



Exploring ESL Public Speaking Anxiety Among Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

English is a core subject in Malaysian schools, yet many students struggle with spoken English despite receiving at least eleven years of formal education. Challenges such as limited fluency, difficulty in organizing ideas, and fear of making mistakes often contribute to anxiety in oral communication. This study explores public speaking anxiety among undergraduate ESL learners, focusing on three key areas: specific anxiety-inducing situations, overall anxiety levels, and the factors contributing to these anxieties. Data were collected from 65 undergraduate students from Universiti Teknologi MARA, using a mixed-methods approach. Thematic analysis was employed to examine common anxiety-inducing situations, such as fear of making mistakes, negative feedback, and unpreparedness. In addition, the study employed the Public Speaking Classroom Anxiety Scale (PSCAS) to evaluate the students' anxiety levels and identify key contributors to



their anxiety. The findings revealed that Fear of Negative Evaluation and Communication Apprehension were significant factors, while Comfort in Speaking English was moderate. Test Anxiety was the least impactful. The study highlights the need for targeted interventions to reduce anxiety and foster confidence in oral communication, with suggestions for more supportive learning environments that reduce fear and build students' comfort levels. The findings offer valuable insights for educators and curriculum designers aiming to create more effective strategies to help students overcome public speaking anxiety and improve their spoken English skills.

Keywords: public speaking anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, ESL learner, self-rated anxiety

INTRODUCTION

English, a globally spoken language, holds significant importance in Malaysia. It is taught as a core school subject. Despite 11 to 13 years of formal English education (Darmi & Albion, 2010; Yacob & Yunus, 2019; Malik et al., 2021), many students struggle with proficiency. Persistent issues like grammar errors, limited vocabulary, and pronunciation challenges often lead to reduced motivation to engage in speaking activities (David et al., 2015; Yacob & Yunus, 2019). Public speaking anxiety is a major barrier that affects students' willingness to speak in English during their transition to tertiary education, hindering their participation, academic performance, and communication skills (Horwitz et al., 1986; Horwitz, 2001). With English as the medium of instruction, their struggles with oral communication are further amplified.

Public speaking anxiety stems from various factors, including fear of making mistakes, peer pressure, negative feedback, and low proficiency in classroom settings (Daud et al., 2019). Abdullah et al. (2024) also highlight limited vocabulary, lack of preparation, and weak grammar as additional contributors to anxiety in speaking contexts. While general English language challenges have been widely studied, there is limited research on how these anxiety-inducing factors specifically affect Malaysian undergraduates in public speaking contexts. To address this gap, this study examines the levels and sources of public speaking anxiety among undergraduate ESL learners. It addresses the following research questions:

1. What specific anxiety-triggering situations do undergraduate ESL students encounter in classroom public speaking scenarios?
2. What are the levels of classroom public speaking anxiety among undergraduate ESL students?
3. What are the sources of classroom public speaking anxiety among undergraduate ESL students?

By identifying the key anxiety-inducing factors, this research aims to provide meaningful insights. These findings are intended to inform educators and curriculum designers about effective interventions that can support learners. The study offers actionable strategies to reduce anxiety and enhance speaking confidence. Ultimately, this can improve academic performance and prepare ESL undergraduates for future career opportunities.



LITERATURE REVIEW

Strong oral communication skills are essential for career readiness, as they enhance academic performance, expand professional opportunities, and improve workplace communication (Querol-Julián, 2023). In a globalized job market, English proficiency is crucial for securing high-paying jobs, increasing productivity, and minimizing financial risks such as unemployment (Tran, 2012; Doan & Hamid, 2019; Chea & Lo, 2022). However, many ESL learners struggle with speaking due to factors such as limited vocabulary, grammatical difficulties, and anxiety when communicating in English (Yacob & Yunus, 2019; Malik et al., 2021). Public speaking, in particular, is often perceived as an intimidating task that heightens anxiety and hinders fluency (Daud et al., 2019). Thus, the need to improve and master speaking skills is of utmost importance. Studies suggest that providing learners with more opportunities to practice speaking in supportive environments can help build their confidence and fluency (Nation & Newton, 2009).

Theoretical Perspectives on Speaking Anxiety

This paper explores speaking anxiety among university undergraduates. The theoretical framework adopted is based on Malik et al. (2021), which integrates three theories: Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis, and Horwitz's foreign language anxiety theory, as shown in Figure 1.

Horwitz's theory (Horwitz et al., 1986) examines how anxiety affects language learners. It identifies three anxiety constructs: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension refers to anxiety when speaking a foreign language due to self-doubt. Test anxiety involves worry about language assessments, while fear of negative evaluation is the fear of being judged due to perceived language deficiencies.

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis relates to Horwitz's theory. It suggests that emotional factors like anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence affect language acquisition. High anxiety or low motivation raises the affective filter, which blocks language input and hinders learners' ability to engage in speaking tasks. Conversely, when anxiety is low, learners are more receptive to language input and can participate more effectively.

Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) explains how learners progress with social interactions and scaffolding. Tasks within the ZPD allow learners to engage in speaking activities when supported by teachers or peers. If tasks exceed their ZPD without support, anxiety increases, leading to avoidance. This framework suggests using structured interactions to reduce anxiety and promote language growth.

