

An Investigation into Secondary Learners' English-Speaking Anxiety: Levels and Attitudinal Correlates

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ABSTRACT

Speaking anxiety is a critical affective barrier to second language oral performance, particularly in high-stakes assessments. This study examined English-speaking anxiety and its relationship with attitudes toward speaking English among Malaysian secondary school students preparing for the SPM English Speaking Test. 60 Form 4 students from Melaka participated in a one-day speaking workshop, with data collected using the English-Speaking Anxiety Scale (ESAS) adapted from Ran et al. (2022). Descriptive statistics revealed that most students (85%) reported *moderate* speaking anxiety, while 15% experienced *low* anxiety and none reported *high* anxiety ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 0.29$). The most prominent concern was self-doubt in achieving oral proficiency, whereas conversational exchanges in English were perceived as less difficult. Pearson's correlation analysis indicated a weak, non-significant positive relationship between students' attitudes toward English speaking and their speaking anxiety ($r = .17$, $p = .19$), suggesting that positive attitudes alone may not effectively reduce anxiety. These findings highlight that speaking anxiety remains a persistent challenge in exam-focused ESL contexts and that learners' attitudes, while important, may not strongly predict anxiety levels. Instead, factors such as self-efficacy, exam-related pressures, and coping strategies are likely more influential. The study underscores the need for interventions such as low-stakes speaking practice, collaborative learning, and confidence-building activities to help reduce anxiety and enhance oral performance in ESL classrooms.

Keywords: Speaking anxiety, Attitudes, ESL, Malaysian context

INTRODUCTION

Speaking tasks often generate anxiety in language classrooms. Characterised by nervousness, avoidance, fear of failures, and apprehension for negative judgements, these experiences fall under the broader construct of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), a term firstly introduced by E.K Horwitz et al (1986). FLA concerns all four skills of language involving reading, listening, speaking, and writing. However, speaking, in particular, presents distinct challenges for foreign and second language learners, who are required to think, process, and respond in real time while possibly being evaluated by peers or teachers. Research has long documented the effects of speaking anxiety to fluency, oral performance, and overall communicative competence (E. Horwitz, 2001; Woodrow, 2006; Shomoosi et al, 2009; Liu, 2018; Muftah 2023, Yazi, Amat Esa, & Mohd Noor, 2023). However, the studies are mainly in EFL context and conducted with university students.

Among the multiple variables associated with speaking anxiety, learner attitudes toward the target language and speaking have received significant attention. Attitudes are associated with how learners perceive speaking tasks and opportunities, which in turn affect their self-confidence and willingness to communicate. Learners

with positive attitudes will be more willing to take risks, while negative attitudes can exacerbate fear and avoidance. This is not a simple causation, because one can argue that the direction could be in reverse, that competence and achievements in language promote positive attitude and motivation in learning and participation. However, Gardner (2006) asserts that the direction of causality is immaterial to the discussion, explaining that studying correlations can reveal probabilities linking the two variables. For instance, finding a negative correlation between attitude and speaking anxiety shows that there is an increased probability that learners with negative attitudes experience heightened anxiety. In this case, understanding the interaction between the two variables is still valuable to the literature, as well as informing language practice in the classroom.

In Malaysian context, English is taught as a second language and plays an essential role in education, higher learning, and employment opportunities. For secondary schools, students are required to sit for the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) English Speaking Test, a compulsory component of the national examination system. This places additional pressure on students to perform. In response, Malaysian schools have increasingly implemented speaking-focused workshops to prepare students for the SPM oral test. Preparations and rehearsals may reasonably allow for better oral performance, however a study (Zulkflee et al, 2023) conducted among candidates of Malaysian University English Test (MUET) taking the MUET speaking test revealed that the Form 6 participants in the study reported higher anxiety than the Diploma students. This opens up discussions about “overlearning” to meet testing standards, because the Diploma candidates only had 10 weeks to prepare as opposed to the Form 6 students who had a year.

Despite growing research and interest in language learning anxiety and communicative competence, there is still limited research about speaking anxiety and the link between attitudes and speaking anxiety among Malaysian secondary students in the ESL context. The present study therefore seeks to fill this gap by addressing these two questions:

What are the levels of speaking anxiety among secondary students in a secondary school in Melaka?

