

## **Merentasi Suara: Memahami Kesukaran Komunikasi Rakan Sebaya dalam Kalangan Pelajar Antarabangsa dalam Pengajian Bahasa Inggeris**

### ***Bridging Voices: Understanding Peer Communication Struggles among International Students in English Language Studies***

Muhammad Haikal Daniel bin Rokhairy  
<sup>1</sup>Fuzirah Hashim

Pusat Kajian Bahasa dan Linguistik,  
Program Pengajian Bahasa Inggeris,  
Fakulti Sains Sosial dan Kemanusiaan, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

Correspondence author email: fuzy@ukm.edu.my

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#### **ABSTRAK**

*Komunikasi merupakan asas kepada integrasi akademik dan sosial, khususnya bagi pelajar antarabangsa yang berhadapan dengan persekitaran yang pelbagai dari segi bahasa dan budaya. Kajian ini meneliti cabaran komunikasi yang dihadapi oleh pelajar antarabangsa Tahun 3 dalam program Pengajian Bahasa Inggeris (English Language Studies, ELS) di Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), dengan memberi tumpuan kepada interaksi mereka bersama rakan sebaya. Menggunakan reka bentuk kajian kes bercampur (mixed-methods), data dikumpulkan melalui soal selidik dan temu bual separa berstruktur. Dapatan menunjukkan bahawa peserta mengalami halangan emosi seperti kebimbangan berbahasa, rasa rendah diri, dan takut dinilai, di samping cabaran kefahaman yang melibatkan loghat tempatan, bahasa slanga, dan penggunaan dwibahasa (code-switching). Pelajar juga melaporkan penggunaan pelbagai strategi penyesuaian seperti mempermudah bahasa, meniru gaya komunikasi rakan tempatan, serta bergantung pada alat terjemahan untuk mengatasi salah faham. Dari masa ke masa, pendedahan yang meningkat terhadap rakan sebaya dan persekitaran pembelajaran yang menyokong telah meningkatkan keyakinan dan keupayaan komunikasi mereka. Kajian ini, yang ditafsir melalui Teori Penyesuaian Komunikasi (Communication Accommodation Theory, CAT) dan Teori Pengurusan Kebimbangan/Ketidaktentuan (Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory, AUM), menegaskan bahawa pengalaman komunikasi pelajar antarabangsa dipengaruhi oleh kedua-dua kecekapan linguistik dan kesediaan emosi. Kajian ini diakhiri dengan cadangan pedagogi untuk memupuk persekitaran komunikasi yang inklusif bagi meningkatkan penglibatan pelajar antarabangsa dan kompetensi antara budaya dalam konteks pendidikan tinggi di Malaysia*

**Kata kunci:** Komunikasi, Pelajar Antarabangsa, Interaksi Rakan Sebaya, Kebimbangan Berbahasa, Kecekapan Komunikasi

## ABSTRACT

*Communication is fundamental to academic and social integration, particularly for international students navigating linguistically and culturally diverse environments. This study investigates the communication challenges faced by Year 3 international students in the English Language Studies (ELS) program at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), focusing on their peer interactions. Employing a mixed-methods case study design, data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Findings reveal that participants experience emotional barriers such as language anxiety, self-consciousness, and fear of judgment, alongside comprehension challenges involving local accents, slang, and code-switching. Students also reported using various accommodation strategies including simplifying language, mimicking local peers, and relying on translation tools to overcome miscommunication. Over time, increased exposure to peers and supportive learning environments enhanced communicative confidence and adaptation. The study, interpreted through Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory, underscores that international students' communication experiences are shaped by both linguistic competence and emotional readiness. The study concludes with pedagogical recommendations for fostering inclusive communication environments that promote international student engagement and intercultural competence within Malaysian higher education.*

**Keywords:** *Communication, International Students, Peer Interaction, Language Anxiety, Communication Competence*

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized higher education landscape, communication acts as a bridge that connects individuals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. For international students, this bridge is not merely a tool for exchanging information but a pathway toward academic engagement, social integration, and intercultural understanding. Within Malaysian universities, where English often functions as both a medium of instruction and a lingua franca, effective peer communication plays a vital role in shaping students' academic success and sense of belonging. As noted by Musheke and Phiri (2021), communication serves as the cornerstone of cooperation and performance within any organization an idea that resonates equally within educational institutions where collaboration and peer interaction are essential to learning outcomes. Through effective communication, students achieve clarity, minimize misunderstandings, and cultivate mutual respect in environments marked by linguistic diversity and cultural plurality.

Despite Malaysia's reputation as a leading hub for international education, many international students continue to encounter communication barriers that limit their full participation in academic and social life. Linguistic variations such as local dialects, informal speech styles, and frequent code-switching between English and Malay often create confusion and inhibit interaction. Khojastehrad and Sattarova (2015) observed that international students in Malaysian universities struggle to interpret local accents and colloquial expressions, leading to miscommunication and feelings of exclusion. Beyond linguistic issues, these difficulties are compounded by emotional challenges. Halali et al. (2023) emphasize that language anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and low self-confidence are major factors discouraging active participation in peer communication and classroom discussions.