These three theories collectively explain speaking anxiety in the ESL classroom. Horwitz's theory identifies specific anxiety triggers, while Krashen's hypothesis highlights how anxiety impacts language acquisition by acting as a barrier to input and engagement. Vygotsky's ZPD further emphasizes the role of social support in mitigating anxiety and enhancing learning opportunities. When integrated, this framework suggests that structured peer or teacher support (ZPD) can help lower the affective filter, reducing communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz, 2001). By understanding these interconnected perspectives, educators can develop

targeted strategies to foster a more supportive and anxiety-free speaking environment for ESL learners.

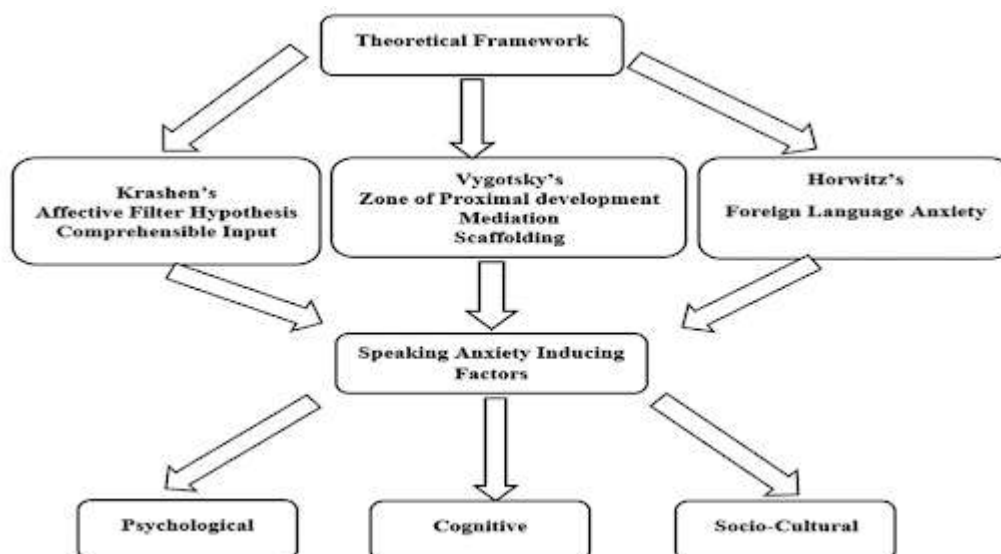


Figure 1. Theoretical framework for anxiety-inducing factors in English language classroom (Malik et al., 2021)

Contextual Factors Influencing Public Speaking Anxiety Among ESL Learners

Public speaking anxiety (PSA) is a common issue among ESL learners (Dwyer & Davidson, 2012; Bodie, 2010; Taly & Paramasivam, 2020). It significantly impacts their performance in academic and social settings. Several factors contribute to this anxiety, including language proficiency, cultural influences, and classroom dynamics.

One major cause of speaking anxiety is a lack of English proficiency. Damayanti and Listyani (2020) note that students are often afraid to speak due to their inadequate language skills. This fear leads to overthinking, nervousness, and a lack of confidence. Rajitha and Alamelu (2020) also emphasize that limited proficiency can exacerbate feelings of fear and anxiety. The findings suggest that proficiency plays a foundational role in shaping students' confidence. When students lack sufficient language skills, their ability to participate in discussions and articulate their thoughts is hindered, reinforcing a cycle of avoidance and anxiety. Therefore, addressing language proficiency is crucial in reducing speaking anxiety.

Inadequate vocabulary is another significant factor. Sadighi and Dastpak (2017) explain that limited vocabulary knowledge causes communication difficulties and embarrassment when students struggle to find the right words. Mohd Nor et al. (2019) found that students were embarrassed by their language limitations and afraid of making grammatical errors, which discouraged them from interacting with lecturers and peers. These findings indicate that vocabulary limitations not only affect linguistic fluency but also influence social engagement.



When students fear making mistakes, they may hesitate to participate, leading to reduced speaking practice and slower language development.

Classroom activities also contribute to speaking anxiety. Horwitz (2001) found that students often feel self-conscious during speaking activities that expose their weaknesses, leading to fear and panic. This anxiety is heightened by concerns about limited vocabulary or grammar skills. Many students report that being unexpectedly called upon in class is a significant stressor (Mohd Nor et al., 2019). Mulyani (2018) highlights that classroom activities like asking questions, answering, and giving presentations are major sources of speaking anxiety. These activities trigger fear of being judged for making mistakes. Taly and Paramasivam (2020) add that delivering oral presentations in class is stressful due to concerns about English proficiency and negative judgments from lecturers and classmates. Sadighi and Dastpak (2017) found that fear of making mistakes is one of the leading causes of speaking anxiety. Learners worry that their mistakes will be pointed out in front of the class, leading to embarrassment (Mohd Nor et al., 2019). These studies collectively indicate that classroom structures can either alleviate or exacerbate anxiety. If students are frequently placed in high stakes speaking situations without preparation, their anxiety may intensify. However, structured scaffolding, such as rehearsals or peer collaboration, can create a more supportive environment.

Negative evaluations and peer assessments further contribute to anxiety. Sinaga et al. (2020) discovered that students often feel anxious about negative judgments of their speaking performance and distress from pessimistic thoughts. This fear of evaluation, combined with concerns about their English proficiency, amplifies anxiety (Amini et al., 2019). Students with lower proficiency experience more severe anxiety because they struggle to express ideas clearly and fluently (Bensalem, 2023). The difficulty of constructing grammatically correct sentences in real time during speaking tasks can also trigger anxiety and hinder performance (Megawati & Permana, 2022). These findings show the importance of supportive feedback in reducing speaking anxiety and improving students' experiences. Instead of focusing on mistakes, educators can use formative assessments that help students learn from errors. Encouraging peer feedback and lowering high-pressure evaluations can create a more supportive environment.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to examine ESL students' public speaking anxiety in classroom settings, specifically addressing:

RO1: Identifying specific anxiety-triggering situations.

