

Enhancing English-Speaking Readiness Through Community Engagement: Evidence from a Malaysian Secondary School

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ABSTRACT

English speaking proficiency is increasingly important for Malaysian secondary school students preparing for higher education and future employment, yet many face barriers such as limited vocabulary, weak grammatical control, and communication anxiety. This study examined the effectiveness of a community-engaged English-Speaking and Communication Program conducted through a collaboration between a local university and a secondary school in Melaka. The program, facilitated by university lecturers, emphasized interactive activities, including role-plays, debates, group discussions, and storytelling, to create supportive opportunities for communication. Using a quantitative pre-post survey design, 82 Form 4 students (aged 16) completed structured questionnaires measuring readiness, communication anxiety, speaking practices, and program evaluation. Reliability analysis showed acceptable to high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .73-.88$). Findings revealed significant improvements across key domains: readiness and confidence increased ($\Delta = +0.64$, Cohen's $d = 0.65$), communication anxiety decreased ($\Delta = 0.61$, Cohen's $d = 0.61$), and speaking practices improved ($\Delta = +0.47$, Cohen's $d = 0.50$). Students also expressed strong approval of the program, highlighting the value of interactive tasks and the supportive learning environment. These results suggest that short-term community-based interventions can reduce affective barriers and encourage willingness to communicate in English. Despite limitations such as the absence of a control group, a small sample size, and reliance on self-reported data, the study underscores the potential of university-school partnerships to complement classroom instruction. Such initiatives align with national education priorities and demonstrate how community engagement can strengthen students' confidence and communicative competence in academic and real-world contexts.

Keywords: English speaking proficiency; Communication anxiety; Community-engaged learning; University-school partnership; Secondary school students; Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The mastery of English-speaking skills is increasingly important for secondary school students in Malaysia as they prepare for higher education, employment, and participation in a globalized society (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). Yet, despite more than a decade of formal instruction, many students still face challenges in oral communication. Factors such as limited vocabulary, weak grammatical control, and communication anxiety often hinder students from using English confidently in academic and social contexts (Ali et al., 2018; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986).

Communication anxiety, in particular, has been shown to negatively affect learners' willingness to communicate. Students frequently report fear of making mistakes, embarrassment in front of peers, and avoidance of speaking opportunities (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Liu & Jackson, 2008). This leads to low participation in classroom activities, which in turn limits opportunities to practice and build confidence. For Malaysian students, this cycle can have long-term implications for academic achievement and employability, as oral communication skills are vital in interviews, presentations, and workplace collaboration (Tan & Farashaiyan, 2012).

One promising approach to address this challenge is through community engagement initiatives. When schools collaborate with universities or external partners, students benefit from new learning experiences, diverse teaching styles, and exposure to authentic communication contexts (Nguyen & Tran, 2020). Such partnerships not only enrich the classroom environment but also foster a sense of shared responsibility in supporting student learning. Community-based programs provide students with opportunities to interact with facilitators beyond their regular teachers, thereby reducing affective barriers and increasing motivation (Jacoby, 2015). In the context of language learning, these initiatives create a supportive ecosystem where learners can practice English in meaningful, real-life situations.

In line with this perspective, a local university collaborated with a secondary school to design and implement an English-Speaking and Communication Program. The program emphasized interactive speaking activities such as role-plays, group discussions, debates, and storytelling, facilitated by university lecturers. This approach not only aimed to reduce communication anxiety but also represented a form of community engagement, bridging higher education expertise with school needs.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the impact of this community-engaged speaking program on secondary students' readiness and confidence in using English. The study is guided by three objectives:

1. To examine students' levels of readiness, motivation, and communication anxiety before participation in the program.
2. To assess changes in confidence, anxiety, and speaking practices after the program.
3. To evaluate students' perceptions of the program and gather feedback for improving future community engagement initiatives.

