A Racing Heart and Strategies: A Case Study of Final-Year Undergraduates Taking the English Exit Speaking Test

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ABSTRACT

Undergraduates often face situations that require quick decision-making and concentration, especially during stressful assessments. A racing heart is usually linked to anxiety, which may also indicate increased mental effort. In language learning, this reaction may be triggered by fears of speaking English inaccurately or failing to complete all five tasks in the English Exit Speaking Test (EET). Using Giles' (1973) Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), this study explores students' speaking anxiety and the adjustment strategies they use when taking the EET Speaking Test at a Malaysian public university in Sarawak. The general purpose is to identify the main causes of anxiety, examine how students adapt, and suggest ways to reduce speaking anxiety in oral assessments. Addressing a research gap, this study investigates three research questions: (i) what levels of speaking anxiety students experience, (ii) whether gender differences exist, and (iii) what strategies are used to manage anxiety. A mixed-methods design was used, with quantitative data collected from 88 undergraduates through convenience sampling and qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews. All respondents were non-native speakers with English as a second language and had at least 15 years of formal English education. Findings highlight a lack of confidence and fear of incomplete tasks as the main causes of anxiety, while coping strategies include reframing negative thoughts, relaxation, thorough preparation, and focusing on fluency over perfection. Overall, the study shows that speaking anxiety involves not only language skills but also emotions, social situations, and personal experiences.

Keywords: CAT, English Exit Test, speaking test, anxiety

INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is broadly defined as a subjective state of tension, apprehension, and worry linked to autonomic nervous system activation (Horwitz et al., 1986), consistent with the Oxford Learner's Dictionaries' (n.d.) characterisation of anxiety as nervousness over an anticipated negative outcome. It affects individuals regardless of race, gender, or age and can significantly impede performance (Čiček, 2014; Horwitz et al., 1986). Importantly, anxiety is neither uniform in its causes nor its intensity: while some individuals experience acute distress in specific situations, others report only mild unease or none at all (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). This variability is particularly evident in second language (L2) learning contexts, where speaking—more than any other skill—tends to provoke heightened anxiety due to its real-time, evaluative nature.

Despite completing formal English instruction, many Malaysian graduates continue to struggle with workplace communication skills such as delivering presentations, leading meetings, and adapting register across professional contexts. This gap has prompted the Ministry of Higher Education to position the English Exit Test (EET) as a critical benchmark, reflecting its broader aim of producing graduates who can operate confidently in English within both domestic and international job markets (Zuraidah Don, 2016). Yet ESL learners frequently underperform in speaking assessments due to limited vocabulary, grammatical uncertainty, and communication anxiety (Yaacob & Yunus, 2019; Malik et al., 2021), and EET test-takers specifically have shown consistent inhibition and weak performance in the speaking component (Suzana Ab. Rahim et al., 2019). While these

performance patterns are documented, the underlying anxiety experienced by test-takers—and the strategies they use to manage it which remain underexamined, particularly within Sarawak, where no prior study has addressed the EET speaking component specifically.

Addressing this gap is essential not only for understanding students' emotional experience of the test but also for informing more targeted preparation strategies ahead of high-stakes oral assessments. Accordingly, this study aims to identify the main causes of speaking anxiety among undergraduates, examine how students adapt their communication when faced with this anxiety, and propose strategies to reduce speaking anxiety in oral assessments. To this end, the study is guided by three research questions: (i) what levels of speaking anxiety do English language learners experience while taking the EET speaking test?; (ii) is there a significant difference in speaking anxiety levels during the EET based on gender?; and (iii) what strategies do students employ to manage speaking anxiety effectively?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Strong communication skills enhance graduates' employability, enabling them to perform effectively in interviews, follow workplace instructions, and contribute to team-based tasks. Within this context, Suzana Ab. Rahim and Boon (2017) examined the implementation challenges of the English Exit Test (EET) and the Competence-Based English Test (CBET), both designed to gauge graduates' workplace readiness, and identified persistent administrative and rating difficulties. Based on the systematic review analysis conducted, it can be concluded that both competence tests have their fair share of hiccups and hurdles before the tests are administered and rated without a glitch.