RO2: Measuring the levels of classroom public speaking anxiety.

RO3: Determining the sources of this anxiety.

Participants & Sampling

The study recruited 65 undergraduate students (47 female, 18 male) aged 18–26 from Universiti Teknologi MARA, all attending an English proficiency workshop. Participants included 51



Diploma and 14 Degree students, selected through convenience sampling based on their voluntary participation and motivation to improve English-speaking skills.

To maintain homogeneity, only students with prior exposure to English language learning at the university level were included. Their participation was voluntary, and they provided informed consent before data collection. The sample size was deemed sufficient based on similar studies using the Public Speaking Classroom Anxiety Scale (PSCAS) with comparable participant numbers.

Data Collection Procedures

Participants completed a 17-item questionnaire adapted from Yaikhong and Usaha's (2012) PSCAS, which was administered via Google Forms. The link was shared during the workshop, with respondents given ample time to complete the survey on-site.

The questionnaire utilized a 5-point Likert scale, where respondents indicated their level of agreement with each statement about public speaking anxiety. The scale consisted of five response options - 1 ("Strongly Disagree"), 2 ("Disagree"), 3 ("Neutral"), 4 ("Agree"), to 5 ("Strongly Agree"). This scale enabled more detailed responses by measuring different levels of agreement instead of a basic yes-or-no choice.

To capture qualitative insights, an open-ended question, "In what situations are you anxious about speaking English?" was placed at the end of the questionnaire. This encouraged reflective responses directly linked to RO1.

Instrument Reliability & Validity

The PSCAS is a validated scale derived from established instruments such as the FLCAS (Horwitz et al., 1986), PRCA-24 (McCroskey, 1970), and PRPSA-34 (McCroskey, 1970). Yaikhong and Usaha (2012) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.90, confirming high internal reliability. The adaptation maintained the original structure to ensure content validity for ESL learners.

Data Analysis

For RO1, thematic analysis was applied to responses from the open-ended question "In what situations are you anxious about speaking English?" to identify recurring patterns in students' anxiety experiences. Responses were categorized based on common themes that emerged from the data.

For RO2, descriptive statistical analysis was conducted on PSCAS scores to determine students' levels of classroom public speaking anxiety. Anxiety levels were categorized as High Anxiety (> 68), Moderate Anxiety (51–68), and Mild Anxiety (< 51).

For RO3, responses were further examined to determine key sources of classroom public speaking anxiety, identifying major contributing factors based on students' self-reported concerns.



Instrument: Public Speaking Classroom Anxiety Scale (PSCAS)

The Public Speaking Classroom Anxiety Scale (PSCAS), developed by Yaikhong and Usaha (2012), is a validated tool designed to measure anxiety in public speaking contexts. It builds upon previous scales, including Horwitz et al.'s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), McCroskey's (1970) Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) and Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA-34), and Clevenger and Halvorson's (1992) Speaker Anxiety Scale (SA). These foundational works contribute to the PSCAS's reliability in assessing different dimensions of public speaking anxiety among ESL learners.

The PSCAS consists of 17 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 represents "Strongly Disagree," 2 "Disagree," 3 "Neutral," 4 "Agree," and 5 "Strongly Agree." The scale evaluates four key dimensions of anxiety: Fear of Negative Evaluation, Comfort in Speaking English, Test Anxiety, and Communication Apprehension. Items 6, 9, 11, 13, 14, and 16 measure Fear of Negative Evaluation, while items 4, 8, 10, and 12 assess Comfort in Speaking English. Test Anxiety is captured through items 1, 7, and 17, and Communication Apprehension is reflected in items 2, 3, 5, and 15. Each participant's total anxiety score was calculated by summing item responses and adjusting the total by subtracting 17 from the maximum possible score of 85. Based on the final score, anxiety levels were categorized as high (above 68), moderate (between 51 and 68), or mild (below 51).

The PSCAS provided the primary data for RO2, helping categorize students based on their public speaking anxiety levels. Additionally, responses to the open-ended question—"In what situations are you anxious about speaking English?"—were analyzed thematically to address RO1 (anxiety-triggering situations) and RO3 (sources of anxiety). This combined approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of ESL students' public speaking anxiety, linking quantitative and qualitative insights.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section reveals the results and discussion for the study conducted to understand the levels and sources of public speaking anxiety among undergraduate ESL students, as well as the correlation between students' self-rated anxiety and their PSCAS scores. The results are organized based on the sections of the questionnaire.

Demographic Analysis

Gender Analysis

Table 1. Distribution of gender

Gender	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Female	47	72.31
Male	18	27.69
Total	65	100



As shown in the table, a significant majority of the participants are female, representing 72.31% of the sample, while the remaining 27.69% are male. This disparity suggests that female students may be more motivated or inclined to attend English proficiency workshops compared to their male counterparts.