These concerns are even more pronounced in English Language Studies (ELS) programs, where communication is not only the vehicle of learning but also its core subject. Students enrolled in such programs are expected to demonstrate advanced proficiency, engage in analytical discussions, and collaborate extensively using English. However, as Kashinathan and Aziz (2021) point out, many learners experience apprehension due to limited vocabulary, self-doubt, and fear of committing errors—

factors that can inhibit their communicative competence. As a result, some students adopt avoidance behaviors or restrict themselves to minimal participation, further widening the gap between linguistic capability and actual communicative performance.

Although numerous studies have explored the general communication challenges faced by international students in Malaysia (e.g., Yushriman et al., 2024; Halali et al., 2023), little is known about those enrolled in language-intensive programs such as ELS. This research gap is particularly significant among advanced learners—such as Year 3 students—who are presumed to have achieved linguistic maturity but continue to experience barriers in peer communication. The absence of focused inquiry into this cohort leaves unanswered questions about how emotional, cultural, and linguistic dynamics interact to shape their communication behaviors.

To bridge this gap, the present study investigates peer communication difficulties among Year 3 international students in the English Language Studies program at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). Peer interaction, encompassing both academic and informal contexts, forms the foundation for intercultural learning and social adaptation. By examining how students navigate these interactions, this study seeks to uncover not only the challenges they face but also the strategies they employ to foster understanding and participation. Guided by two theoretical lenses—Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) (Giles et al., 2015) and Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory (Gudykunst, 2005)—this research explores how students manage linguistic adjustments, negotiate identity, and regulate anxiety during intercultural encounters.

Ultimately, this study aims to bridge voices across linguistic and cultural divides, offering insights into how Malaysian universities can better support international students' communicative competence and intercultural integration. The findings are expected to contribute to ongoing discussions about inclusivity, language education, and internationalization in higher education, emphasizing that effective communication extends beyond fluency—it embodies empathy, adaptability, and shared understanding.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter presents a review of relevant literature concerning the communication challenges experienced by Year 3 international students in the English Language Studies (ELS) program at UKM. It highlights key concepts and prior studies related to communication, effective communication, international student experiences, and the theoretical framework underpinning this research. The review aims to establish a foundation for understanding the communication difficulties encountered during peer interactions and guides the analysis and discussion in later chapters.

Communication is central to human interaction and is essential in educational, social, and professional settings. It is a process of human activity expressed through spoken and written language, images, signals, sounds, and other forms of code that contain meaning and are understood by others (Antonius & Wahyu, 2020). Communication involves interpretation and mutual understanding shaped by context. Essential components of the communication process include the sender, message, medium, receiver, and feedback.

Effective communication ensures clarity, collaboration, and engagement within institutions. According to Men and Yue (2025), transparent internal communication and balanced leadership styles foster employee advocacy, trust, and performance. Similarly, Li and Yazid (2025) found that in virtual teams, clear communication of goals and decision-making processes significantly contribute to conflict management and project success. Additionally, Musheke and Phiri (2021) explained how communication links leadership and staff in any organizational setting, directly impacting performance. However, communication can be hindered by various barriers. Organizational hierarchies often restrict open dialogue, and cultural diversity can lead to misinterpretation. Kast and Rosenzweig (1972) identified that differences in cultural norms may influence how messages are received. Moreover,

reliance on digital communication tools can reduce clarity due to the absence of non-verbal cues (Scott, 1974). In educational settings, these barriers are also applicable. Students from different backgrounds may encounter difficulty in expressing ideas or understanding peers due to cultural and linguistic differences.

International students often face communication challenges due to differences in language, culture, and academic expectations. Alam and Angsor (2024) found that many students struggle to adapt to different teaching styles, academic expectations, and assessment methods in Malaysian universities. The pressure to perform well academically, combined with language difficulties, increases students' stress levels and affects their overall well-being. The study highlights that academic stress is particularly high among students who are unable to seek help due to language limitations, leading to lower academic performance and decreased satisfaction with their educational experience. Recent studies continue to affirm that language anxiety remains a core barrier to effective communication among international students. Halali, Hoon, and Arif (2023) found that students' prior educational experiences and linguistic backgrounds strongly predict their levels of communication apprehension and oral proficiency in academic English. Similarly, Chen et al. (2024) observed that self-perception and peer influence directly shape second language anxiety, leading to avoidance behavior and reduced confidence in classroom interactions. Both studies underscore that language anxiety is not purely linguistic—it is deeply psychological, affecting motivation, participation, and intercultural adjustment. These findings align with the present study's observations that Year 3 ELS students experience anxiety due to fear of misjudgement and linguistic inadequacy.