Suzana Ab. Rahim et al. (2019) further conducted a study to analyse the performance of a group of local undergraduates in their English Exit Test (EET), which comprises written and spoken assessments designed to make them workplace-compliant. However, the results have indicated that test-takers tend to be inhibited when it comes to expressing themselves verbally, resulting in a dismal performance in the speaking component. Consequently, graduates' overall lack of English proficiency and particularly their communication skills, are major factors contributing to the unemployment rate among our graduates (Siti Hanim Stapa, 2016). As such, it is a cause for concern to rectify the situation and figure out solutions to tackle their weak performance. This study also analyses the different performance between the Engineering and Hotel Management and Tourism undergraduates that indicated light difference in their achievement of grades. The five dissimilar disciplines of speaking tasks also recorded a difference in their score means, which could suggest that treatments need to be tailored for those weak performers.

A study by Sukunah Pachaiappana et al. (2020) examines the prevalence of test anxiety in Malaysia and investigates the association of test anxiety with socio-demographic factors. A cross-sectional survey comprising demographic data and the FRIEDBEN Test Anxiety Scale (FTAS) questionnaire was used. Of the 371 students who responded, 46% of the students reported a low level of test anxiety, almost 20% a high level of test anxiety, and 34% a medium level of test anxiety. Further analyses suggest that test anxiety is significantly predicted by factors such as gender and ethnicity. This is further supported by Djigunović (2009) that highlighted that factors like intelligence, gender, age, desire to learn, communication ability, and learning approach can influence an individual's success in the foreign language classroom. Any student in a foreign language classroom will have personal experiences from their language learning course and might encounter language speaking anxiety differently. Even a group of learners in the same classroom may have varied views on their experiences, personal achievements, and how anxiety has impacted their learning. Thus, these findings can help the education system, including the Ministry of Education, policymakers, schools, teachers, and parents, to better understand the scope of the problem and the groups of students who are most affected.

Brown (2004) presented a list of skills that foreign language learners need to develop when learning to speak a language, dividing them into micro skills and macro skills. The macro skills involve larger aspects of speaking, such as fluency and discourse. On the other hand, the micro skills focus on smaller parts such as phonemes and collocations. He notes that although "the macro skills have the appearance of being more complex than the micro skills, both contain ingredients of difficulty, depending on the stage and context" (Brown, 2004, p. 143).

Empirical studies across Malaysian tertiary institutions highlight that demographic variables, particularly gender and social comparison, significantly influence test anxiety levels (Sukunah Pachaiappana et al., 2020; Djigunović, 2009). Female students frequently report higher affective vulnerability in oral tasks, whereas male students exhibit different reporting tendencies or coping mechanisms. However, understanding how affective factors translate into adaptive test-taking behaviour requires a robust communicative framework.

Speaking Anxiety, Gender Differences, and Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)

