A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Speaking Anxiety Among Malaysian Undergraduate Students in English-Medium Contexts

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ABSTRACT

In Malaysia, most tertiary education institutions strongly promote the use of English as the primary medium of interaction between students and educators, both inside and outside the classroom. Nevertheless, speaking anxiety remains a persistent challenge among Malaysian undergraduates, particularly within English-medium higher education settings. Despite the nation's long-standing emphasis on English language education, many students continue to experience apprehension during oral communication tasks, which in turn affects their academic performance, classroom participation, and future employability. This conceptual paper draws on theories from second language acquisition, communication studies, and sociocultural linguistics to present a holistic framework that captures the antecedents, mediators, and consequences of speaking anxiety among Malaysian undergraduates. Four interrelated domains—linguistic, psychological, pedagogical, and sociocultural—are synthesised to illustrate how these factors shape students' willingness to communicate and their overall oral performance. The paper concludes with theoretical propositions to guide future empirical research, alongside practical implications for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers. This conceptual contribution is positioned to support future research paper submissions within applied linguistics, communication, and higher education journals.

Keywords: speaking anxiety, Malaysian undergraduates, English-medium higher education, second language acquisition, sociocultural linguistics,

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's multilingual landscape positions English as a crucial linguistic resource for academic success and socioeconomic mobility. Universities increasingly operate under English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) policies, requiring students to engage in oral presentations, discussions, and group projects in English (Gill, 2014). However, many undergraduates still demonstrate reluctance to speak English; citing anxiety, fear of judgment, and perceived inadequacy as the main reasons hindering them from using the language freely (Ramasamy, 2020). Speaking anxiety which commonly is understood as the tension and apprehension related to oral communication, poses challenges not only for academic performance but also for employability, as employers regard spoken English proficiency as a key skill when interviewing their future employees (Shah et al., 2016).

Research on Malaysian learners' speaking anxiety has expanded in recent years, but findings are dispersed across separate domains. Linguistic-focused studies highlight how limited vocabulary, grammar difficulties, and pronunciation concerns heighten anxiety (Tie, 2020; Abdullah & Abdul Rahman, 2018). Psychological perspectives point to low self-efficacy, negative self-beliefs, and reduced confidence as major contributors to speaking apprehension (Miskam & Saidalvi, 2018; Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). Pedagogical investigations emphasise the role of teacher feedback, assessment design, and classroom climate in shaping students' willingness to participate (Yassin, Razak & Maasum, 2019; Tan et al., 2022). Meanwhile, sociocultural studies

reveal how face-saving norms, accent stigma, fear of negative evaluation, and gendered communication expectations shape undergraduates' comfort when using English (Suparia et al., 2022; Khamis, Yunus & Mansor, 2024).

Despite these valuable insights, the literature remains largely compartmentalised. Existing studies tend to isolate linguistic, psychological, pedagogical, or sociocultural factors, limiting understanding of how these dimensions interact to shape speaking anxiety. Addressing this gap, the present conceptual paper synthesises perspectives from second language acquisition, communication studies, and sociocultural linguistics to propose an integrated framework. The model illustrates how multiple domains collectively influence Malaysian undergraduates' speaking anxiety and offers a foundation for more holistic future empirical research.

Problem Statement

Despite at least 11 years of formal English education beginning in primary schools at 7 years old until the completion secondary school at the age of 17, Malaysian undergraduates frequently struggle with oral communication. Several issues persist:

1. **Mismatch between proficiency and expectations:** Lee (2018) identifies a significant gap between Malaysian undergraduates' measured English proficiency and the communicative demands they face in academic settings. While many students demonstrate adequate comprehension of complex written texts, this receptive competence does not reliably extend to spontaneous oral production. In unscripted speaking situations—such as class discussions, impromptu presentations, or peer interactions—students often struggle to retrieve appropriate vocabulary, organise coherent ideas, and maintain fluency under pressure. These difficulties align with findings by Abdullah, Netra, and Hassan (2024), who observed that undergraduates in Malaysia face persistent problems in public speaking due to limited vocabulary, grammatical weaknesses, pronunciation issues, and low confidence. Furthermore, Zamri and Hashim (2024) showed that speaking anxiety among English-major undergraduates is significantly correlated with their overall English proficiency, suggesting that affective factors (such as self-confidence and perceived competence) also play a critical role in shaping oral communicative performance. These studies suggest that improving English proficiency among Malaysian undergraduates requires not only strengthening linguistic knowledge but also addressing psychological barriers and building more opportunities for real-time productive use of English.

