

# Conquering the Fear: Navigating Second Language Speaking Anxiety Among ESL Learners in Selangor Private University

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.903SEDU0371>

Received: 29 June 2025; Accepted: 03 July 2025; Published: 01 August 2025

## ABSTRACT

This research investigation focuses on the amount of English-speaking anxiety among English as a Second Language (ESL) students at a private university in Selangor, Malaysia. A considerable number of Malaysian graduates struggle with English competence, which limits their employment opportunities. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the amount of English-speaking anxiety among ESL students, as well as to identify the elements that contribute to it. A total of 100 undergraduate students (33 men and 67 women) participated. A modified version of Horwitz et al.'s (1986) Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS) was administered via a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire. Data was analyzed using SPSS version 29. The findings show that students have moderate levels of speaking anxiety, which is mostly due to test anxiety, communication uncertainty, and fear of poor evaluation. These findings help students and teachers understand the amount of English-speaking anxiety and devise techniques to alleviate it.

**Keywords**— speaking, anxiety, second language, undergraduate students

## INTRODUCTION

English is a global communication substrate, and it is widely accepted as the dominant language for global communication, despite cultural and linguistic differences. It is essential in a variety of contexts and is used in all global activities, including conferences, sports, international trade, business, and everyday communication. For a long time, English was the chosen language in the workplace and the medium of education (Asserraji et al., 2022). However, the language's position is rapidly being reduced to that of a foreign language. While English is a foreign language in many places, it is considered a second language in Malaysia (Jamian et al., 2022). For a long period, English was the favored business language and the medium of instruction in schools (Ali & Shanmugam, 2023).

Somehow, the status of the language is gradually shifting towards being classified as a foreign language. The prevalent issue faced by Malaysians today is a reluctance to use the language and a lack of interest in studying it deeply (Muhammad et al., 2020). Malaysians do not necessarily shy away from the language, but the spoken form differs from standard English. The younger generations are significantly inclined towards what is referred to as Malaysian English, whilst those born during the colonial era tend to speak Standard English (Omar & Hashim, 2021).

Communication is a way to communicate thoughts and emotions to others while also generating and gathering information. Communicating in English is key because it helps us navigate our globalized, interconnected world. However, speaking in English might be difficult for foreign language learners who want to practice. Speaking has been identified as the most stressful and anxiety-producing language skill in ESL classes (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021). Speaking anxiety is the anxiousness or fear that an individual feels when presenting (or about to deliver) a speech in front of an audience. This type of worry is common among second language learners, affecting their language and academic performance, as English proficiency is critical for the next generation (Rahmat et al., 2020).

The Ministry of Education has embraced a number of new and upgraded projects. In 2002, the Malaysian government began Science and Mathematics instruction in English to improve pupils' English language skills. The Maintaining the Malay Language and Strengthening the Command of English program was initiated in 2009, and students who have a strong command of English can explore a wide range of topics (Othman et al., 2020).

Graduates still face challenges constructing sentences in English and effectively communicating in the language. Most potential employers' priorities English proficiency, which is crucial for professional success. While anxiety is a persistent issue, it is manageable. By exploring its origins, this study aims to assist readers in addressing their nervousness when speaking a second or foreign language. Since anxiety can impede performance and learning outcomes and contribute to inadequate language skills, it is important to address it promptly (Sriwichai, 2020).

This study looks into the prevalence of English-speaking anxiety and the triggers that lead to it among ESL students at a private institution. It will also look into potential disparities in the severity of English-speaking anxiety based on specific criteria including gender, age, faculty, and native language. The study investigates the core causes of speaking fear, including communication anxiety, test anxiety, and anxieties about receiving negative feedback.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **English Language Anxiety**

English language anxiety among Malaysian university students is a prevalent issue, with studies showing moderate to slight levels of anxiety in various contexts. Research indicates that fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and test anxiety contribute to overall language anxiety (James et al., 2020). Pre-university students exhibit low levels of speaking anxiety but moderate motivation, with extrinsic motivation slightly higher than intrinsic (Ramarow & Hassan, 2021). A study of public university students in Sarawak found a moderate level of speaking anxiety, positively correlated with SPM English results (Lin et al., 2020). Malaysian Chinese students in private universities also experience moderate levels of presentation anxiety (AlShaibani et al., 2022). Common coping strategies include seeking help from peers and instructors, using online resources, self-motivation, and rehearsing before presentations (James et al., 2020). Educators are advised to create supportive learning environments and provide guidance to reduce anxiety and improve language skills.