Is there a correlation between students’ English-speaking attitude and their speaking anxiety?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Second Language Anxiety and Speaking Anxiety

Second language anxiety (SLA) refers to a form of anxiety characterised by tension, worry, and apprehension uniquely related to second or foreign language learning and use. It arises from self-perceptions, beliefs, and fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz, 1986). It interferes with cognitive processes, such as attention, memory, and language performance in tasks like speaking, listening, and learning (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Speaking anxiety often stems from learners’ fear of negative evaluation, which may lead to physiological symptoms, such as sweating, trembling, rapid heartbeat, and avoidance behaviours such as reluctance to speak or participate in classroom interactions (Horwitz, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Also, according to Horwitz (1986) and MacIntyre & Gardner (1994), speaking anxiety negatively affects fluency, accuracy, and willingness to communicate. Together, these outcomes restrict learners’ opportunities to improve speaking skills and reduce overall SLA success.

Findings from Nabihah & Farehah (2024) revealed that in the Malaysian secondary school context, the main contributing factor of students’ speaking anxiety is Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) alongside English proficiency level, socioeconomic, as well as geographical factors. This is supported by Muhammad and Ismail (2025), which cited that the fear of negative evaluation among Form Six students was the major attribution to the anxiety. Conversely, emotional and social factors such as a supportive classroom environment could enhance students’ speaking confidence, as discovered by Roslan et al. (2025).

English-Speaking Attitudes and Motivation

In Second Language Acquisition (SLA), understanding students' attitudes towards speaking is crucial for creating effective learning experiences. Gardner's (1985) affective domain framework highlights how student attitudes motivate learners. This includes their willingness to communicate (WTC), persistence, and ability to manage anxiety. Research shows that positive attitudes towards language learning and speaking significantly affect students' engagement and overall skill level.

Positive attitudes towards speaking can boost WTC, which is vital for effective communication. Studies show that learners who feel positively about speaking are more likely to take part in classroom discussions. This engagement helps improve their speaking skills over time. For example, Wong and Ismail (2023) reported that students with more positive attitudes demonstrated stronger speaking performance and were far more proficient. This supports the findings of Syafrizal et al., who emphasized the strong impact of language learning attitudes on students' speaking skills in Indonesia (Syafrizal et al., 2018). Additionally, research by Azarfam indicates that lower levels of communication apprehension relate to increased WTC, showing the connection between emotions and language performance (Azarfam, 2022).

In exam-focused ESL settings, different classroom dynamics affect students' attitudes towards speaking. Teacher feedback plays a vital role, as helpful and constructive feedback often encourages positive attitudes and reduces anxiety. It helps to create a more supportive learning atmosphere. For instance, Mahripah (2014) noted that while learners showed positive feelings and behaviours regarding English speaking, conflicting attitudes could create challenges for lasting improvements (Mahripah, 2014). This suggests that addressing students' concerns through constructive feedback can lead to better long-term results.

Relationship Between Speaking Attitude and Anxiety

Attitudes and anxiety towards a language is often highlighted in the study of second/ foreign language acquisition. A chronological review of recent research reveals a growing body of literature confirming their interconnected and profound impact.

Karagöl and Başbay (2018) in a study among Turkish university students found a negative, medium significant relationship between attitude levels and anxiety levels. Thus, conclusion made for this study as students with positive attitudes having lesser anxiety level. At the secondary school level, Tekşan, Mutlu, and Çinpolat (2019) investigated middle school students and observed a significantly negative relationship between speaking skills attitude and speech anxiety.

In Indonesian EFL learner's context, Pratiwi (2020) reported that positive attitudes were linked with higher speaking achievement. Similarly, another study among Filipino EFL learners confirmed the relationship between attitude and anxiety, noting that there is a significant correlation between English language speaking anxiety and attitudes perceived on English language (Glomo-Narzoles & Glomo-Palermo, 2021).