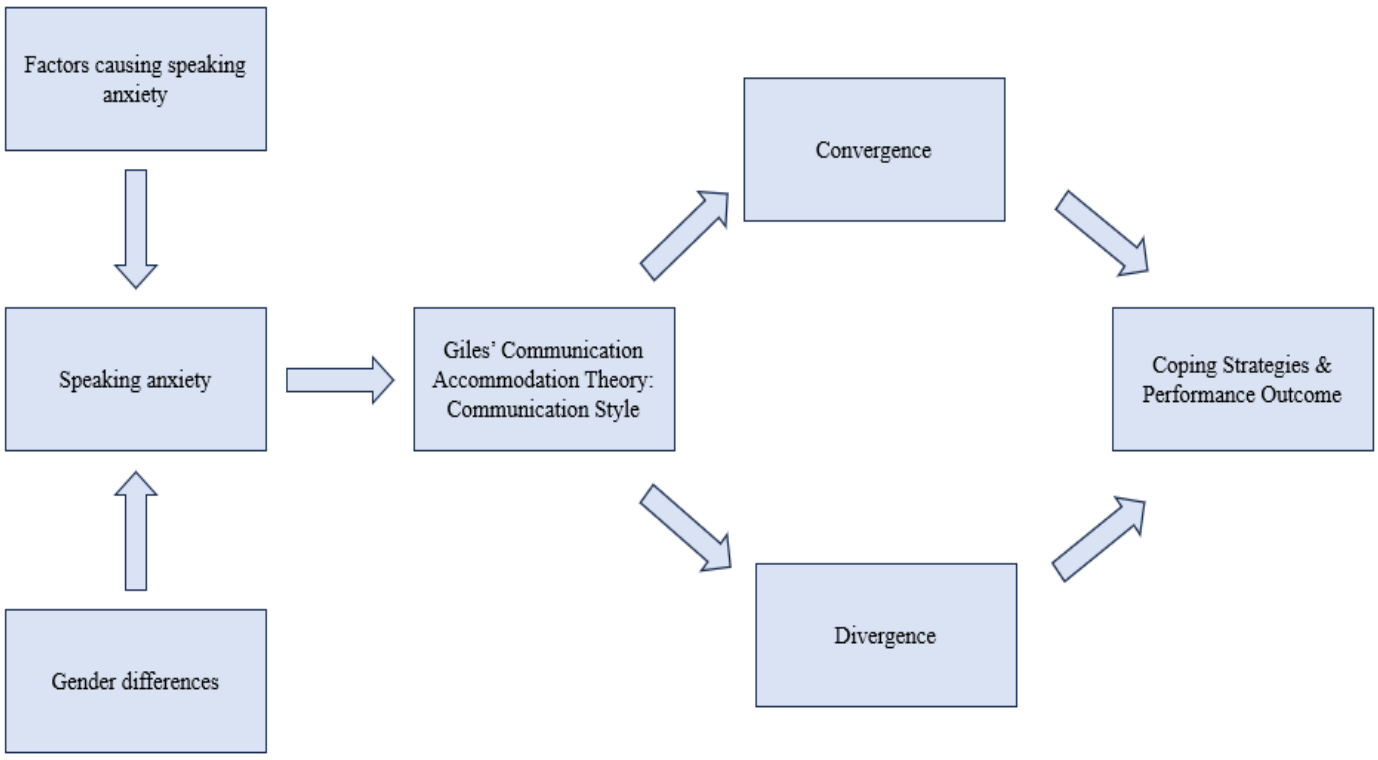


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of Students' Speaking Anxiety and Accommodation Strategies during EET Speaking Test

The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) examines foreign language anxiety through three interrelated components: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety (Piniel & Zólyomi, 2022; Romadloni et al., 2026; Mohtasham & Farnia, 2017). Across instructional settings, speaking is frequently identified as one of the most anxiety-provoking aspects of second language learning (Suparia et al., 2022; Nordin et al., 2021; Kamarulzaman et al., 2023). Oral communication tasks have been associated with moderate to high anxiety among diverse learner populations (Khreisat, 2022; Jurikova, 2025; Amengual-Pizarro, 2018). Communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation are particularly prominent during spontaneous speaking tasks, when learners must formulate responses while anticipating how others may judge their performance (Hakim, 2022; Mohtasham & Farnia, 2017; Alrashidi & Alenezy, 2026; Amengual-Pizarro, 2018). Lower oral proficiency and reduced confidence in one's speaking ability are also associated with higher anxiety levels (Alamri & Qasem, 2024; Okyar, 2023; Daflizar, 2024; Alrashidi & Alenezy, 2026).