### **ESL Speaking Skills**

Malaysian university students face various challenges in developing their ESL speaking skills. Online learning platforms have shown promise for improving speaking abilities, but connection speed remains a concern (Saputra et al., 2023). Students face challenges during the Malaysian University Examination Test (MUET), such as a lack of vocabulary and grammar understanding and time limits (Karnine et al., 2022). Non-linguistic challenges such as anxiety, lack of confidence, shyness, and fear of making mistakes also hinder students' speaking skills development (Nadesan & Shah, 2020). Despite these obstacles, students generally perceive that they know to use online platforms effectively (Saputra et al., 2023). To address these issues, researchers suggest implementing various teaching methodologies and encouraging students to actively participate in speaking activities (Karnine et al., 2022; Saputra et al., 2023). Further research is needed to explore effective strategies for enhancing ESL speaking skills among Malaysian university students.

### **The Intensity of Speaking Anxiety**

Speaking anxiety is a significant challenge for ESL learners in Malaysian universities. Studies have identified both internal and external factors contributing to this anxiety, including fear of negative evaluation, lack of confidence, and difficulties in self-expression (Kashinathan & Abdul Aziz, 2021). Cultural differences and fear

of being evaluated by peers and lecturers also play a role (Taly & Paramasivam, 2020). While anxiety levels may vary based on factors such as teaching subjects, they generally do not differ significantly by gender or school location (Badrasawi et al., 2020). To cope with speaking anxiety, students employ various strategies, including relaxation techniques, positive thinking, preparation, and seeking peer support (Rahmat et al., 2021).

### **Factors Affecting Speaking Anxiety**

Speaking anxiety among Malaysian ESL learners is influenced by multiple interconnected factors, which often exacerbate the fear and hesitation associated with using English in public or academic settings (Ali & Shanmugam, 2023). Self-related perceptions play a pivotal role in shaping a learner's confidence and attitude toward speaking English. Negative self-evaluations, such as believing one's speech is inadequate or fearing judgment from peers, can significantly heighten anxiety (Nadesan & Shah, 2022). Additionally, learning challenges, such as struggling to acquire vocabulary, grammar, or pronunciation skills, contribute to learners feeling unprepared or ill-equipped to express themselves effectively. Research indicates a clear link between English proficiency and public speaking anxiety, with lower proficiency levels correlating with higher anxiety (Tee et al., 2022). This relationship suggests that learners who feel less confident in their language abilities are more likely to experience debilitating levels of anxiety, which can hinder their academic and professional growth.

To mitigate speaking anxiety, students adopt various coping strategies, which can be broadly categorized into affective, cognitive, and behavioural approaches. Affective strategies include relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing or mindfulness, which aim to reduce physical symptoms of anxiety. Cognitive strategies focus on reframing negative thoughts into positive affirmations, allowing learners to shift their mindset and approach speaking tasks with optimism (Sriwichai, 2020). Meanwhile, behavioural strategies involve practical methods like thorough preparation, rehearsing speeches, or avoiding eye contact to reduce the pressure of direct audience engagement (Taly & Paramasivam, 2020). By addressing these factors holistically, educators and institutions can significantly reduce speaking anxiety among Malaysian ESL learners, thereby enhancing their communication skills and overall academic experience.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study used a quantitative research approach and a self-administered questionnaire to assess the level of speaking anxiety among ESL undergraduates at a private institution in Selangor. A descriptive research approach was used to investigate two objectives: assessing the amount of speaking anxiety and establishing the related factors. 100 students, 67% female and 33% male, were randomly selected from the Faculty of Education and Social Sciences at Universiti Selangor, Bestari Jaya Campus.