Recent studies continued to underscore these findings. Saputra et al. (2023) explored gender differences in Indonesia and found that while both male and female students expressed positive attitudes toward speaking English, male students exhibited higher levels of speaking anxiety. Despite positive attitudes toward speaking English among learners, anxiety persists, particularly among male students. Most recently, Muengnakin and Narathakoon (2025) investigated Thai high school students and identified moderate levels of both speaking anxiety and attitudes, with a significant negative correlation between the two. Collectively, these studies demonstrated a clear and evolving understanding of how a learner's internal state—comprising both their attitude and anxiety—fundamentally shapes their success in speaking proficiency in ESL/EFL learning.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative, survey-based design to examine English-speaking anxiety and its relationship with students' attitudes toward speaking English. Survey was chosen as it allows for systematic collection of numerical data to describe levels of anxiety and to test correlations between variables. Survey is

also consistent with recommendations for quantitative inquiry in educational research (Creswell, 2014). The participants of this study were 60 Form Four students from a secondary school in Melaka, Malaysia. These students were selected based on convenience sampling due to their availability to participate in the survey. The survey participants were identified based on two criteria; they were form 4 students preparing for the national examination, SPM, and they were also participants of the SPM Speaking Test workshop co-organised by the school and the researchers. Data were collected using the English Speaking Anxiety Scale (ESAS) developed by Ran et al (2022). ESAS consists of 29 items measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). To better reflect Malaysian context, the word “foreign language” in the survey was changed to “second language”.

Data for this research was collected using printed questionnaires. The survey was administered during a one-day speaking workshop facilitated by trained instructors. The survey was conducted post-activity to ensure students could reflect on their speaking experiences in a meaningful and immediate context. To maintain confidentiality, responses were anonymised. The data collected through ESAS were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 30 for analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data that address Research Question 1 (RQ1), which determined the levels of English-speaking anxiety among the participants. For Research Question 2 (RQ2), Pearson’s correlation test was conducted to examine the relationship between students’ attitudes towards speaking English and their levels of speaking anxiety. The correlation analysis helped to determine whether higher levels of anxiety were linked with more negative attitudes. The level of significance was set at $p < .05$.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RQ1: Levels of Speaking Anxiety among Secondary Students

The first research question seeks to determine the overall speaking anxiety level among Form 4 students in a secondary school in Melaka.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Speaking Anxiety Items (N = 60)

Item	M	SD	Min	Max
Q3	2.52	0.77	1.00	4.00
Q4	2.60	0.91	0.00	4.00
Q7	2.65	0.94	1.00	4.00
Q8	2.63	0.55	2.00	4.00
Q9	3.02	0.62	2.00	4.00
Q10	2.60	0.83	1.00	4.00
Q11	2.72	0.83	1.00	4.00
Q12	2.67	0.88	1.00	4.00
Q13	2.83	1.06	1.00	4.00
Q14	2.58	0.81	0.00	4.00
Q18	2.68	0.72	1.00	4.00
Q19	2.95	0.81	1.00	4.00
Q20	2.88	0.83	1.00	4.00
Q21	2.58	0.79	1.00	4.00
Composite Anxiety Mean	2.71	0.29	2.07	3.43

Fourteen items from the English-Speaking Anxiety Scale were used to measure speaking anxiety level (Ran et al, 2022), which specifically assess anxiety level in oral communication. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for each item used (Q3, Q4, Q7–Q14, Q18–Q21). The overall mean score for speaking anxiety was 2.71 (SD = 0.29), with values ranging from a minimum of 2.07 to a maximum of 3.43. This result indicates that, on average, although there were some differences across individuals, students experienced a moderate degree of speaking anxiety. Based on Table 1, the mean scores ranged from 2.52 to 3.02, indicating that students generally reported moderate levels of speaking anxiety across different speaking situations. Standard deviations ranged between 0.55 and 1.06, suggesting that although most students' responses clustered around moderate speaking anxiety, there were slight variations in responses among the participants, with certain students noticeably experiencing lower or higher anxiety compared to the average group.

The findings also suggest that the participants' speaking anxiety was strongly associated with self-doubt in their ability to achieve competency in spoken English. This is because the highest mean score was recorded for item 9 which is *"I often wonder if I can learn to speak English well"* (M= 3.02, SD= 0.62). Meanwhile, the lowest mean score recorded is for item 3 which is *"It is difficult for me to talk with others in English"*. This indicates that generally, students do not perceive conversations in English as highly difficult. Compared to other sources of speaking anxiety, interpersonal interaction itself appeared to be the weakest trigger for speaking anxiety.