Categorization of SPM/ STPM Grades and MUET Band Analysis

Table 2. Distribution of SPM/STPM grades

SPM/STPM Grade Range	Frequency Count	Percentage (%)
A+, A, A-	31	47.69
B+, B, B-	18	27.69
C+, C	11	16.92
C-, D+, D	5	7.69
Total	65	100

Table 3. Distribution of MUET Band

MUET Band	Frequency Count	Percentage (%)
BAND 3	10.0	55.56
BAND 4	8.0	44.44

The Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) and Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM) are key Malaysian exams assessing secondary and pre-university academic performance, while the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) evaluates English proficiency for university admission.

Analysis of prior SPM/STPM results shows 47.69% of participants achieved A-range grades, 27.69% B-range, 16.92% C-range, and 7.69% D-range. Among 18 MUET respondents, 55.56% scored Band 3, and 44.44% Band 4. These results suggest moderate English proficiency, with many showing strong capabilities but room for improvement for those in lower bands. Female participants dominated (72.31%), potentially reflecting higher motivation among women for English workshops, consistent with studies linking female L2 learners to stronger instrumental motivation and positive attitudes (Bacon & Finnemann, 1992; Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Demographic and academic performance data provide critical context for the study, helping to explore anxiety-inducing situations in public speaking as outlined in the first research question.



Thematic Analysis of Anxiety Situations

This section presents the results from the self-evaluation component of the questionnaire, specifically focusing on the situations where respondents feel anxious about speaking English. The data was analyzed thematically, categorizing the responses into distinct themes based on the situations described by the participants. These themes provide insight into the specific contexts that trigger anxiety among the respondents.

Table 4. Responses of self-evaluation component

Theme	Responses
Public Speaking and Presentations	"Speak in public" "Speaking in front of many people." "Public Speaking" "In formal settings, such as presentation when I have to speak in front of people." "When talking in front of people / class" "When present or speaking test" "Presentations & speaking test" "Public speaking and presentation" "I'm anxious about speaking English when i need to present using English language" "When speaking in front of many audiences" "Presentation " "When do presenting" "In front of many people"
Exams and Tests	"During speaking test" "During examination" "For a speaking test especially in a group of unknown people" "When I sit for an exam, for example, I sit for a speaking test." "Tests and Exam" "Test I guess" "When present or speaking test" "Presentations & speaking test" "During the speaking test, when answering someone's question in English because my grammar is bad and I cannot think of a word in English."
Impromptu Speaking	"When someone ask me a sudden question" "Impromptu situations, but I do try to calm myself down" "To think of an answer directly." "When trying to reply to someone who is talking to me." "When under too much pressure" "If I don't understand the question properly"



Speaking with Fluent English Speakers	"When talking to someone who is more fluent in English" "When speaking with people that are fluent in English because I am afraid that I might get judged for my English accent or pronunciation..." "When talking to someone" "When speaking with someone"
Formal Settings	"In formal settings, such as a presentation when I have to speak in front of people." "When I'm speaking in a formal situation" "Talking formally"
Meeting New People	"When I meet new people" "Meeting new people"
Understanding and Elaborating Ideas	"When I have to elaborate my points" "Elaborating ideas" "Thinking about what idea I need to point out while having conversations" "Explain something that I don't really know about" "Lack of information"
Fear of Making Mistakes	"Afraid of mistakes pronunciation" "Pronounce, language" "Pronouncing the scientific word" "Afraid of wrong pronouns" "When I don't understand the topic"
General Anxiety	"Shaking" "Nothing is impossible" "Trick question"
Other Situations	"Roleplay" "When I feel pressure to find the answer."

Public Speaking and Presentations

The most prevalent theme identified was *Public Speaking and Presentations*. Respondents frequently mentioned feeling anxious when required to speak in public, especially in formal settings such as presentations. Some of the examples include phrases like "*Speaking in front of many people*," "*Public speaking*," and "*Presentations & speaking test*." The formal nature of public speaking in the classroom, coupled with the pressure of performing before an audience, significantly contributes to the anxiety students experience. As highlighted by Sugiyati and Indriani (2021), public speaking typically involves limited interaction between the speaker and the audience, placing the speaker in a position where their every move is scrutinized. This pressure, coupled with commonly reported concerns such as fear of negative evaluation, performance-related anxiety, and self-perceived incompetence (Horwitz et al., 1986; Yaikhong & Usaha, 2012), likely intensifies their anxiety. These findings align with the broader literature on public speaking



anxiety, which identifies fear of judgment, making mistakes, and failing to meet expectations as key contributing factors (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

Exams and Tests

Another significant theme was *Exams and Tests*. Respondents expressed anxiety related to speaking assessments, as evidenced by statements like "During speaking test" and "When I sit for an exam, for example, I sit for a speaking test." This theme underscores the stress students experience in evaluative situations, particularly in speaking assessments, is a significant contributor to their overall speaking anxiety. The pressure of performing well in high-stakes exams can greatly heighten this anxiety, as students are often concerned about their proficiency being judged and the potential for poor performance. This aligns with Young's (1990) observation that students exhibit varying reactions to test anxiety during oral exams, with some feeling comfortable and others experiencing considerable stress that negatively impacts their performance. Moreover, research by Oxford and Ehrman (1995) and Phillips (1992, as cited in Horwitz, 2001) indicate that self-reported anxiety related to speaking in class is closely tied to test performance, showing a dual role where anxiety can either facilitate or debilitate performance. This underscores the complex relationship between speaking assessments and student anxiety, as mild anxiety may enhance focus and motivation, whereas excessive anxiety can lead to nervousness, cognitive overload, and impaired speech production (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Understanding this balance is crucial for designing assessments that minimize anxiety's negative effects while leveraging its potential to enhance performance.