Intercultural adaptation is another significant challenge affecting peer interaction and communication outcomes among international students. In a 2023 study, Lu, Wang Guénier, and Hird (2023) found that frequent intercultural contact—particularly with local peers—significantly enhances international students' intercultural communication competence, helping them overcome cultural misunderstandings and linguistic hesitation. Similarly, Yushriman et al. (2024) identified that communication challenges among international students in Malaysian universities often stem from insufficient institutional support and limited opportunities for authentic intercultural exchange. Both studies highlight the need for peer collaboration and exposure as crucial drivers of cultural adaptation—insights directly supporting the present study's focus on Year 3 ELS students' peer communication experiences. More recent literature has begun emphasizing the emotional and psychological dimensions of communication difficulties. Guo (2025) examined how unresolved language barriers contribute to social isolation and depressive symptoms among international students, arguing that emotional distress further amplifies communication withdrawal. Complementarily, Wu and Montgomery (2021) explored intercultural transitions in higher education and highlighted that clear institutional communication practices, such as bilingual resources and inclusive teaching, mitigate cultural shock and anxiety. These findings reinforce the importance of emotional safety, empathy, and institutional inclusivity in addressing the communication struggles faced by international students in Malaysia.

Cultural adaptation also plays a critical role in international students' experiences. Mahmud et al. (2010) note that adjusting to a new cultural environment can be overwhelming for many students, especially when facing unfamiliar customs, social norms, and behavioral expectations. The study found that cultural differences in classroom interactions, communication styles, and expectations from faculty members can create misunderstandings and discomfort. Additionally, international students often experience difficulties in forming relationships with local students due to cultural and linguistic differences, further contributing to their sense of isolation. Additionally, adapting to new academic systems and expectations increases stress. Differences in teaching styles, assessment formats, and faculty interactions contribute to students' academic anxiety. Cultural misunderstandings further complicate peer relationships, making it harder for international students to connect with local peers and feel included in group work or class activities. These challenges underline the need to explore how Year 3 ELS students manage peer communication in a multicultural academic environment.

## ***2.1 Theoretical Perspectives***

To guide the research, two key theories are applied: Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory. These frameworks provide insight into how international students adjust communication strategies and manage emotional responses in intercultural settings.

### *2.1.1 Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)*

CAT, developed by Giles (1973), explains how individuals modify their communication style to improve understanding and social connection. The theory focuses on three main strategies:

- **Convergence:** Adapting speech to resemble peers' communication style, enhancing group acceptance and reducing misunderstandings.
- **Divergence:** Maintaining one's distinct communication style, which may reinforce identity but can cause social distance.
- **Maintenance:** Continuing one's usual style without modification, which may either support clarity or signal disconnection.
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CAT also addresses **overaccommodation**, where excessive adjustments become patronizing. These behaviors reflect attempts to bridge linguistic and cultural gaps but can also unintentionally create discomfort. CAT helps explain how international students either try to integrate or retain their own identity in peer interactions, shaping communication outcomes.

### *2.1.2 Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory*

Gudykunst's (1988) AUM Theory focuses on how individuals handle uncertainty and anxiety during intercultural communication. Effective communication depends on managing both at optimal levels.

- **Uncertainty:** Cognitive aspect of being unsure about how others will respond.
- **Anxiety:** Emotional tension caused by uncertainty.

AUM highlights the importance of **self-concept**, **motivation**, and **mindfulness** in reducing anxiety and facilitating better interactions. International students often enter peer interactions unsure about social norms or how they will be perceived, which can reduce participation and increase stress. By applying AUM, this study examines how students overcome emotional and cognitive hurdles in communication, especially in unfamiliar peer settings.

## *2.2 Conceptual Framework*

This research uses a conceptual framework integrating CAT and AUM to explore peer communication challenges among Year 3 international ELS students at UKM. CAT provides insight into students' communication adjustments, while AUM explains how they manage emotions like anxiety and uncertainty.

For example, a student may adjust their accent (convergence) but still hesitate due to fear of judgment (anxiety). Another may maintain their original speech style (maintenance) while managing social uncertainty. Together, these theories help identify which factors contribute to or hinder successful peer communication.

Understanding the interaction between these two frameworks supports the development of strategies to enhance students' communication confidence and intercultural competence in academic settings.

This chapter reviewed the foundational concepts and literature related to communication, especially within the context of international students. It explored the role of effective communication, common challenges in intercultural peer interactions, and two theoretical models that provide a lens for analyzing student behavior and experiences. These insights form the basis for the current study and

support its aim to investigate the peer communication challenges faced by Year 3 international ELS students at UKM.

### 3.0 METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodology used to explore communication challenges experienced by Year 3 international students in the English Language Studies (ELS) program at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). Using a case study design, the study employs both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a detailed understanding of student experiences. The following sections explain the research design, participant selection, data collection methods, and procedures for data analysis.

A mixed-methods research design was adopted to investigate the communication barriers faced by the target group. While the qualitative component is emphasized due to the small number of participants, a short quantitative questionnaire was included to collect demographic information and gauge students' self-perceptions.