A composite score, Anxiety Mean, was calculated by averaging the responses to the 14 items. To further classify students' anxiety, the composite scores were grouped into three categories: Low Anxiety (1.0–2.4), Moderate Anxiety (2.5–3.4), and High Anxiety (3.5–5.0). As shown in Table 2, the vast majority (85%) fell into the moderate range, while 15% reported low anxiety, and none of the participants reached the high anxiety category.

Table 2 Distribution of Speaking Anxiety Levels (N = 60)

Level of Anxiety	Score Range	n	%
Low Anxiety	1.0–2.4	9	15%
Moderate Anxiety	2.5–3.4	51	85%
High Anxiety	3.5–5.0	0	0%

Note. Higher scores indicate greater speaking anxiety.

In sum, these findings indicate that the majority of participants preparing for the SPM English Speaking Test experienced moderate level of speaking anxiety, suggesting that while anxiety is not overwhelming, it remains a consistent challenge for oral communication.

RQ2: Correlation Between Attitude and Anxiety

A Pearson correlation was conducted to examine the relationship between students' English-speaking attitude and their speaking anxiety. As shown in Table 3, the results revealed a weak positive correlation between the two variables, $r(58) = .17, p = .19$. This correlation was not statistically significant, indicating that students' attitudes toward English speaking were not strongly associated with their reported speaking anxiety.

Table 3 Correlation Between English-Speaking Attitude and Speaking Anxiety

Correlations			
		Anxiety Mean	Attitude Mean R
Anxiety Mean	Pearson Correlation	1	.171
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.191
	N	60	60

Attitude Mean R	Pearson Correlation	.171	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.191	
	N	60	60

N = 60. Pearson correlation coefficients are reported. Correlation is not statistically significant ($p > .05$).