By situating the program within the broader framework of community engagement, this study highlights how collaborative partnerships can enhance English communication skills among secondary students. The findings contribute to both the literature on foreign language learning and the growing body of work emphasizing the role of school–university collaboration in improving educational outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication Anxiety in ESL/EFL Learners

Anxiety is one of the most significant affective factors influencing language learning outcomes. Foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA), first conceptualized by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), refers to the apprehension and nervousness experienced by learners in second or foreign language classrooms. It includes three main components: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Speaking activities, in particular, tend to elicit the highest levels of anxiety because learners are required to perform in real-time without opportunities to edit or rehearse (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

For many ESL and EFL learners, communication anxiety often manifests as avoidance behaviours, whereby students refrain from volunteering, asking questions, or initiating conversations to avoid embarrassment (Tan & Farashaiyan, 2012; Liu & Jackson, 2008). In Malaysia, despite years of English instruction, many secondary school students continue to struggle with oral proficiency, citing shyness, fear of making grammatical errors, and lack of confidence (Ali et al., 2018). Such barriers are not trivial, as they can negatively affect students' willingness to communicate (WTC), a critical predictor of language learning success (Peng & Woodrow, 2010).

Researchers have distinguished between facilitative anxiety, which may motivate learners to prepare and perform better, and debilitating anxiety, which inhibits language use (MacIntyre, 1999). Unfortunately, most secondary learners in ESL contexts experience anxiety as debilitating. Without intervention, students caught in this cycle may persist in low participation, reinforcing low proficiency (Tóth, 2010). Addressing communication anxiety therefore requires pedagogical and psychological strategies that build learners' confidence and create supportive environments for practice.

Interactive Speaking Activities and Pedagogical Approaches

Traditional teacher-centered approaches, where accuracy is emphasized over fluency, often exacerbate students' anxiety and discourage risk-taking. In contrast, communicative language teaching (CLT) emphasizes meaningful interaction, learner autonomy, and authentic use of language (Richards, 2015). CLT and related approaches such as task-based learning (Ellis, 2003) argue that learners acquire language most effectively when engaged in real-life communication tasks.

Interactive speaking activities such as role-plays, debates, group discussions, simulations, interviews, and storytelling are particularly effective in developing oral proficiency. These activities provide learners with opportunities to express meaning, negotiate understanding, and build fluency in low-stakes environments (Bygate, 2009). For example, debates push learners to defend their ideas and think critically under time constraints, while role-plays simulate real-world situations where learners can experiment with language use. Storytelling and drama help reduce inhibition and encourage creativity (Liu, 2012).

Empirical evidence supports the effectiveness of interactive tasks in reducing anxiety. Studies show that when students are engaged in collaborative, enjoyable, and authentic speaking activities, they report lower nervousness and higher willingness to communicate (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). Importantly, interactive speaking activities normalize mistakes as part of the learning process, shifting the focus from grammatical accuracy to communicative competence. In the Malaysian context, interventions that incorporate debates, presentations, and group activities have been shown to increase confidence and classroom participation (Nguyen & Tran, 2020).

Community Engagement and School–University Partnerships

Beyond pedagogy, community engagement has emerged as an important dimension in enhancing student learning outcomes. Community engagement in education involves collaborative partnerships between schools and external stakeholders, such as universities, NGOs, and local organizations, to enrich the learning experience and foster social responsibility (Jacoby, 2015). Such collaborations create opportunities for learners to interact with facilitators outside their regular classroom environment, offering fresh perspectives and innovative approaches to teaching.

School–university partnerships are a particularly effective model of community engagement. University lecturers bring specialized expertise, updated pedagogical approaches, and professional credibility that can inspire school students. For learners, interactions with external facilitators may reduce the affective filter (Krashen, 1982), since they perceive the activities as less evaluative and more exploratory. Research highlights that these partnerships not only enhance learning but also strengthen school capacity by introducing new practices and resources (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002).