The small sample size of three participants is appropriate for this qualitative case study, as it prioritizes depth over breadth. According to Vasileiou et al. (2018), qualitative research emphasizes the richness of individual experiences rather than statistical generalization. The decision to include three Year 3 international students was guided by the study's aim—to explore specific communication challenges in peer interactions within the ELS context—where detailed, context-specific insights are more valuable than a large dataset. Moreover, Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend small, focused samples for case studies to enable thorough exploration of participants' perspectives and experiences. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that all participants shared relevant characteristics: being international students, enrolled in the ELS program, and actively engaged in peer interactions. This selection ensured that the participants could meaningfully reflect on both linguistic and cultural dimensions of their communication experiences. The sample size of three participants was intentionally selected to align with the mixed-methods case study design, which emphasizes both in-depth qualitative exploration and complementary quantitative support. In mixed-method research, the qualitative component typically focuses on depth and meaning, while the quantitative component provides contextual and comparative insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Although the participant number is small, this approach is methodologically appropriate, as the goal of this study is not to generalize findings but to gain a comprehensive understanding of the communication challenges faced by Year 3 international students within the ELS program.

#### 3.1 Data Collection Process

##### 3.1.1 Sample

The study involves three Year 3 international students enrolled in the ELS program at UKM. All eligible students from this cohort are included using purposive sampling. This sampling technique ensures that participants can offer in-depth insights on the topic based on their academic and intercultural experiences. Although the sample is small, it aligns with qualitative research standards, where depth of analysis takes precedence over generalizability (Patton, 2002; Marshall et al., 2013).

##### 3.1.2 Instruments

Two instruments are used: a short questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide.

- **Questionnaire:** The questionnaire gathers basic demographic data and background English proficiency. It also includes Likert-scale items assessing communication confidence, peer interaction frequency, and perceived barriers such as accent comprehension, anxiety, and cultural misalignment. These items are adapted from established instruments (Lutfiana et al., 2020; Zhang & Mi, 2009) and grounded in CAT (Giles, 1973) and AUM Theory (Gudykunst, 2005).

- **Interviews:** The semi-structured interviews consist of 10 guiding questions. They are designed to explore deeper themes such as communication anxiety, accommodation strategies, and peer dynamics. Conducted face-to-face at UKM's Centre for Language and Linguistics, these interviews encourage participants to elaborate on their personal experiences. Questions are open-ended and flexible to allow follow-up based on participant responses.

### **3.2 Research Procedure & Data Collection**

Prior to data collection, ethical approval is obtained from the research supervisor. Three Year 3 international students from the English Language Studies program at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia were selected through purposive sampling. Participants are briefed on the study objectives and provided with consent forms. Recruitment is conducted via email and student messaging platforms. All three eligible participants agree to contribute. Research tools are reviewed and refined to align with the conceptual framework (CAT and AUM) and the research questions.

The data collection process consisted of two phases:

- **Phase 1: Questionnaire Distribution** The questionnaire is distributed via Google Forms and remained open for one week. It is divided into three parts: (A) Demographics and background proficiency, (B) Peer communication practices, and (C) Communication challenges. All participants complete the form, ensuring a full response rate.
- **Phase 2: Semi-Structured Interviews** Following the questionnaire, interviews are conducted in person and lasted 30–45 minutes. The format allowed for follow-up and deeper discussion. All sessions are audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed for analysis. The interviews provide contextual detail that complement and expand upon the survey data.

### **3.3 Data Analysis**

The data are analyzed in two stages: quantitative analysis of questionnaire responses and qualitative analysis of interview transcripts.

- **Quantitative Analysis:** Survey data are processed in Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages are used to summarize participant backgrounds and key variables (e.g., confidence, frequency of peer communication). Although the sample size limited statistical testing, the data helped identify patterns and guide the qualitative phase.
- **Qualitative Analysis:** Interview transcripts are analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Key themes identified included:
  - **Convergence and identity negotiation** – Adjusting speech to match peers (CAT)
  - **Communication anxiety and silence** – Avoiding interaction due to fear of judgment (AUM)
  - **Strategic code-switching** – Mixing English and native language to maintain fluency
  -

These themes are interpreted within the theoretical lens of CAT and AUM, helping explain how students manage communication challenges in a multicultural academic environment.

Integration of Data: Findings from both methods are triangulated to form a holistic understanding. For instance, if survey data reveals a high frequency of anxiety during group work, the interview data elaborate on the reasons and coping strategies. This integration enhances the study's reliability and provide practical insights for improving peer communication support in the ELS program.

This chapter has outlined the methodological approach adopted for this case study, including the mixed-methods design, participant recruitment, instrument development, and data analysis techniques. By combining quantitative and qualitative data, the study aims to provide a well-rounded exploration of the communication challenges faced by Year 3 international students at UKM.

## 4.0 DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents an in-depth discussion of the communication challenges experienced by Year 3 international students in the English Language Studies (ELS) program at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). Guided by the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory, the research employs a mixed-methods case study approach. It integrates both quantitative findings from a questionnaire and qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews to holistically explore the participants' experiences.