Impromptu Speaking

Impromptu Speaking emerged as a key theme, where respondents noted the challenge of responding spontaneously without preparation. Examples include "When someone asks me a sudden question" and "Impromptu situations, but I do try to calm myself down." Impromptu speaking emerged as a central theme in our findings, with respondents expressing significant anxiety about responding spontaneously to tasks or presenting in class without prior preparation. This difficulty aligns with Chen's (2009) research, which identified lack of preparedness as a major source of anxiety in English oral presentations. Whai and Mei (2016) similarly noted that inadequate practice and preparation were key factors contributing to students' difficulties in oral presentations. Similarly, "If I don't understand the question properly" highlights the fear of misinterpretation, which can lead to hesitation and self-doubt. This aligns with Mak (2011) who found that unprepared speaking tasks heighten anxiety for second-language learners. The fear of making mistakes or struggling to articulate thoughts clearly intensifies anxiety, ultimately impacting overall speaking performance.

Speaking with Fluent English Speakers

Anxiety when *Speaking with Fluent English Speakers* was another prominent theme. Respondents mentioned feeling nervous when interacting with individuals who are more proficient in English, with examples such as "When talking to someone who is more fluent in English" and "When speaking with people that are fluent in English because I am afraid that I might get judged for my English accent or pronunciation." This notable theme was the anxiety respondents felt when



interacting with more proficient English speakers. Examples included concerns about being judged for their accent or pronunciation. This theme highlights the social pressure and fear of judgment experienced by students who perceive themselves as less proficient.

This finding is consistent with Amir et al. (2022), who reported that feelings of inadequacy and external factors contribute to presentation anxiety, especially when facing a more knowledgeable audience. Putri et al. (2020) similarly found that self-perception and fear of making mistakes are significant sources of speaking anxiety. Furthermore, Brundage et al. (2017) noted that fear of negative evaluation heightens social anxiety, aligning with our results where students fear judgment from more proficient speakers.

These studies collectively suggest that anxiety in language use is influenced by both internal self-perceptions and external judgments. Addressing these factors through supportive measures could help reduce anxiety and build confidence.

Formal Settings

The theme of *Formal Settings* also emerged from the analysis, where respondents indicated anxiety when speaking in formal or professional contexts. Statements such as "When I'm speaking in a formal situation" and "Talking formally" illustrate this concern. This anxiety is supported by existing research, which shows that formal settings amplify anxiety due to the pressures of meeting high standards and adhering to linguistic norms. Gargalianou et al. (2016) explored foreign language anxiety in professional contexts and found that personality traits and gender differences significantly impact how individuals experience anxiety in these settings. Their study demonstrates that professional environments heighten anxiety due to high stakes and expectations. Similarly, Effiong (2016) highlights that factors such as the teacher's demeanor and the formality of classroom settings can intensify anxiety among learners. Additionally, Salsabila (2024) reported that students feel more anxious in formal contexts because of concerns about their proficiency and fear of criticism. These findings suggest that both academic and professional settings contribute to heightened anxiety, as students feel pressured to perform well under scrutiny. The fear of judgment, coupled with high expectations, reinforces their apprehension, highlighting the need for strategies that foster a more supportive and confidence-building speaking environment.

Meeting New People

Meeting New People was another theme identified in responses. Participants expressed anxiety when interacting with unfamiliar individuals, as seen in examples like "When I meet new people" and "Meeting new people." Students often fear that their spoken English might lead to a poor impression, which exacerbates their anxiety. This heightened apprehension stems from the uncertainty of how they will be perceived and the potential judgment about their language skills.

Research supports this observation, highlighting that social interactions involving unfamiliar individuals can significantly amplify anxiety. Gargalianou et al. (2016) found that anxiety in foreign language contexts is influenced by personality traits and gender differences, which can affect how individuals experience social interactions. Similarly, Taly and Paramasivam (2020) noted that international students often face increased anxiety in social settings due to their self-perceived language inadequacies and fear of negative evaluation. These findings underscore that



the pressure to make a positive impression when meeting new people can intensify students' anxiety, particularly when navigating interactions in a second language.

Understanding and Elaborating Ideas

The theme of *Understanding and Elaborating Ideas* was also prominent. Respondents reported feeling anxious when required to explain or elaborate on their thoughts, as indicated by statements like "When I have to elaborate my points" and "Thinking about what idea I need to point out while having conversations." This theme highlights the cognitive demands of articulating ideas clearly in a second language, which can be a source of stress for many students. The fear of not being able to express themselves accurately or fully can lead to anxiety, particularly in academic or formal discussions.

Effiong (2016) observed that anxiety related to peer and teacher perceptions in the classroom reflects students' fear of inadequate expression. This fear is particularly pronounced during formal discussions, where accurate communication is crucial. Taly and Paramasivam (2020) also noted that international students experience significant anxiety stemming from concerns about their ability to convey ideas accurately, especially in evaluative contexts.

Horwitz et al. (1986) reported that students often feel very self-conscious when engaging in speaking activities that reveal their perceived inadequacies, leading to "fear, or even panic" (p. 128). This anxiety is exacerbated by concerns about limited vocabulary or grammatical knowledge, and students frequently cite being called upon unexpectedly in class as a major source of stress. Mulyani (2018) identifies similar sources of anxiety, noting that activities such as asking and answering questions and delivering presentations contribute significantly to students' fears. They often worry about being judged for their mistakes during these activities. Consistent with these findings, the studies highlight how the mental effort required to elaborate on ideas can increase anxiety for students who are apprehensive about their ability to communicate effectively.