2. **High communication apprehension:** Malaysian learners are reported to experience some of the highest rates of foreign language anxiety in Asia (Marwan, 2016). In particular, many students report significant speaking anxiety when required to use English, which can inhibit their performance and participation. For example, Miskam and Saidalvi (2019) found that Malaysian undergraduates exhibited moderate levels of English-speaking anxiety when measured with the Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS), suggesting that fear of negative evaluation and self-perceived limited competence are real barriers to oral communication. More recently, Ahmad and Awang Hashim (2023) reported a similarly moderate but pervasive level of speaking-specific anxiety among 298 Malaysian undergraduates, with students identifying their own perceived lack of language competence as the strongest predictor of anxiety. These findings further support Marwan's (2016) claim and highlight how anxiety continues to be a major issue in Malaysian higher education, particularly around productive oral skills.

3. **Societal perceptions of "good English":** Malaysian students frequently internalise a native-accent ideal, often equating native-like English with prestige, correctness, and social advantage—a phenomenon that Rajadurai (2017) links directly to issues of identity and insecurity. Rajadurai argues that many Malaysian learners feel they must approximate British or American accents to be seen as competent, contributing to a deep sense of linguistic insecurity. This pressure is not confined to the classroom. In the workplace, Abu Bakar and Hashim (2023) found that many Malaysian employees believe they must modify their natural accent where they often suppressing their Malaysian-accented English in professional contexts to be perceived as more competent or credible. At the same time, however, tensions remain. Tan, Lee, Kasuma, and Ganapathy (2018) report that while many undergraduates value their local-accented Malaysian English and recognise its functional importance, they nonetheless regard it as "substandard" compared to native varieties. This discrepancy suggests a persistent ideological hierarchy: local accents

are accepted for day-to-day use, but are judged inadequate for the "ideal" of nativeness. In short, these show how societal perceptions of "good English" in Malaysia are deeply tied to accent bias, perpetuating anxiety, identity challenges, and pronunciation practices aligned more with native standards than with local linguistic realities.

4. **Inconsistent classroom practices:** Inconsistent classroom practices also play a substantial role in heightening learners' speaking anxiety. Suleiman (2021) notes that certain pedagogical routines—such as inflexible presentation formats, teacher-dominated turn-taking, and performance-oriented assessments—can unintentionally intensify students' fear of being evaluated. When learners feel compelled to follow rigid structures or deliver "perfect" presentations, their cognitive load increases, reducing their ability to speak spontaneously and confidently. Similar concerns are echoed in Hassan and Yamat's (2020) study, which found that Malaysian undergraduates experienced heightened anxiety when classroom tasks prioritised accuracy over communicative meaning, leading students to over-focus on grammatical correctness at the expense of fluency. Likewise, Aisyah (2018) reported that classroom environments characterised by strict teacher control and limited peer interaction tended to suppress student participation, with learners expressing fear of making mistakes in front of both teachers and classmates. Hence, it is indicated that classroom practices significantly shape learners' emotional response to speaking tasks. Pedagogical designs that emphasise flexibility, peer collaboration, and process-based speaking are therefore more likely to reduce anxiety and support oral communicative development.

Purpose of the Conceptual Paper

Existing research tends to be fragmented, lacking an integrative model that connects linguistic competence, self-beliefs, EMI classroom dynamics, and cultural expectations. Therefore, this conceptual paper aims to:

1. Review theoretical and empirical literature on speaking anxiety.
2. Identify the major domains influencing Malaysian undergraduates' oral communication anxiety.
3. Develop a conceptual framework integrating these domains.
4. Propose testable propositions to guide future research.

Theoretical Foundations

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Theory (Horwitz et al., 1986)

Horwitz and colleagues define language anxiety as a situation-specific anxiety arising from foreign language learning. Key components include communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. This theory is foundational for understanding the emotional dimension of speaking anxiety.