The analysis in this chapter is structured around the study's research questions:

1. What are the common communication challenges faced by Year 3 international students in the ELS program during peer interactions?
2. What strategies and support mechanisms can be implemented to enhance the intercultural communication competence of these students?

Findings are organized into two major parts: quantitative results and qualitative themes. Tables and figures are included to visualize key data and illustrate emerging patterns. This comprehensive discussion of the results provides evidence-based insights to inform future practices in improving intercultural peer communication.

### 4.1 Quantitative Findings

Quantitative data was gathered via a structured questionnaire. It focused on demographic background, English proficiency, peer communication frequency, self-confidence in peer settings, and communication challenges. Despite the limited number of respondents (three students), the data provided a preliminary but valuable snapshot of the communication issues faced in the ELS context.

Age	Gender	Country of Origin
21	Female	China
21	Prefer not to say	China
24	Male	China

TABLE 1.0

All three participants are Chinese international students, with a balanced gender representation. This homogeneity allows for a focused case analysis based on shared cultural-linguistic backgrounds and common environmental experiences. Their age range suggests academic maturity, making them appropriate for assessing long-term communication experiences.

Years of Studying	Number of Respondents	Percentage
3-5 years	3	100%

TABLE 2.0

All three respondents (100%) reported studying English for a period of three to five years. This indicates moderate proficiency and basic academic familiarity with English, though not necessarily fluency in advanced or spontaneous communication settings. When asked if they had studied in an English-speaking environment before entering UKM, two participants (66.7%) answered "yes," suggesting prior exposure to communicative settings in English, while one respondent (33.3%) answered "no," implying limited immersion outside formal classroom learning.

Regarding self-assessment of specific language skills, the following results were observed:

- **Listening:** Two participants (66.7%) rated themselves at 4/5, and one (33.3%) at 3/5.

- **Speaking:** Two participants (66.7%) gave themselves a score of 4/5, and one (33.3%) rated themselves at 3/5.
- **Reading:** One participant (33.3%) rated 3/5, one (33.3%) at 4/5, and another (33.3%) at 5/5, indicating higher confidence in receptive comprehension.
- **Writing:** All participants (100%) rated their writing skills at 3/5, identifying it as their weakest skill area.

These findings reveal that participants generally perceive themselves as moderately proficient English users. While receptive skills (listening and reading) are relatively stronger, expressive skills (speaking and writing) present notable challenges. Writing emerged as the most consistently difficult area, potentially reflecting limited vocabulary range or structural uncertainty in academic contexts.

Furthermore, the frequency of English use among respondents also vary. Responses were evenly distributed—one respondent reported frequent English use, one daily use, and one occasional use—indicating variations in comfort, social circle composition, and exposure. Participants unanimously reported using English during group assignments (100%), class presentations (100%), and online group discussions (100%), but only 33.3% reported using English in informal social interactions, such as chatting after class or during events. This finding suggests that while students actively use English in structured academic settings, informal peer engagement remains limited, likely due to anxiety, fear of error, or linguistic discomfort.

Self-rated confidence levels also revealed meaningful patterns:

- Group discussions: 66.7% rated confidence 3/5; 33.3% rated 4/5.
- Informal conversations: 66.7% rated 5/5; 33.3% rated 3/5.
- Initiating conversations: 66.7% rated 3/5; 33.3% rated 2/5.
- Presenting ideas: 66.7% rated 4/5; 33.3% rated 2/5.
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These results indicate moderate confidence during structured, goal-oriented communication but lower confidence in initiating or maintaining spontaneous peer exchanges. When asked about preferred conversation partners, two participants preferred speaking with fellow international students due to reduced anxiety and familiarity in speech patterns, while one preferred local students for language improvement opportunities. Code-mixing with Mandarin was noted as a coping mechanism during discussions with other Chinese peers.

Subsequently, regarding the communication challenges that they face, Participants reported multiple communication barriers during peer interactions. Two out of three respondents (66.7%) rated their nervousness when speaking to local peers at 4/5, while one (33.3%) rated it 3/5—demonstrating a consistent presence of speaking anxiety. Comprehension difficulties were also common, with 66.7% rating understanding of local accents or slang at 5/5 difficulty. Avoidance behavior was observed, as participants admitted to occasionally avoiding group discussions or remaining quiet due to fear of mistakes.

Furthermore, all respondents (100%) agreed that they felt more confident communicating with other international students than with local peers. This highlights the comfort derived from shared linguistic norms and empathy in communication. Code-switching, particularly between English and Mandarin, was also employed as a strategy to manage misunderstandings and maintain conversational flow.