Fear of Making Mistakes

The *Fear of Making Mistakes* was another recurring theme in the responses. Participants mentioned being afraid of mispronouncing words, using incorrect grammar, or making errors in general, with examples such as "Afraid of mistakes in pronunciation" and "Afraid of wrong pronouns." This theme underscores the perfectionism that can accompany language learning, where students may feel immense pressure to avoid errors. The fear of making mistakes, especially in public or formal settings, can significantly contribute to their anxiety, as they may worry about negative evaluations or misunderstandings. As mentioned by Sadighi and Dastpak (2017), speaking anxiety may result from poor vocabulary knowledge, which can cause communication issues and might lead to embarrassment when students cannot find the right words to say. In addition, a study by Mohd Nor et al. (2019) also found that respondents were embarrassed by their limited language skills and were afraid of making grammatical errors, which made them hesitant to converse in English.



General Anxiety

Some respondents displayed a *General Anxiety* about speaking English, evident in vague expressions like "Shaking" and "Nothing is impossible." This generalized anxiety may stem from affective factors such as emotions and self-esteem (Oxford, 1990; Shumin, 2002) and is influenced by personality traits. Extroverted individuals tend to experience less anxiety and show more willingness to speak, while introverted individuals may face greater challenges (Brown, 1987; MacIntyre & Thivierge, 1995). This overall anxiety affects students' performance in various speaking situations.

Other Situations

Finally, there were *Other Situations* mentioned by respondents that were less common but still noteworthy. Examples include specific scenarios like "Roleplay" and "When I feel pressure to find the answer." These situations may not be as universally anxiety-inducing as the other themes but still represent unique contexts where certain students feel anxious. Understanding these less common triggers can help in developing more comprehensive strategies to address anxiety in language learning.

The thematic analysis reveals that respondents' anxiety primarily arises from public speaking, formal presentations, exams, impromptu speaking, and interactions with fluent English speakers. The findings align with existing research, emphasizing that fears of negative judgment and mistakes are central to speaking anxiety (Mulyani, 2018; Taly & Paramasivam, 2020). Studies by Sugiyati and Indriani (2021) and Chen (2009) highlight the stress associated with formal speaking situations and the cognitive demands involved. Further, concerns about pronunciation and grammatical errors, as noted by Sadighi and Dastpak (2017) and Mohd Nor et al. (2019), significantly contribute to this anxiety. Additionally, Horwitz et al. (1986) and Effiong (2016) support the view that self-consciousness and fear of inadequate expression are major factors.

This analysis directly addresses the first research question by detailing the specific situations that trigger public speaking anxiety among undergraduate ESL students. The consistent findings across studies reinforce the need for targeted interventions to alleviate anxiety and build students' confidence in speaking English. Understanding how these anxiety sources relate to students' self-rated anxiety levels can inform more personalized support strategies. For example, recognizing the specific contexts that trigger anxiety can help educators design workshops and practice sessions that foster confidence and competence in public speaking.

PSCAS Evaluation

This section presents the findings from the PSCAS evaluation, focusing on the distribution of responses across the four identified factors: Fear of Negative Evaluation (Factor 1), Comfort in Speaking English (Factor 2), Test Anxiety (Factor 3), and Communication Apprehension (Factor 4). Each factor is analyzed based on the frequency of responses to related question items, reported in percentages according to a Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The results are followed by an interpretation of each factor. The analysis concludes with a summary of the factor statistics, providing insights into the overall anxiety levels among the participants.



Factor 1: Fear of Negative Evaluation

Table 5. Results for factor 1 of PSCAS

Likert Scale Range	1 <i>(Strongly Disagree)</i>	2	3	4	5 <i>(Strongly Agree)</i>
PSCAS Factor 1 Items	Percentage (%)				
6. I am afraid that other students will laugh at me while I am speaking English.	12.31	16.92	29.23	23.08	18.46
9. I can feel my heart pounding when I am going to be called on.	1.54	10.77	29.23	33.85	24.62
11. It embarrasses me to volunteer to go out first to speak English	4.62	16.92	40.0	29.23	9.23
14. I feel anxious while I am waiting to speak English.	10.77	21.54	41.54	20.0	6.15
13. Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while I am speaking English.	3.08	13.85	43.08	30.77	9.23
16. I have trouble to coordinate my movements while I am speaking English.	12.31	24.62	40.0	18.46	4.62

Table 5 presents the distribution of responses for Factor 1, which measures the Fear of Negative Evaluation among participants. The responses show that a significant portion of the participants expressed moderate to high levels of fear, particularly for items Q9 and Q11. For Q9, 33.85% of respondents selected option 4, indicating a strong fear of negative evaluation, while 24.62% chose the highest level (5). Similarly, Q11 had 40.0% of participants selecting option 3, and 29.23% selecting option 4, reflecting considerable concern about being negatively evaluated by others.