Additionally, findings concerning gender differences in foreign language speaking anxiety remain mixed. Piniel and Zólyomi's (2022) meta-analysis of 48 FLCAS studies reported no statistically significant overall gender difference, although female learners tended to report slightly higher mean anxiety scores. Individual studies, however, have identified significant differences within particular populations. Park and French (2013), in a study involving 948 Korean university students, found that female students reported significantly higher foreign language anxiety. Similarly, Okyar (2023), who examined 293 Turkish EFL undergraduates, reported significantly lower speaking anxiety among male students. Romadloni et al. (2026) also reported that female

Indonesian vocational students scored 6.2 percentage points higher in speaking anxiety. In contrast, Alamri and Qasem (2024), in a study of 151 Saudi undergraduates, found no statistically significant gender difference in overall speaking anxiety.

These divergent findings point to contextual variation in the relationship between gender and anxiety. Some studies report greater fear of negative evaluation or speaking apprehension among female learners (Suparia et al., 2022; Daflizar, 2024; Hwa & Peck, 2017; Alrashidi & Alenezy, 2026). Others identify comparable anxiety levels across genders or greater apprehension among male learners in particular evaluative situations (Suparia et al., 2022; Fauziah et al., 2022; Wang & Ran, 2026; Nordin et al., 2021; Amengual-Pizarro, 2018). Consequently, gender differences should be interpreted in relation to the sampled population, the dimensions of anxiety measured, and the learning or assessment context.

Speaking anxiety also has an interpersonal dimension, as learners' emotional responses and communication behaviours may vary according to their interlocutors and the classroom environment (Romadloni et al., 2026). These patterns can be interpreted through Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which offers a framework for examining how individuals adjust their communication in response to other participants and social conditions. For example, interaction with native speakers has been associated with greater communication apprehension than interaction with peers (Suparia et al., 2022; Qaddumi et al., 2023). Howard Giles' (1973) Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) proposes that during conversations, individuals adjust their communication styles to converge towards or diverge from their interaction partners. CAT posits that during communicative interactions, individuals adjust their verbal and nonverbal behaviours to achieve social goals, manage personal identity, and facilitate comprehension. The core strategies within CAT include convergence (adapting communication to become more similar to the interlocutor's style to gain approval or decrease social distance) and divergence (accentuating communicative differences to signal distinct identity or distance). This adjustment, or accommodation, is influenced by social factors, motivations, and perceptions of the other person's identity and group affiliations. The theory explains how and why people adapt their speech, language, and nonverbal behaviours in social interactions.

However, few studies see the CAT convergence-divergence framework as a theoretical gap, because many academics disagree that the CAT framework adequately explains how the theory framework convergence-divergence addresses possible interlocutors' disagreements. Similarly, Judee Burgoon (1993); Schilling-Estes, (1998); Ishak, & Rafik-Galea (2015) challenged and critiqued the communication accommodation theory and questioned the "convergence-divergence frame," stating that conversations are too complex to be reduced to the procedures of the Communication Accommodation Theory. According to Gray et al. (2023), critics of the idea argue that conversations are often too complicated to be boiled down into simple components like convergence and divergence (May & Perry, (2022)). They also note that people can utilise both approaches in the same interaction, which has garnered little attention from researchers. Mixed-gender pairings and unfamiliar interlocutors may also heighten self-monitoring and concerns about negative evaluation (Romadloni et al., 2026). Such findings suggest that speaking anxiety is shaped partly by the conditions under which communication occurs. Supportive classroom practices may help reduce these pressures. Appropriate scaffolding, encouraging feedback, and classroom norms that support participation can alleviate evaluative stress and help learners engage more confidently in oral activities (Romadloni et al., 2026; Hakim, 2022; Mohtasham & Farnia, 2017). Conclusively, the literature suggests that foreign language speaking anxiety reflects an interaction between individual characteristics, social expectations surrounding gender, and interpersonal experiences within the learning environment (Romadloni et al., 2026; Daflizar, 2024).