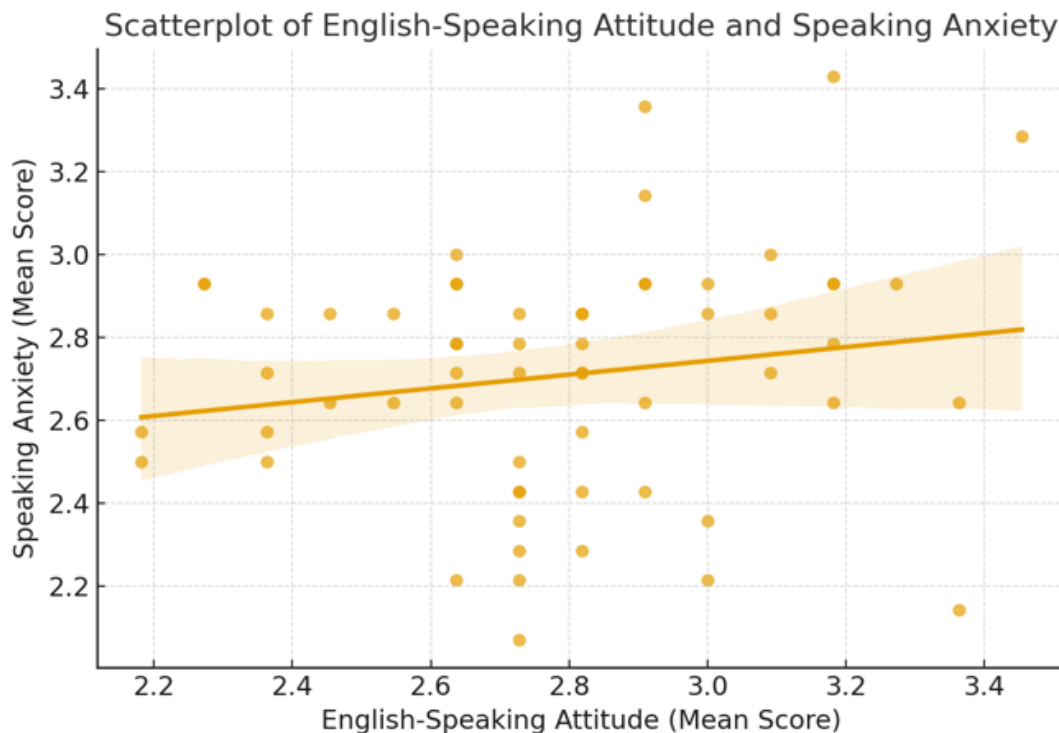


Figure 1 Scatterplot of English-Speaking Attitude and Speaking Anxiety

A scatterplot with a regression line was generated to further illustrate the relationship between English-speaking attitude and speaking anxiety (see Figure 1). The plot demonstrates a slight upward trend, consistent with the weak positive correlation observed in the analysis. However, the dispersion of data points confirms the nonsignificant relationship between the two constructs.

DISCUSSION

Analysis indicated that most students experience moderate speaking anxiety ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 0.29$), which is consistent with Horwitz's (1986) conceptualisation of language anxiety as a barrier to oral communication. In particular, self-doubt regarding their ability to learn to speak English well ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 0.62$) was reported as the most salient concern, emphasising the role of self-efficacy in shaping anxiety level. The analysis also interestingly revealed that conversational exchanges were perceived as less challenging ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 0.77$), suggesting that exam-related speaking tasks involving evaluation may contribute more to anxiety than peer interaction using the English language. These findings support earlier work (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994) and point to the need to reduce exam-related pressures in speaking test preparation. This aligned with recent studies (Nabihah & Farehah; 2024, Muhammad & Ismail; 2025, and Roslan et al; 2025) which highlighted the need to address both psychological and contextual factors in reducing speaking anxiety.

The analysis also revealed a weak positive but non-significant correlation between students' attitudes toward English speaking and speaking anxiety ($r = .17$, $p = .19$). While attitudes were moderately positive ($M = 2.79$), they did not substantially reduce anxiety ($M = 2.71$). This contrasts with prior research that often links positive dispositions to lower anxiety. Recent studies, however, emphasize that self-efficacy, peer support, and coping strategies exert stronger influence than attitudes alone in mitigating anxiety (Sun et al., 2025; Namaziandost et

al., 2024; Bárkányi, Z., & Brash, B., 2025). These findings suggest that interventions should integrate confidence-building and collaborative practices beyond attitude enhancement.

Offering low-pressure speaking exercises, constructive feedback, and teamwork activities could be integrated into the classroom practice to better assist. Speaking practice should also steer clear of over-repetition, as it may increase anxiety to meet testing standards. However, further longitudinal research is needed to provide more insights into the connection between reducing anxiety and improving speaking performance since the study did not report on students' actual speaking grades.

The intervention targeted English-speaking anxiety through two integrated strategies. From RQ1, reducing exam-related pressures by using non-graded practice and transparent rubrics can be an effective intervention; whereas for the findings of RQ2, incorporating collaborative practice and low-pressure speaking activities can be effective methods. Moreover, team-based tasks and structured peer feedback could foster communicative responsibility, while short recorded role-plays provided repeated practice opportunities. Feedback emphasised communicative effectiveness before linguistic accuracy. All these are aimed at lowering fear of negative evaluation, mitigating anxiety symptoms, and enhancing willingness to communicate in English.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study revealed the levels of speaking anxiety among respondents at a moderate level which made up the majority at 85%. A smaller group reported low anxiety level at 15% and none fell into the high anxiety level category. A weak, non-significant positive relationship was reported between attitude and anxiety. It should be highlighted that although the majority of respondents scored a moderate level of anxiety, attitudes may not necessarily correlate. Regardless, the findings disclosed could have alleviated the instructor's role to plan proper intervention and execution in teaching/coaching speaking skills in ESL/EFL classrooms. This study possessed few limitations as it was confined to a single school setting with quite a small sample size.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should consider expanding the sample to include larger and more diverse samples. A longitudinal mixed-method study could also be employed not only to see progress over time but also to gain a deeper comprehension of this issue. Additionally, including measures of actual speaking performance would further clarify the relationship between attitude, anxiety, and achievement. Finally, testing classroom intervention strategies such as collaborative tasks and low-stakes speaking activities through action research could yield valuable insights for improving ESL speaking instruction.

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