Communication Apprehension Theory (McCroskey, 1984)

Communication apprehension refers to fear or anxiety associated with real or anticipated communication. McCroskey distinguishes between trait apprehension, context-specific apprehension, audience-based apprehension, and situational apprehension. This theory helps explain why students may speak comfortably with peers but freeze during presentations.

Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1997)

Self-efficacy is one's belief in their ability to perform a task. In oral communication, higher speaking self-efficacy reduces anxiety and increases participation (Woodrow, 2011). Malaysian studies also show that self-efficacy predicts willingness to speak (Zulkifli, 2020).

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982)

Anxiety, low motivation, and lack of confidence raise the "affective filter," blocking language acquisition. Speaking anxiety thus not only affects performance but also long-term learning outcomes.

Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978)

Speaking is socially mediated. Students' identities, peer relationships, and societal norms shape their confidence and communicative behaviour. In Malaysia, linguistic expectations and "accent prestige" norms heavily influence students' willingness to speak.

Key Domains Influencing Speaking Anxiety

Linguistic Factors

Linguistic challenges such as limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, and grammar concerns often trigger anxiety (Ting & Phan, 2008). Malaysian learners commonly feel insecure about sounding "incorrect" or "not fluent enough" (Rajadurai, 2017). Learners' speaking difficulties often stem from a combination of linguistic and contextual factors that constrain their ability to communicate effectively. A limited lexical repertoire frequently restricts students' capacity to express clear ideas, forcing them to rely on repetitive vocabulary or simplified structures, which further undermines confidence during spontaneous speech. Moreover, pronunciation and accent concerns compound these challenges, as learners may fear negative evaluation or feel their accent is "inferior," resulting in heightened self-monitoring and reduced fluency. In addition, many students develop a fixation on grammatical accuracy, prioritising error-free production over communicative meaning. These often interrupt speech flow and increases anxiety, particularly in performance-oriented tasks. Other than that, there are also a lack of real-life speaking opportunities, with many classrooms offering limited chances for authentic interaction beyond rehearsed presentations or controlled practice. These elements create a communicative environment in which learners struggle to speak confidently and spontaneously, reinforcing the cycle of anxiety and limited oral proficiency.

Psychological Factors

Internal emotional and cognitive processes play a crucial role in shaping students' experiences of speaking anxiety. Central to these processes is self-efficacy, defined by Bandura (1997) as individuals' beliefs in their ability to perform specific tasks whereby students with low linguistic self-efficacy often anticipate failure before speaking, which heightens anxiety and reduces engagement. In addition, perfectionism further intensifies this response, as students who strive for flawless performance tend to fixate on potential errors, diverting cognitive resources away from real-time communication. Fear of negative evaluation similarly contributes to anxiety, with learners worrying about how peers, teachers, or evaluators may judge their language ability. These concerns are frequently reinforced by past speaking failures, which can create emotional imprints that shape future expectations and avoidance behaviours. These factors influence students' willingness to communicate, often lowering their readiness to initiate or participate in oral interactions. Thus, students with low self-confidence are more likely to avoid speaking tasks, perpetuating a cycle of silence and anxiety.

Pedagogical and Classroom Factors

Classroom climate exerts a significant influence on learners' speaking anxiety, either solving or worsening it depending on the learning environment (Woodrow, 2011). Teacher behaviour is a central factor: supportive, encouraging instructors tend to foster confidence and reduce apprehension, whereas intimidating or overly critical behaviour can heighten anxiety. Peer interaction norms also shape emotional responses, as collaborative and non-judgmental interactions create safer spaces for practice, while competitive or evaluative peer dynamics can increase fear of negative evaluation. The style of assessment further affects anxiety levels, with high-stakes speaking tasks often provoking tension, whereas low-stakes, formative tasks allow learners to experiment and build confidence. Various Malaysian studies show that supportive lecturers significantly reduce anxiety (Ramasamy, 2020). Thus, effective instructional scaffolding, such as modelling language use, guiding planning, or providing structured prompts, helps learners manage cognitive load and reduces the pressure of real-time speaking. Additionally, ample opportunities for rehearsal, including repeated practice in supportive contexts, enable learners to consolidate skills and gradually overcome performance-related stress.