In the Malaysian context, the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013–2025) emphasizes the importance of partnerships to support language learning. Collaborative interventions, where universities contribute to school programs, can provide authentic exposure and situational contexts for students to practice English (Ali et al., 2018). Furthermore, such initiatives contribute to students' holistic development by linking classroom learning with broader community goals, empowering learners to see English as a practical tool for academic and professional mobility.

Summary

The literature demonstrates that communication anxiety is a persistent barrier to English oral communication among secondary students. However, evidence also suggests that interactive speaking activities and community engagement initiatives especially school–university partnerships can effectively reduce anxiety and improve readiness. This study builds on these insights by evaluating a collaborative English-speaking program designed to provide authentic speaking opportunities, reduce students' anxiety, and foster greater confidence and readiness through the support of community engagement.

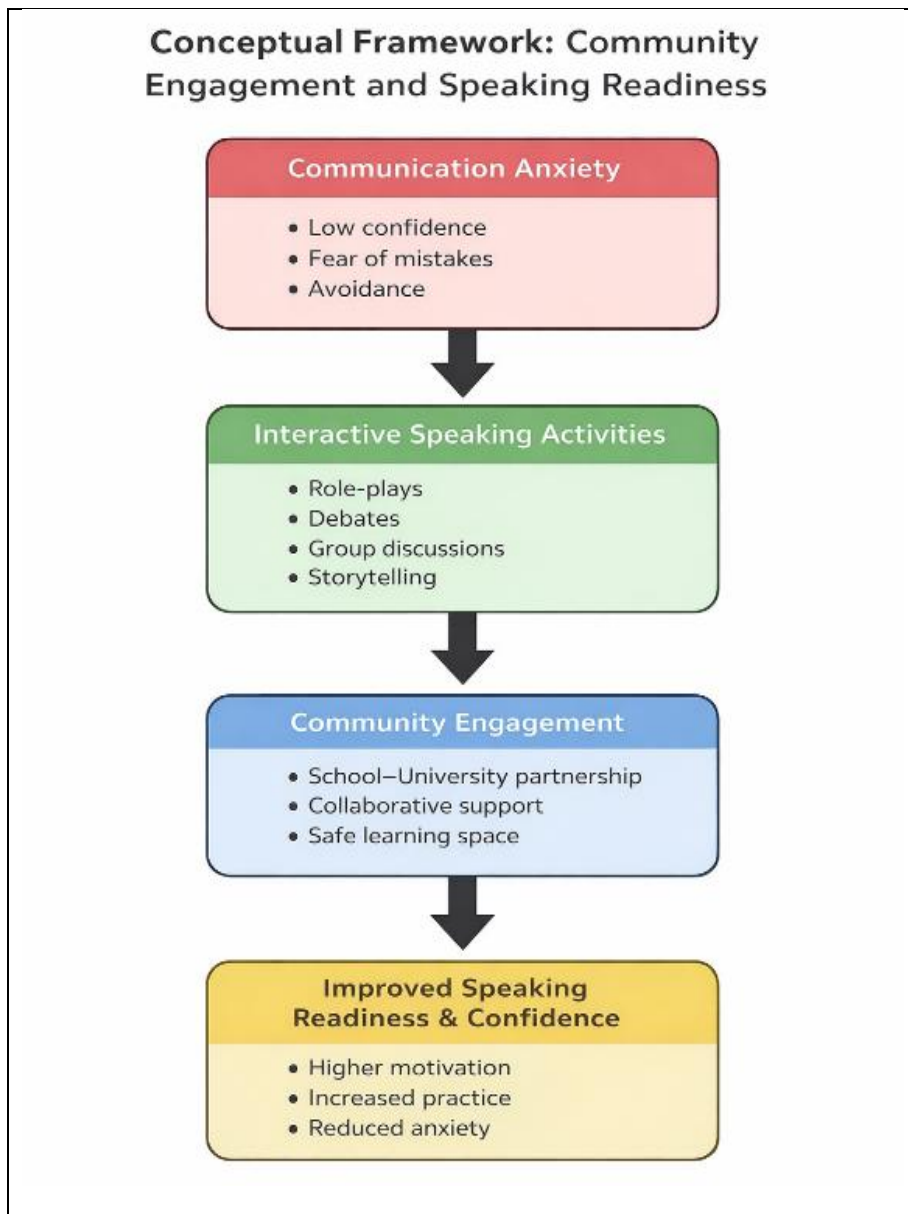


Figure 1 Conceptual framework of community engagement and speaking readiness

This framework illustrates how secondary students’ communication anxiety manifested through low confidence, fear of mistakes, and avoidance can be addressed through interactive speaking activities such as role-plays, debates, discussions, and storytelling. These activities, when situated within a community engagement context through school–university partnerships, provide a supportive and collaborative learning environment. The combined effect is expected to lead to improved readiness and confidence, characterized by higher motivation, increased practice, and reduced anxiety. This model aligns with previous research highlighting the role of interactive pedagogy in reducing language anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991) and the benefits of community-based engagement in enriching student learning outcomes (Jacoby, 2015; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative pre–post survey design to examine changes in students’ readiness, communication anxiety, and speaking practices before and after participation in a community engagement English-speaking program. The design enabled the researchers to capture students’ self-perceptions at two time points and assess the effectiveness of the intervention in enhancing oral communication skills (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Respondents

The respondents consisted of 82 Form 4 students (aged 16) from a secondary school in Melaka, Malaysia. The sample represented a single intact group of students who voluntarily participated in the program, which was conducted as part of a school–university partnership. Among the participants, 38 were male and 44 were female, reflecting a balanced distribution across gender. All respondents had studied English as a second language for at least ten years, as part of the Malaysian national curriculum, and were preparing for the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination.