Common strategies identified include:

- Asking for clarification or repetition (100%)
- Simplifying language (100%)
- Using translation tools such as Google Translate (66.7%)
- Confirming understanding after conversations (66.7%)
- Remaining silent to avoid errors (66.7%)
- Using gestures or switching languages when necessary (33.3%)

When asked about their biggest challenges in communicating with peers, one participant mentioned difficulty joining conversations, another reported trouble finding words quickly, and the third highlighted shyness and nervousness in group settings.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that while international students in the ELS program at UKM are capable of functioning in English, emotional and cultural barriers continue to limit their confidence and fluency in peer interactions. The patterns of linguistic hesitation, avoidance, and reliance on translation tools indicate a need for targeted support and intercultural communication training within the academic environment.

#### **4.2 Qualitative Findings**

This section presents the qualitative findings derived from semi-structured interviews with three Year 3 international students enrolled in the English Language Studies (ELS) program at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). Thematic analysis identified four central themes: emotional barriers and confidence, comprehension difficulties, speech adjustment strategies, and coping mechanisms. These findings illuminate how emotional, linguistic, and sociocultural factors intersect to influence peer communication.

##### **4.2.1 Emotional and Psychological Barriers**

All participants described experiencing nervousness, self-consciousness, and fear of being judged when speaking English with local peers—especially during their early semesters. One participant stated, “*I always feel nervous because I make mistakes,*” while another added, “*My English is not very good... I’m afraid they cannot understand me.*” Such anxieties often led to silence or waiting for others to initiate conversations.

These experiences reflect Gudykunst’s **Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory**, where unmanaged anxiety disrupts communicative effectiveness in intercultural settings. One participant attributed her initial fear to strict past teaching experiences: “*In my high school, my English teacher had very high standards... here, it feels more encouraging.*” Although gradual adaptation occurred, internal anxiety remained a key obstacle to confidence and active engagement.

##### **4.2.2 Challenges in Understanding Local Speech**

Participants consistently struggled with local speech patterns, particularly **accent variation**, **slang**, and **code-switching** between English and Malay. One commented, “*When they mix English with Malay, I don’t understand—I get lost.*” Another mentioned difficulty grasping cultural jokes or memes: “*Sometimes they joke, but I can’t catch it, so I just stay quiet.*”

These comprehension challenges illustrate the **uncertainty** aspect of AUM Theory—where misunderstanding social or linguistic cues leads to withdrawal and hesitation. The findings emphasize that communication barriers were not purely linguistic but also cultural, as interpreting local humor and informal speech required contextual knowledge.

##### **4.2.3 Speech Adjustment and Accommodation**

Participants employed various communication adjustment strategies consistent with **Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)**. Some converged by mirroring local peers’ tone and expressions: “*I mimic the way you talk—the slang, the way you say things.*” Others preferred maintaining their usual speech for clarity, saying, “*I just use simple English, they understand.*”

This diversity in speech behavior illustrates how individuals balance social integration and self-comfort. Introverted participants were less likely to adapt, demonstrating CAT’s *maintenance* strategy, while

confident ones engaged in *convergence* to foster belonging. The absence of exaggerated or artificial adjustment suggests students prioritized authenticity over forced adaptation.

#### **4.2.4 Coping Strategies and Adaptation**

Despite difficulties, students displayed resilience through several coping mechanisms. All reported asking for clarification, repeating key points, or using Google Translate during confusion. One shared, *“If I get confused, I ask or repeat what they said to confirm.”* Some code-mixed Mandarin and English with bilingual friends for efficiency.

Passive strategies like silence were also common when Malay was used. *“When they speak Malay, I just wait until they say my name,”* one admitted. Participants valued lecturers who explained in English after using Malay and provided bilingual materials. These practices reduced anxiety and enhanced comprehension. Overall, students exhibited strategic competence (Byram, 1997), using available linguistic, social, and digital resources to overcome communication breakdowns.

#### **4.2.5 Growth in Confidence Over Time**

Over time, participants described notable improvement in communicative confidence. *“I used to not talk in the first semester, but after getting familiar with classmates, I talked more,”* said one. Exposure to peers and classroom interactions built fluency and familiarity with local accents. Small talk after class also encouraged informal learning and social comfort.

However, not all experienced change—some maintained earlier habits due to introversion. Regardless, all agreed that confidence, rather than perfect grammar, determined communicative success: *“Be more confident—they won’t judge you for grammar mistakes.”* This progression highlights communication as a developmental process shaped by emotional readiness and social support.

### **4.3 Discussion**

The present study found that Year 3 international students in the ELS programme at UKM experienced persistent language anxiety and low self-confidence during peer interactions. Respondents reported worry about making grammatical mistakes, hesitation to initiate talk, and fear of negative evaluation — patterns that mirror findings in other Malaysian contexts. Halali, Hoon and Arif (2023) similarly report that academic speaking challenges among international and overseas learners are strongly associated with communicative language anxiety and limited prior learning experiences, which impede active participation in classroom discussions (Halali et al., 2023). This similarity suggests that the emotional barriers observed in this UKM case study reflect broader affective dynamics in Malaysian higher education, where anxiety constrains oral participation.