In conclusion, these classroom factors interact to shape whether learners experience speaking activities as threatening or empowering.

Sociocultural Factors

Malaysia's multilingual context and entrenched accent hierarchies significantly shape learners' self-perception and experiences of speaking anxiety. Social pressure to speak "good English," often defined in terms of native-like pronunciation and grammar, can create intense fear of losing face, particularly in public or formal settings. This causes students to be acutely aware of potential judgement from peers, which reinforces self-monitoring and hesitancy during oral communication. These pressures are further compounded by urban–rural disparities in English exposure, as students from rural areas often have fewer opportunities to interact with proficient speakers, limiting both linguistic competence and confidence. Underlying these dynamics are pervasive ideologies of native-speakerism, which elevate native-like English as the ideal standard while devaluing local-accented varieties. These pressures heighten fear of making mistakes, particularly in public speaking contexts. Hence, these societal and linguistic factors contribute to heightened anxiety and a sense of inadequacy among Malaysian learners in English-speaking contexts.

PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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The core relationships include:

1. Linguistic competence, psychological traits, pedagogical practices, and sociocultural expectations interact to shape speaking anxiety.
2. Self-efficacy, fear of negative evaluation, and perceived peer support operate as mediators.
3. Classroom climate, lecturer support, and prior speaking experiences serve as moderators.
4. Speaking anxiety influences willingness to communicate and oral performance.

Propositions For Future Research

1. Linguistic competence negatively predicts speaking anxiety among Malaysian undergraduates.
2. Fear of negative evaluation mediates the relationship between linguistic competence and speaking anxiety.
3. Speaking self-efficacy negatively predicts speaking anxiety regardless of proficiency level.
4. Supportive classroom climate moderates the relationship between speaking anxiety and oral performance.
5. Sociocultural pressure for native-like English use positively predicts speaking anxiety.
6. Speaking anxiety negatively predicts willingness to communicate in English.
7. Students with negative prior speaking experiences exhibit stronger links between fear of evaluation and anxiety.

Implications

Teachers play a pivotal role in mitigating speaking anxiety by creating supportive and low-pressure learning environments. Incorporating low-stakes speaking activities, such as brief pair discussions or informal presentations, allows learners to practice without fear of harsh evaluation, gradually building confidence

(Woodrow, 2011; Suleiman, 2021). Constructive, non-threatening feedback that highlights strengths while gently addressing errors encourages risk-taking and reduces the fear of negative evaluation. Additionally, scaffolding techniques—such as modelling target language use, structured prompts, and group rehearsals—help learners organise ideas and manage cognitive load, fostering more fluent and confident oral performance (Bandura, 1997; Hassan & Yamat, 2020).

Next, curriculum design can further support speaking proficiency by integrating communication skills modules across disciplines, ensuring that learners engage in oral practice beyond language-specific courses. Establishing dedicated language support units, such as conversation labs, coaching sessions, or peer-led discussion groups, provides structured opportunities for rehearsal and personalised guidance (Ahmad & Awang Hashim, 2023). Such initiatives not only reinforce linguistic competence but also promote learner autonomy and reduce anxiety by normalising mistakes as part of the learning process.

Lastly, at the policy level, aligning English-medium instruction (EMI) policies with student readiness is crucial to prevent undue stress and speaking anxiety. Policymakers should consider phased or scaffolded EMI approaches that account for learners' existing proficiency levels and provide targeted support where needed (Rajadurai, 2017). Interventions addressing rural–urban disparities in English exposure—such as resource allocation for under-served schools, teacher training, and access to language technology—can help ensure equitable opportunities for oral development, reducing systemic barriers that contribute to anxiety and limited communicative competence.

CONCLUSION

Speaking anxiety among Malaysian undergraduates is a multidimensional issue shaped by linguistic, psychological, pedagogical, and sociocultural factors. By integrating these domains, the conceptual framework presented in this paper offers a holistic understanding of the conditions that promote or hinder oral communication in English. Future empirical studies can adopt this model to design more targeted interventions that reduce anxiety and enhance communicative competence.

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