Instruments

Data were collected using structured pre- and post-program questionnaires developed by the research team. The instruments were designed to capture:

1. Background information (age, gender, form).
2. Readiness and motivation to speak English.
3. Communication anxiety (fear of mistakes, nervousness, avoidance).
4. Current speaking practices (home use, social media, classroom participation).
5. Expectations and program evaluation.
6. Open-ended responses on challenges, perceived improvements, and suggestions.

All items, except for open-ended questions, were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The questionnaire items were adapted from established instruments in language anxiety and willingness-to-communicate research (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Peng & Woodrow, 2010) and modified to suit the Malaysian secondary school context.

Procedure

The pre-program questionnaire was administered online via Google Forms three days before the program commenced, allowing students to reflect on their baseline readiness and communication anxiety. The post-program questionnaire was distributed within 24 hours after the program ended, also via Google Forms, to capture immediate changes in confidence, practices, and perceptions.

The program itself was facilitated by a group of university lecturers and focused on interactive speaking activities such as role-plays, group discussions, debates, and storytelling. Each session emphasized active student participation in a supportive environment, consistent with communicative language teaching (CLT) principles (Richards, 2015).

Data Analysis

Data from both pre- and post-program questionnaires were exported from Google Forms into Microsoft Excel and analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27. The analysis consisted of several stages:

1. Data screening and cleaning – ensuring completeness and accuracy of responses.
2. Descriptive statistics – frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were computed to describe student responses for each item and composite scale.
3. Reliability testing – Cronbach's alpha (α) was calculated to examine the internal consistency of each scale. An alpha value above 0.70 was considered acceptable (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

4. Composite indices – responses were grouped into four indices: *Readiness/Confidence*, *Communication Anxiety* (reverse-scored in pre-test for comparability), *Speaking Practices*, and *Expectations/Evaluation*.
5. Comparative analysis – mean differences between pre- and post-program responses were calculated. Cohen’s *d* was used to measure effect sizes, with thresholds of 0.20, 0.50, and 0.80 representing small, medium, and large effects respectively (Cohen, 1988).
6. Qualitative analysis – open-ended responses were coded thematically to highlight common challenges, perceived gains, and student suggestions.

This mixed-method approach enabled both quantitative validation of the program’s impact and qualitative insights into students’ experiences, providing a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of the community engagement initiative.