The high percentages in the 3-5 range suggest that fear of negative evaluation is a prominent source of anxiety among the participants. This finding aligns with broader literature on language anxiety, where fear of negative evaluation is consistently highlighted as a key factor affecting learners'



confidence and willingness to communicate. Studies such as those by Sugiyati and Indriani (2021) and Chen (2009) underscore that fear of negative judgment significantly contributes to public speaking anxiety. Similarly, research by Amir et al. (2022) and Brundage et al. (2017) indicates that concerns about being judged or criticized by more proficient speakers exacerbate language anxiety. Furthermore, Toubot et al. (2018) found that a substantial majority of participants (78.7%) identified fear of negative evaluation as a major contributor to their speaking anxiety, supported by Daud et al. (2019), who noted that fear of making mistakes and subsequent embarrassment are prevalent concerns among students. These studies collectively reinforce the significance of fear of negative evaluation in shaping students' speaking anxiety and highlight the need for interventions that address these specific fears to build learners' confidence and improve their communication skills.

Factor 2: Comfort in Speaking English

Table 6. Results for factor 2 of PSCAS

Likert Scale Range	1 <i>(Strongly Disagree)</i>	2	3	4	5 <i>(Strongly Agree)</i>
PSCAS Factor 2 Items	Percentage (%)				
4. I feel confident while I am speaking English.	3.08	20.0	58.46	13.85	4.62
8. I have no fear of speaking English.	9.23	18.46	41.54	21.54	9.23
10. I feel relaxed while I am speaking English.	4.62	23.08	52.31	15.38	4.62
12. I face the prospect of speaking English with confidence.	1.54	10.77	63.08	21.54	3.08

Table 6 shows the distribution of responses for Factor 2, which assesses participants' Comfort in Speaking English. The results indicate a generally moderate comfort level, with the majority of responses clustered around option 3. For instance, Q4 had 58.46% of respondents choosing option 3, while Q10 showed 52.31% selecting the same option. These figures suggest that while some students are relatively comfortable speaking English, there is still a significant portion that feels only moderately at ease.



The moderate scores across Factor 2 suggest that participants are not entirely uncomfortable with speaking English but also do not exhibit full confidence. This ambivalence may represent a transitional stage where students are becoming more familiar with English usage in different contexts but have not yet attained complete confidence. This finding is consistent with some research highlighting that learners often experience a gradual increase in comfort and proficiency as they gain more experience and positive reinforcement. Creating more opportunities for practice and providing positive reinforcement can help students transition from moderate comfort to greater confidence in speaking English.

Factor 3: Test Anxiety

Table 7. Results for factor 3 of PSCAS

Likert Scale Range	1 <i>(Strongly Disagree)</i>	2	3	4	5 <i>(Strongly Agree)</i>
PSCAS Factor 3 Items	Percentage (%)				
1. I never feel quite sure of myself while I am speaking English.	7.69	23.08	49.23	12.31	7.69
7. I get nervous when the English teacher asks me to speak English which I have prepared in advance.	12.31	24.62	36.92	20.0	6.15
17. Even if I am very well prepared, I feel anxious about speaking English.	7.69	18.46	29.23	33.85	10.77

Table 7 provides the distribution of responses for Factor 3, which evaluates Test Anxiety. The data reveals a notable concentration of responses in the 3-4 range, with Q1 showing 49.23% of participants selecting option 3, and Q17 showing 33.85% selecting option 4. These results indicate that a considerable number of students experience moderate to high anxiety specifically related to speaking tests.

The results for Factor 3 highlight that test anxiety is a significant concern among the participants. The high frequency of responses in the middle to upper ranges suggests that speaking tests are a considerable source of stress. This finding is consistent with the broader literature on language learning, where test anxiety is often cited as a major factor impacting students' performance and overall anxiety levels. For example, the study by Cheng et al. (2014) confirmed that test anxiety is



a prevalent issue among language learners, with speaking tests frequently identified as particularly anxiety-provoking. This aligns with thematic analyses in various studies which identify exams and tests as major triggers for anxiety. To address this issue, strategies such as mock exams and anxiety management workshops have been recommended to help alleviate test-related stress and improve students' performance and confidence (Brown, 1987).

Factor 4: Communication Apprehension

Table 8. Results for factor 4 of PSCAS

Likert Scale Range	1 <i>(Strongly Disagree)</i>	2	3	4	5 <i>(Strongly Agree)</i>
PSCAS Factor 4 Items	Percentage (%)				
2. I start to panic when I have to speak English without preparation in advance.	9.23	18.46	21.54	32.31	18.46
3. In a speaking class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.	1.54	20.0	30.77	35.38	12.31
5. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking English.	4.62	15.38	53.85	23.08	3.08
15. I dislike using my voice and body expressively while I am speaking English.	20.0	24.62	43.08	10.77	1.54

Table 8 illustrates the distribution of responses for Factor 4, which assesses Communication Apprehension. The data shows a varied distribution, with Q3 and Q15 standing out. For Q3, 35.38% of participants chose option 4, while for Q15, 43.08% selected option 3. These results indicate that while some students are highly apprehensive about communicating in English, others are more comfortable, leading to a more balanced distribution across the response options.

The varied responses for Factor 4 suggest that communication apprehension is a significant issue for some students but less so for others. This variation aligns with existing literature on communication apprehension, which identifies it as a common challenge among language learners. For instance, McCroskey (1970) highlights that communication apprehension can vary widely among individuals, with some experiencing high levels of anxiety and others feeling more at ease.