Comprehension difficulties — particularly problems understanding local accents, slang, and code-switching — emerged as another central barrier. Participants described confusion when peers mixed Malay with English or used local colloquialisms, often leading to withdrawal from informal conversations. These findings concur with earlier work showing that ethnolinguistic varieties (local English ethnolects, code-mixing) present decoding challenges for newcomers (Ismail et al., 2015), and echo broader evidence that language variety and rapid informal speech reduce comprehension and participation (Khojastehrad & Sattarova, 2015). The UKM students’ reports therefore align with international evidence that linguistic diversity in host societies increases cognitive uncertainty for international learners.

A consistent pattern across the interviews was preferential comfort with other international students and greater confidence in structured academic tasks (e.g., group assignments, presentations) than in spontaneous social talk. This matches cross-national research showing that international students often find formal academic contexts safer than informal social spaces, and that peer composition matters: interactions with co-nationals or other non-native speakers often reduce anxiety and allow pragmatic code-mixing as a coping strategy (Lu et al., 2023). Lu et al. (2023) specifically report that

frequent, direct intercultural contact with host-country peers improves intercultural competence over time, but that the process is incremental and mediated by the quality of contact — a pattern also visible in the UKM respondents who described gradual confidence growth through repeated exposure. [ERIC](#) The coping strategies reported in this study — asking for clarification, simplifying language, using translation tools, relying on bilingual peers, and strategic silence — are consistent with the literature on strategic competence and self-regulated communication. Byram's notion of strategic competence (Byram, 1997) and more recent empirical work (e.g., Halali et al., 2023) document similar pragmatic strategies used by learners to maintain interactional flow despite gaps in proficiency. The UKM participants' use of these strategies indicates a pragmatic orientation toward maintaining task completion and saving face, rather than withdrawing entirely. [ERIC](#)

However, this case study also highlighted some nuanced differences compared with other empirical settings. First, unlike some studies that document widespread overt divergence (strong identity-based resistance to accommodation), the UKM respondents reported mostly subtle or moderate forms of convergence (mimicry) or maintenance; extreme divergence was not observed. This suggests that language-study cohorts (ELS students) may be more motivated to adapt because English is both their medium of study and a target skill, which slightly shifts the balance toward accommodation compared with general international student populations (Giles et al., 2015; Soliz et al., 2022). Second, UKM students emphasized institutional practices (e.g., bilingual slides, lecturers repeating points in English) as critical supports — a finding that aligns with Yushriman et al. (2024) who stress institutional communication practices in Malaysian universities — but contrasts with contexts where institutional supports are weaker and peer strategies predominate.

The social consequences of communication barriers in the UKM case — notably tendencies toward social isolation or selective participation — are echoed in recent work linking language barriers to psychosocial outcomes. Guo (2025) documents how prolonged communication difficulties can increase feelings of exclusion and even depressive symptoms among international students, especially where social networks are limited; the UKM respondents' accounts of withdrawal and muted participation reflect this risk and underscore the mental-health dimension of communicative exclusion. This convergence between psychosocial studies and the present data highlights that language support is also a matter of student well-being, not only academic performance.

Finally, the combined theoretical lens of CAT and AUM proved useful for interpreting the data. CAT explained the observable speech adjustments (convergence, maintenance), while AUM offered insight into why students sometimes failed to accommodate — because anxiety and uncertainty blocked the cognitive resources needed for accommodation (Gudykunst, 2005). These dual framing echoes international empirical recommendations that pairing socio-cognitive and sociolinguistic perspectives produces a fuller account of intercultural peer communication (Gudykunst, 2005; Giles et al., 2015). Overall, the UKM case both corroborates and nuances international findings: many emotional and linguistic obstacles are common across contexts, but the ELS setting and institutional supports shape how accommodation and coping unfold in practice.

Implications from comparative evidence. Cross-study comparisons suggest three actionable points: (1) strengthen inclusive pedagogic practices that reduce code-switching or immediately translate key points (Yushriman et al., 2024); (2) formalise peer-mentoring and structured intercultural contact opportunities to accelerate safe accommodation (Lu et al., 2023); and (3) integrate psychosocial supports because language barriers can compound isolation (Guo, 2025). These steps are supported by empirical evidence across Malaysia and other host-country contexts and address both the affective and the linguistic dimensions revealed by the UKM case. Several recent studies conducted between 2024 and 2025 further illuminate and support the findings of this research. These works provide empirical and contextual reinforcement, highlighting similar communication barriers, emotional challenges, and coping mechanisms among international students in Malaysian higher education and beyond.

A study titled “*Overcoming Language Anxiety and Cultural Adaptation Challenges: A Study of International Students in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions*” (2025) published in RSIS International surveyed 300 international students across multiple Malaysian universities. The findings

revealed moderate to high levels of language anxiety and cultural adaptation difficulties, especially among students from non-English-speaking countries and among female respondents. The study further identified that social support and language proficiency were strong predictors of positive adaptation outcomes. These results strongly parallel the present study's findings on emotional and psychological barriers, particularly participants' self-consciousness and anxiety in peer interactions. However, while the RSIS study offers generalizable quantitative evidence, the present research complements it through an in-depth qualitative lens, emphasizing lived experiences and coping strategies.