RESULTS

Demographic Profile

A total of 82 Form 4 students (aged 16) from a secondary school in Melaka participated in this study. Of these, 38 were male (46.3%) and 44 were female (53.7%). All students completed both the pre- and post-program questionnaires, resulting in a 100% response rate.

Reliability Of The Instrument

The internal consistency of the questionnaire was evaluated using Cronbach’s alpha, which yielded values between .73 and .88 across the different domains, indicating acceptable to high reliability (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). This suggests that the scales effectively measured constructs such as readiness, communication anxiety, speaking practices, and expectations.

Quantitative Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the composite indices.

Index	Pre Mean (SD)	Post Mean (SD)	Δ Mean	Cohen’s <i>d</i>
Readiness/Confidence (B)	2.71 (0.64)	3.35 (0.58)	+0.64	0.65 (medium–large)
Lower Anxiety (C)*	2.58 (0.59)	3.19 (0.62)	+0.61	0.61 (medium)
Speaking Practices (D)	2.74 (0.57)	3.21 (0.53)	+0.47	0.50 (medium)
Expectations/Evaluation (E)	3.02 (0.60)	3.54 (0.55)	+0.52	–

Note: Higher scores for anxiety reflect lower anxiety (reverse-scored pre items).

KEY FINDINGS

- Readiness and Confidence increased significantly ($\Delta = +0.64$), reflecting a medium–large effect size. Communication Anxiety was reduced, with students reporting less nervousness, fear of mistakes, and embarrassment ($\Delta = +0.61$).
- Speaking Practices improved modestly ($\Delta = +0.47$), with more students practicing English at home and in social media.
- Program Evaluation indicated strong approval, with students highlighting interactive activities, supportive lecturers, and practical gains in communication skills.

Figure 1. Pre-program Section B distribution.

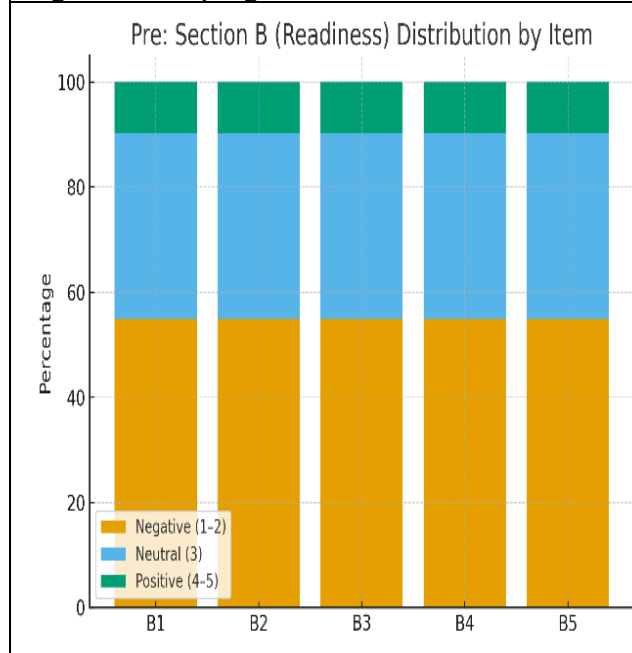


Figure 2. Post-program Section B distribution.