The primary instrument was the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), a validated tool with high reliability (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.882), containing 33 items addressing communication anxiety, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. The questionnaire, created using Google Forms, comprised demographic details in Section A and Likert-scale items in Section B, distributed via Telegram and WhatsApp. Data collection involved primary sources (FLCAS responses) and secondary sources (academic literature). Analysis using SPSS (Version 29.0) included descriptive statistics to determine anxiety levels, mean, and analysis of samples t-test between factors, providing a comprehensive understanding of speaking anxiety among the participants.

## RESULTS

### Level of Speaking Anxiety

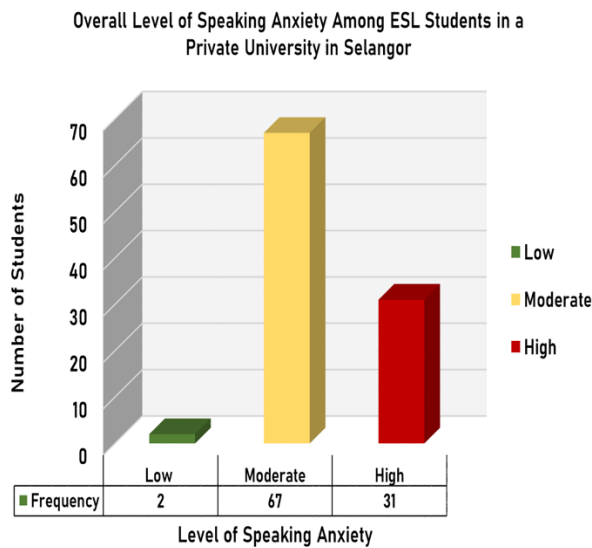


Figure 1. The level of speaking anxiety

Figure 1 shows the level of speaking anxiety expressed by students at a private institution in Selangor. The students' speaking anxiety levels were classified into three groups (as shown in the table): low, moderate, and high. The statistics suggest that the majority of students experienced average levels of speaking anxiety. According to the descriptive statistics, 67% of respondents scored between 2.34 and 3.66, indicating that they were moderately anxious about speaking. Furthermore, 31% of students reported high levels of speaking anxiety, showing that those with moderate levels of anxiety are on par with those with high levels of worry. The percentage difference between pupils with high and moderate levels of speaking anxiety is 36%. In addition, just two students, or 2% of the total, reported mild speaking anxiety. As a result, the data in Table 1 demonstrate that the majority of students at a private institution in Selangor had moderate speaking anxiety.

Table 1Independent sample t-test analysis

Factor	Levene's Test (p)	t	df	p	Interpretation
Communication Anxiety	0.963	0.529	98	0.529	Not Significant
Test Anxiety	0.818	0.18	98	0.18	Not Significant
Negative Evaluation	0.243	0.118	98	0.118	Not Significant

The independent samples t-test was used to see if there were any significant differences in speaking anxiety levels between male and female ESL students, notably communication anxiety, test anxiety, and fear of being evaluated negatively. The exam compared the mean scores for each anxiety factor in both gender groups. Prior to doing the t-test, Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was employed to determine variance homogeneity. The Levene's Test results for all three variables returned non-significant p-values ( $p > .05$ ), showing that the assumption of equal variances was not broken.

There were no statistically significant differences between male and female students in terms of communication anxiety ( $t(98) = 0.529$ ,  $p = .529$ ), test anxiety ( $t(98) = 0.180$ ,  $p = .180$ ), or fear of unfavorable assessment ( $t(98) = 0.118$ ,  $p = .118$ ). These data indicate that gender has no significant influence on the level of speaking anxiety experienced by ESL learners in this environment.