Similarly, *“Speaking Anxiety in English Classrooms: Perspectives from Polytechnic Students in Malaysia”* (2025), published by HRMARS, investigated the affective factors influencing oral communication among Malaysian polytechnic students. The research identified that fear of making mistakes, peer judgment, and public evaluation significantly increased communication apprehension. It also found that constructive lecturer feedback and supportive classroom environments could mitigate these anxieties. Although this study focused on local polytechnic students, the affective dimensions—fear, anxiety, and self-doubt—mirror those of the international ELS students in this research. The alignment underscores that speaking anxiety in academic contexts is not confined to linguistic background but is a wider pedagogical concern in Malaysia's multilingual education system.

In the realm of social and linguistic comprehension, the *“Review of Intercultural Academic and Social Challenges among Chinese International Students in Malaysia”* (2024), published in the *Journal of International Students (OJED)*, provides strong contextual reinforcement. This systematic review examined both academic and social dimensions of adaptation among Chinese students, identifying major challenges in understanding Malaysian accents, informal English, and cultural humor. The review also emphasized that peer networks and group collaboration play essential roles in overcoming isolation. These findings align directly with this study's participants—who were all Chinese international students—thereby strengthening the external validity of the qualitative themes concerning comprehension difficulties, avoidance, and peer adaptation strategies.

From a digital perspective, *“The Role of Online Social Networking Sites in Facilitating Friendships and Adaptation among International Students in Malaysia”* (2024), published in the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, explored how social media platforms such as WhatsApp, WeChat, and Instagram facilitate integration. The study found that online communities serve as vital transitional spaces where international students build co-national and cross-cultural friendships, seek information, and share experiences before engaging in face-to-face communication. This insight complements the present study's findings by expanding the understanding of coping mechanisms beyond classroom or peer settings. It suggests that online socialization should be recognized as an additional form of intercultural adaptation, reducing isolation and building communicative confidence.

Collectively, these recent studies corroborate the central findings of the present research—that communication barriers among international students are multidimensional, encompassing emotional, linguistic, and cultural elements. They also reveal that adaptation is a gradual, socially mediated process shaped by both interpersonal and technological support. While the small-scale, qualitative nature of this case study offers depth of insight, these broader studies reinforce its relevance and situate its findings within a wider empirical landscape. Future research may build upon this alignment by integrating both digital and interpersonal support frameworks to promote intercultural competence and communication confidence among international students in Malaysia.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has illuminated the multifaceted communication struggles experienced by Year 3 international students in the English Language Studies (ELS) program at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), particularly during peer interactions. Utilizing the frameworks of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory, the findings emphasize that linguistic proficiency alone does not account for the difficulties these students face.

Instead, emotional safety, cultural adaptability, and inclusive institutional practices play equally significant roles in shaping communication outcomes.

Students reported encountering various barriers, including language anxiety, difficulty understanding local accents and slang, frequent code-switching, and fear of being judged by their peers. These challenges often led to reduced participation in academic and social interactions, resulting in feelings of isolation. However, the students also demonstrated adaptability and resilience by adopting strategies such as simplifying speech, mimicking local expressions, using translation tools, and seeking clarification. These behaviors not only reflect practical coping mechanisms but also align closely with the convergence principles of CAT and the emotional regulation emphasized in AUM Theory.

The study underscores that effective peer communication for international students is a dynamic and ongoing process influenced by both internal and external factors. As students gain more exposure to local speech patterns and classroom dynamics, their confidence tends to increase. Nevertheless, institutional support remains crucial. Educational environments that prioritize inclusive language practices, reduce linguistic ambiguity, and foster cultural sensitivity can significantly enhance international students' communicative competence and social integration.

Based on these insights, several recommendations are proposed. Educators should consistently use English as the primary medium of instruction and avoid excessive code-switching, providing translations when necessary. They should also cultivate a classroom atmosphere that is participatory and non-judgmental, enabling international students to express themselves without fear. At the institutional level, structured peer mentorship programs, intercultural workshops, and accessible language support services should be established and actively promoted. These initiatives can provide international students with safe spaces to practice communication and build connections with local peers.

Lastly, international students themselves are encouraged to take ownership of their communication development. This includes actively participating in group work, seeking informal peer interactions, and using strategies like paraphrasing and asking for clarification. Reflecting on both successes and challenges, and being open to feedback, are essential steps toward building greater fluency and confidence.

In conclusion, this research affirms that communicative competence in international academic contexts extends beyond grammar and vocabulary. It involves emotional readiness, cultural awareness, and a supportive institutional culture that values inclusivity. By addressing these dimensions holistically, universities can better support international students in navigating peer communication and achieving both academic success and social belonging.

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