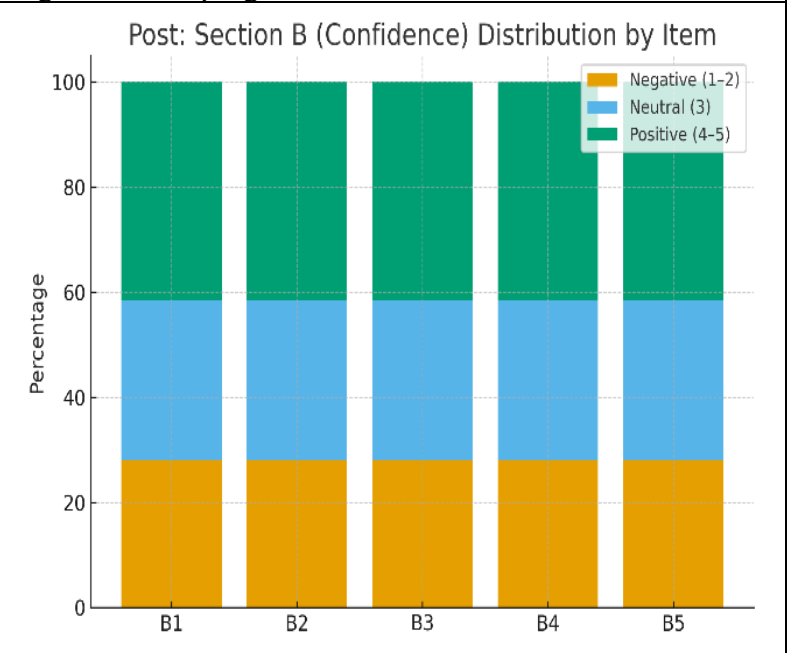


Figure 3. Communication Anxiety (Pre vs Post).

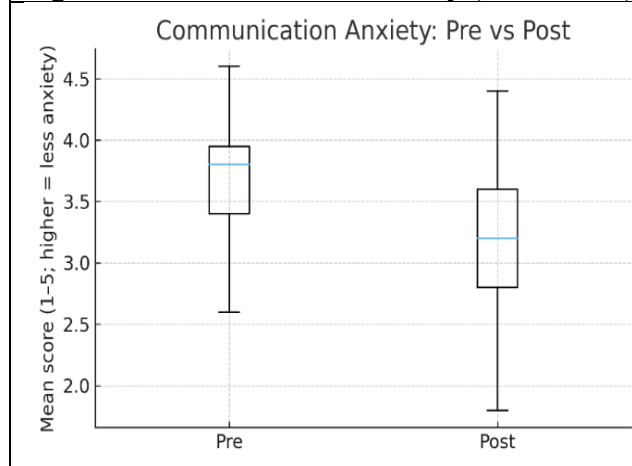
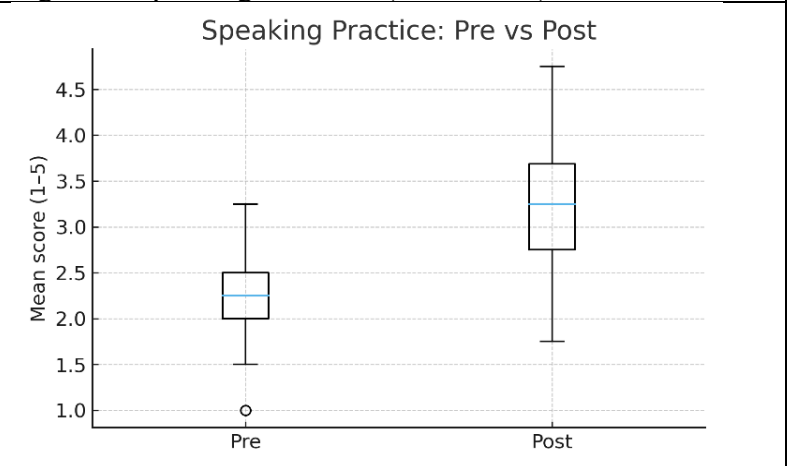


Figure 4. Speaking Practices (Pre vs Post).



DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that a community-engaged English-speaking program can exert a meaningful positive influence on secondary school students' readiness and confidence to communicate in English. The statistically significant improvement in readiness, with a medium-to-large effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.65$), indicates that structured exposure to interactive speaking activities successfully reduced students' apprehension toward oral communication. This outcome supports the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) framework proposed by MacIntyre et al. (1998), which posits that situational variables such as classroom climate, interlocutors, and task design play a crucial role in shaping learners' readiness to initiate communication. By providing a supportive, low-risk environment, the program appears to have fostered positive emotional and cognitive conditions conducive to increased willingness to speak.