## DISCUSSION

This study looked into the amount of English-speaking anxiety among ESL students at a private institution in Selangor, Malaysia, and identified the elements that contribute to this worry. The poll of 100 undergraduate students (33 males and 67 females) revealed a moderate level of English-speaking anxiety. This is similar with recent study on English language anxiety among Malaysian university students, which found moderate to mild levels of worry in a variety of circumstances (James et al., 2020; AlShaibani et al., 2022). The consistent finding of moderate anxiety suggests that while not debilitating for all, speaking anxiety remains a significant hurdle for a considerable portion of ESL learners in Malaysia.

This finding is consistent with recent research indicating that foreign language anxiety is a common affective reaction experienced by learners of all genders, especially in academic settings where communication in a second language is anticipated (Botes et al., 2020). Although prior research focused on potential gender differences, recent findings indicate that the level of speaking anxiety is more driven by classroom setting, self-efficacy, and previous language experience than by demographic characteristics such as gender (Ozer & Akcayoglu, 2021). Test anxiety emerged as a significant contributor, this is consistent with observations by Karnine et al. (2022), who highlighted difficulties faced by students in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), including issues with vocabulary, grammar, and time constraints, which can induce anxiety during formal assessments. The pressure to perform well in examinations often translates into heightened anxiety when speaking English, as students fear making mistakes that could negatively impact their grades (Ali et al., 2024).

Communication apprehension was another prominent factor, refers to the general fear or anxiety associated with communicating with others. Nadesan and Shah (2020) noted that non-linguistic challenges such as lack of confidence and shyness significantly hinder students' speaking skills development. Our findings reinforce that simply engaging in spoken English, regardless of a formal assessment, can be a source of discomfort and apprehension for many ESL learners. This apprehension can stem from a variety of sources, including a perceived lack of proficiency, hesitation to initiate conversations, or an overall discomfort with the act of speaking in a second language.

Furthermore, the fear of negative evaluation played a crucial role in students' speaking anxiety. This involves concerns about being judged or criticised by peers, instructors, or even native speakers. Kashinathan and Abdul Aziz (2021), identified fear of negative evaluation as a key internal factor contributing to speaking anxiety among ESL learners. Similarly, Taly and Paramasivam (2020) emphasised the role of cultural differences and fear of being evaluated by peers and lecturers. This fear can lead to self-censorship, reluctance to participate in discussions, and avoidance of speaking opportunities, ultimately hindering language acquisition and fluency development. The desire to avoid embarrassment or appearing less competent can outweigh the motivation to practice and improve.

The study's methodology, utilising a quantitative approach with the FLCAS questionnaire, allowed for a systematic assessment of anxiety levels and contributing factors. The high reliability of the FLCAS (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.882) strengthens the validity of these findings. While the study did not find significant differences in anxiety levels based on demographic factors like gender, which aligns with some previous research (Badrasawi et al., 2020), it did highlight the pervasive nature of these core anxieties across the student population.

These results offer valuable insights for both students and instructors. For students, understanding that their anxiety is commonly shared and stems from identifiable factors like test pressure, general communication discomfort, and fear of judgement can be a first step towards addressing it. For instructors, these findings underscore the need to create supportive and low-stakes learning environments that mitigate these anxieties. Strategies such as reducing the emphasis on error correction during initial speaking practice, encouraging peer support, and providing ample opportunities for low-pressure communication can be beneficial.



## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study examined the extent and causes of speaking anxiety among ESL students at a private institution in Selangor, revealing a moderate level of anxiety among participants, regardless of demographic factors. However, the research faced limitations, including a small sample size, time constraints, and the exclusive use of quantitative methods. These limitations underscore the need for future studies to adopt mixed-method approaches, expand sample sizes, and explore the issue across diverse academic contexts. To address speaking anxiety, educators should create supportive and relaxed classroom environments, minimize error correction, and encourage positive cognitive, affective, and behavioural strategies to manage anxiety. Additionally, learners must recognize their ability to control anxiety and adopt a positive mindset toward language learning. Future research should build on these findings by including larger samples, employing qualitative methods, and exploring the topic in greater depth to provide a comprehensive understanding of second-language speaking anxiety.

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