depicts the Combined Penang Female Students' Literature Anxiety Scores and indicates that the mean score is 145.9 and Figure 02 records that the Combined Male Students' Literature Anxiety mean score is 151.6. This could suggest that the male students of the combined Penang secondary schools experienced higher literature anxiety scores than the female students of the combined Penang secondary schools in Penang.



**Figure 01.** Combined Penang Female Secondary School Students' Literature Anxiety Scores



**Figure 02.** Combined Penang Male Secondary School Students' Literature Anxiety Scores

**Research Question Two:** Was the demographic variables gender related to the literature anxiety experienced by the students?

**Kedah**

**Table 08.** Mean literature anxiety scores for female and male students of the secondary schools in Kulim

	<b>Gender</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>
Literature anxiety scores	Girls	48	133.4
	Boys	50	144.2

Table 08 shows the results of the Independent Samples *t*-test that was carried out and there was a significant relationship between gender and the literature anxiety scores of the students. ( $p < 0.05$ ). The mean literature anxiety score for the female students is 133.4 whereas the mean literature anxiety score for the male students is 144.2. This shows that for the female students and the male students from the Kulim schools, the male students had a higher mean literature anxiety score than the female students. The results indicate that there is a significant relationship between the literature anxiety scores of the students and the gender of the student.

**Table 09.** Mean literature anxiety scores for female and male students of the secondary schools in Penang

	<b>Gender</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>
Literature anxiety scores	Girls	48	145.9
	Boys	50	151.6

As shown in Table 09, for the male and female students of the Penang secondary schools, the results revealed that there was a significant difference between gender and the literature anxiety scores of the selected Penang secondary school students. ( $p < 0.03$ ). The mean literature anxiety score for the female students is 145.9 whereas the mean literature anxiety score for the male students is 151.6. This suggests that for the female students and the male students from the selected Penang schools, the male students had a higher mean literature anxiety score than the female students. The results indicate that there is a significant relationship between the literature anxiety scores of the students and the gender of the student.

**7. Conclusion**

On a broader scale, this study has indicated that gender differences do exist even for secondary students studying the Literature in English component, depicting that male and female differences in behaviour and mind are worth researching. Traditionally, females are perceived to develop quicker neurologically and to start talking earlier as females have been noted to develop vocabulary faster (Wucherer & Reiterer, 2018). Studies which stress gender-specific expectations state that these expectations mould gender roles such as the language advantage in females (Wucherer & Reiterer, 2018).

The findings of this research reveal these salient implications for research on literature anxiety. First, the results indicated that the majority of these students do experience literature anxiety at mid levels with a few experiencing literature anxiety at low levels and a few at high levels. These results show that for the selected Kulim secondary schools in Kedah, there is a significant relationship between literature anxiety scores and gender. Secondly, for the selected Penang schools, there is also a significant relationship between the students' literature anxiety scores and their gender. Thirdly, for both Kedah and

Penang schools, it was indicated that male students obtained higher literature anxiety scores compared to the female students. Perhaps this could be due to the fact that literature study could be seen as less challenging to female students as compared to male students. Or perhaps this interesting finding regarding higher literature anxiety scores for the male students could have something to do with the fact the Literature in English component is taught in the English Language and that female students have been found to manifest higher confidence when it comes to language abilities (Kessels et al., 2014). Further research into this domain may yield more decisive information regarding this phenomenon. Fourthly, the fact that both in Kulim (Kedah) and Penang schools, male students were more inclined to experience higher literature anxiety scores proves an interesting detail to be researched into. Perhaps this has something to do with the male students' perceptions towards learning Literature in English. Future research of a qualitative nature on gender preferences and learning styles in studying Literature in English could explore in detail the factors inducing such a result.

However the researchers are aware that the selected schools do not represent all the schools in both Kulim and Penang, thus generalisability of the findings may not be feasible. Hence caution should be exercised when drawing inferences from the statistical results of this study. Even with that in mind, the outcomes of this study should enhance our knowledge on literature anxiety and impel further research delving into why students experience literature anxiety and how these students can regulate their literature anxiety. Significant research avenues such as these could augment the teaching and learning of Literature in English here in Malaysia.

We have to remember that these students were in Form Four when the research was conducted and the information indicating that for some students, literature anxiety does exist is an issue not to be treated lightly. These students will sit for the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) the following year and there is a component of Literature in English to be answered in the English Language paper. The results of this study may only be a ripple in the ocean and we need to identify if more students are facing literature anxiety which could hamper their Literature in English study and ultimately their English Language learning and mastery.

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