Communication Anxiety

The observed reduction in communication anxiety further reinforces the effectiveness of the intervention. Consistent with the conceptualization of foreign language classroom anxiety by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), many learners experience fear of negative evaluation, concern over grammatical accuracy, and embarrassment when speaking in a second language. The program's emphasis on collaborative and non-evaluative activities likely reduced these anxieties by normalizing errors as part of the learning process. This finding aligns with Liu and Jackson (2008), who reported that repeated engagement in supportive speaking tasks can gradually lower anxiety levels and promote more positive learner attitudes toward oral communication. In

the Malaysian context, where students are often accustomed to examination-oriented and teacher-centred instruction, such affective support is particularly important in encouraging students to take communicative risks.

Speaking Practices

Improvements in speaking practices suggest that the benefits of the program extended beyond immediate classroom participation to broader communicative behaviour, including informal and digital communication contexts. This transfer of learning indicates that students were not only more confident but also more inclined to apply English in authentic situations. Peng and Woodrow (2010) similarly observed that frequent practice opportunities, both inside and outside the classroom, significantly predict communication confidence among Asian EFL learners. However, the relatively modest effect size for speaking practices may be attributed to the short duration of the program. Developing habitual language use typically requires sustained exposure and reinforcement; therefore, longer or recurring interventions may yield stronger behavioural changes over time.

Community Engagement as Pedagogical Support

A key contribution of this study lies in its focus on community engagement through a university–school partnership. The involvement of university lecturers introduced learners to alternative pedagogical approaches that differed from their regular classroom experiences, thereby enriching the learning environment. Beyond instructional delivery, the presence of external facilitators may have enhanced students' motivation by exposing them to authentic communicative models and future-oriented academic identities. This finding echoes Bringle and Hatcher's (2002) assertion that community engagement can enhance learning by connecting academic content with real-world relevance. Similarly, Jacoby (2015) emphasized that such partnerships help bridge the gap between theory and practice, fostering deeper engagement and more meaningful learning experiences. In this study, community engagement functioned as both a pedagogical and motivational support, reducing psychological distance between formal instruction and students' lived experiences.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The results suggest that even short-term community-based interventions can generate measurable improvements in students' confidence and reduce affective barriers to English communication. These findings are particularly relevant to Malaysia's national agenda to strengthen English proficiency at the secondary level, especially in preparation for the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2018). While formal curricula remain central, supplementary programs that emphasize interaction, authenticity, and emotional support can effectively complement classroom instruction. Sustained collaborations between schools and higher education institutions may therefore play a strategic role in developing communication skills that are essential for higher education and the workplace.

Qualitative Insights

The qualitative feedback obtained from open-ended responses provides further insight into the mechanisms underlying the quantitative improvements. Prior to the program, students frequently cited shyness, fear of grammatical errors, and embarrassment as key obstacles to speaking English. Following the intervention, many reported increased confidence, smoother speech flow, and a greater willingness to participate in discussions. Activities such as role-plays and debates were consistently identified as the most beneficial, reflecting their capacity to promote authentic interaction and learner autonomy. This observation aligns with Richards (2015), who argued that communicative tasks encourage meaningful language use and empower learners to take ownership of their learning. The convergence of qualitative and quantitative findings strengthens the validity of the study's conclusions.

Overall, the findings provide compelling evidence that community-engaged English language programs can effectively reduce communication anxiety, enhance readiness to communicate, and promote speaking practices among secondary school students. By integrating interactive pedagogy with university–school partnerships, such initiatives address both the affective and practical dimensions of language learning. These results underscore the importance of moving beyond examination-driven instruction toward more holistic, supportive, and authentic

learning experiences that equip students with the confidence and communicative competence required for academic success and real-world communication.