Similarly, research by Horwitz et al. (1986) underscores the role of communication apprehension in impacting students' willingness to engage in speaking activities, noting that individual differences in apprehension levels can significantly affect language learning experiences. The findings suggest that targeted interventions, such as personalized support and skill-building activities, could help address the needs of students with higher apprehension while providing general support to others to enhance their communication confidence (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

Factor Statistics

Table 9. Statistics of all PSCAS factors

Factors	Mean	Standard Deviation
Factor 1: Fear of Negative Evaluation	3.17	1.09
Factor 2: Comfort in Speaking English	3.02	0.87
Factor 3: Test Anxiety	2.98	1.07
Factor 4: Communication Apprehension	3.06	1.08

The overall statistics for each factor are summarized in Table 9. Factor 1 (Fear of Negative Evaluation) had the highest mean score ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.09$), indicating it as the most prevalent anxiety factor among participants. This is followed by Factor 4 (Communication Apprehension) with a mean score of 3.06 ($SD = 1.08$), Factor 2 (Comfort in Speaking English) with a mean of 3.02 ($SD = 0.87$), and Factor 3 (Test Anxiety) with a mean of 2.98 ($SD = 1.07$).

The PSCAS evaluation reveals that Fear of Negative Evaluation is the most significant source of anxiety, followed by Communication Apprehension. Test Anxiety, while present, appears less impactful compared to the other two factors. The variability in responses, indicated by the standard deviations, shows that anxiety levels differ widely among participants. These findings align with broader research on language anxiety, where fear of negative evaluation is frequently identified as a major contributor to anxiety in language learning (Brundage et al., 2017; Toubot et al., 2018; Daud et al., 2019; Bensalem, 2023). In the Malaysian classroom context, Abdullah et al. (2024) highlight that undergraduate students experience significant anxiety due to concerns about being negatively evaluated, particularly in public speaking tasks. McCroskey's (1970) work on communication apprehension also supports these findings, emphasizing its role in affecting language learners' confidence and willingness to communicate. Additionally, research by Amir et al. (2022) suggests that fear of oral presentations is a key factor in Malaysian university students' anxiety, further reinforcing the importance of addressing communication apprehension. The impact of test anxiety, although notable, is less pronounced compared to these other factors, consistent with findings from Horwitz et al. (1986), Amini et al. (2019) and Megawati and Permana (2022), who note that while test anxiety is significant, it often interacts with other forms of anxiety.

These findings directly address the second and third research questions of the study, which focus on assessing anxiety levels and identifying key factors contributing to students' anxiety. The quantitative results reveal varying degrees of anxiety, with fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension being the most prevalent concerns. This aligns with qualitative



responses, where students expressed worry about being judged for their English proficiency and struggling to communicate effectively in high-pressure situations. However, while the survey data indicates that test anxiety is a significant factor, the open-ended responses suggest that students perceive daily interactions and impromptu speaking situations as equally, if not more, anxiety-inducing. This parallel between structured assessment concerns and real-life communication challenges underscores the need for interventions that not only target test-related anxiety but also equip students with strategies for managing everyday speaking situations.

Incorporating humor into language learning can reduce student anxiety and improve engagement. A study by Nurul Hidayana et al. (2024) demonstrated that humor positively influences student engagement ($\chi^2/df = 2.230$, $p < 0.001$) and enjoyment ($\beta = 0.517$, $p < 0.001$). This suggests that humor can alleviate fears of negative evaluation and communication apprehension, fostering a more relaxed learning environment.

Similarly, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2016) found that Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) are distinct yet interconnected emotions. Their research indicated that higher FLE is associated with lower FLCA, highlighting the importance of positive emotions in language learning. They also noted that teacher behaviors significantly impact these emotions, with supportive and encouraging teaching styles enhancing FLE and reducing FLCA.

Given these findings, future research could explore how incorporating humor and fostering positive emotions specifically impact students' speaking anxiety in classroom settings. Investigating their effectiveness in reducing communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation could provide valuable insights for designing more engaging and supportive learning environments.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The PSCAS evaluation highlights the multifaceted nature of public speaking anxiety in ESL learners, with patterns emerging across four factors: Fear of Negative Evaluation, Comfort in Speaking English, Test Anxiety, and Communication Apprehension. Fear of Negative Evaluation is the most significant contributor, with the highest mean score, aligning with research linking anxiety to judgment by others. Communication Apprehension also ranks high, reflecting unease in spontaneous English communication.

Moderate Comfort in Speaking English suggests learners are transitioning toward greater ease but require further practice. Test Anxiety, while least impactful, still poses challenges during assessments. These findings address the research objectives by identifying specific anxiety-triggering situations (RO1), measuring classroom public speaking anxiety levels (RO2), and determining key sources of this anxiety (RO3). Thematic analysis identified specific triggers, such as fear of mistakes and peer pressure, highlighting areas needing intervention. The findings suggest a link between higher Fear of Negative Evaluation and greater self-reported anxiety. Future research could explore how these perceptions influence speaking contexts.



In conclusion, addressing Fear of Negative Evaluation and Communication Apprehension through targeted, supportive interventions can help reduce public speaking anxiety. Ungraded speaking activities and regular practice in non-threatening environments, where students engage in structured yet pressure-free interactions, such as small-group discussions or informal presentations are recommended to build confidence and improve English communication skills. These insights provide a basis for refining teaching strategies to support ESL learners in overcoming anxiety and enhancing their speaking abilities. Additionally, fostering positive classroom dynamics through humor and encouraging Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) may further ease student apprehension and create a more supportive learning environment. Future studies could explore how these strategies impact speaking anxiety and engagement, providing insights into effective pedagogical approaches for reducing language-related stress in ESL classrooms.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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