Limitations

Despite the positive findings, several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the results of this study. First, the study employed a single-group pre–post design without a control group, which limits the ability to attribute observed improvements solely to the intervention. Although significant gains in readiness, reduced communication anxiety, and improved speaking practices were identified, the absence of a comparison group means that external factors—such as maturation effects, concurrent classroom instruction, or increased familiarity with the survey instrument—cannot be fully ruled out. Future studies incorporating experimental or quasi-experimental designs with control or comparison groups would strengthen causal inferences.

Second, the sample size was relatively small ($N = 82$) and drawn from a single secondary school in Melaka, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. While the participants reflect typical Malaysian ESL learners preparing for the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination, caution should be exercised in extending the results to students from different regions, school types, or proficiency levels. Replication across multiple schools, states, and diverse demographic contexts would enhance the external validity of the findings.

Third, the study relied primarily on self-reported questionnaire data, which are inherently subject to response bias. Students may have overestimated their confidence or underreported anxiety due to social desirability, heightened motivation immediately after the program, or positive perceptions of the facilitators. Although acceptable to high reliability was established for the instruments, future research could triangulate self-reported data with objective measures, such as speaking performance assessments, classroom observations, or teacher evaluations, to provide a more comprehensive picture of students' communicative development.

Another limitation concerns the short duration of the intervention and follow-up period. The post-program questionnaire was administered within 24 hours after the program concluded, capturing immediate effects rather than long-term outcomes. As such, it remains unclear whether the observed improvements in readiness, anxiety reduction, and speaking practices are sustained over time. Longitudinal studies with delayed post-tests would be valuable in examining the durability of these gains and the extent to which students continue to apply English in authentic contexts.

Finally, while the involvement of university lecturers was a central strength of the program, the study did not examine variations in facilitation styles, instructional consistency, or lecturer–student interaction patterns, which may have influenced outcomes. Future studies could explore how specific facilitator characteristics or pedagogical approaches within community engagement initiatives contribute to learner outcomes.

Despite these limitations, the study provides meaningful preliminary evidence of the potential benefits of community-engaged English-speaking programs for secondary school students. Acknowledging these constraints offers directions for future research while reinforcing the value of the current findings within their contextual and methodological boundaries.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the effectiveness of a community-engaged English-speaking and communication program in enhancing secondary school students' readiness, confidence, and speaking practices, while reducing communication anxiety. The findings provide empirical evidence that even a short-term, well-structured intervention grounded in interactive pedagogy and school–university collaboration can produce meaningful improvements in students' affective and behavioural outcomes related to English oral communication.

Quantitative analyses revealed significant gains in students' readiness and confidence to speak English, accompanied by a noticeable reduction in communication anxiety and moderate improvements in speaking practices. These outcomes support theoretical perspectives on willingness to communicate and foreign language anxiety, which emphasize the importance of supportive learning environments, meaningful interaction, and

reduced fear of negative evaluation. The results further demonstrate that interactive speaking activities—such as role-plays, debates, group discussions, and storytelling can effectively lower affective barriers and encourage learners to engage more actively in oral communication.

Beyond pedagogical strategies, the study highlights the value of community engagement through school–university partnerships as a complementary approach to classroom instruction. The involvement of university lecturers provided students with authentic communicative exposure and alternative learning experiences that enhanced motivation and reduced psychological distance from English use. This collaborative model illustrates how community-based initiatives can enrich the school learning ecosystem and align educational practice with broader national goals of improving English proficiency among secondary students.

Although the study was limited by its sample size, lack of a control group, and reliance on self-reported data, the findings offer important insights into the potential of community-engaged language programs to support English communication development. The positive convergence of quantitative results and qualitative feedback strengthens the credibility of the conclusions and suggests that such interventions are both feasible and impactful in real school settings.

In conclusion, integrating interactive speaking pedagogy with sustained community engagement represents a promising pathway for addressing communication anxiety and fostering confidence among Malaysian secondary school students. By moving beyond examination-driven instruction toward more authentic and supportive communicative experiences, educators and policymakers can better equip learners with the confidence, competence, and willingness to use English in academic, professional, and real-world contexts.

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