In the context of high-stakes oral examinations, test-takers interact in an asymmetrical evaluative structure. High speaking anxiety serves as an affective driver that prompts strategic accommodation. Specifically, anxious students engage in cognitive and linguistic accommodation to meet perceived examiner expectations: they may converge toward formal test standards by prioritising oral fluency over absolute grammatical precision, regulating speaking pace, or using positive cognitive self-talk to align their affective state with performance demands. By operationalising CAT within an oral assessment framework, this study connects psychological anxiety triggers directly to students' self-reported communicative adjustments.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilised an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In the first phase, quantitative survey data were gathered to establish overall anxiety levels and gender-based statistical differences. In the second phase, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted to contextualise the quantitative findings and provide detailed insights into students' perceived coping and accommodation strategies.

The quantitative sample comprised N = 88 final-year undergraduate students enrolled in the EET 699 course at UiTM Sarawak, recruited via convenience sampling. Convenience sampling was appropriate given the accessibility of the target population during the examination cycle (Bornstein et al., 2013). All participants were non-native English speakers with English as a Second Language (ESL) status, having completed at least 15 years of formal English language education. The sample included 26 male (29.5%) and 62 female (70.5%) students across various academic disciplines.

For the qualitative phase, a purposive sub-sample of n = 25 participants was selected from the survey respondents. Purposive sampling ensured representation across varying anxiety score ranges and genders, enabling rich qualitative exploration of test-taking experiences.

Quantitative data were collected using an adapted version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS; Horwitz et al., 1986). The original 33-item FLCAS was systematically modified to suit the specific context of the EET speaking test. Fourteen items from the original scale were removed because they pertained strictly to general language classroom instruction (e.g., native-speaker language teachers, general language class attendance) and were not related to the context of Malaysian Higher Education undergraduates. The resulting 19-item adapted scale comprised three subscales: Communication Apprehension (7 items), Test Anxiety (6 items), and Fear of Negative Evaluation (6 items). To interpret the levels of language anxiety, the study adopted the anxiety-level mean score as outlined by Nurul Fatinah Dellah et. al. (2020).

All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ('Strongly Disagree') to 5 ('Strongly Agree'). The internal consistency of the adapted 19-item scale demonstrated high reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.87). Mean anxiety scores were interpreted according to a standardised three-tier framework (Nurul Fatinah Dellah et al., 2020): 1.00 to 2.49 indicates Low Anxiety; 2.50 to 3.49 indicates Moderate Anxiety; and 3.50 to 5.00 indicates High Anxiety.

Table 1 Levels of Speaking Anxiety Scale

Mean Score	**Level of Anxiety**
0.00-2.50	Low anxiety
2.51-3.50	Moderately anxiety
3.51-5.00	High anxiety

Qualitative data were collected using a semi-structured interview consisting of open-ended questions targeting anxiety triggers, physiological responses during the test, cognitive self-talk, and specific communicative adaptations employed during task execution.

Data collection occurred immediately following the completion of the EET 699 speaking examination during the mid-semester evaluation period. The survey was administered online via Google Forms during scheduled post-examination briefing sessions, requiring approximately 15 minutes to complete. Semi-structured interviews were conducted online via video conferencing within one week of the exam. Interviews lasted 15 to 20 minutes each, were audio-recorded with explicit consent, and were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Prior to data collection, participants were fully informed of the research objectives, procedures, and data usage. Written informed consent was obtained electronically from all respondents. Participation was entirely voluntary,

and participants were assured that refusal or withdrawal would have no bearing on their EET course grades or academic standing. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly preserved by assigning alphanumeric identifier codes to all qualitative transcripts and stripping personal identifiers from quantitative survey files.

Quantitative survey data were processed using SPSS Version 27. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and item rankings) were calculated for each FLCAS dimension. Inferential statistics included independent-samples t-tests to evaluate gender differences in anxiety levels. Assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were verified using Levene's Test for Equality of Variances. To evaluate the practical significance of gender differences beyond statistical p-values, Cohen's d effect size was calculated.

Qualitative interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis adhering to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: (1) familiarisation with transcripts, (2) initial code generation, (3) searching for candidate themes, (4) reviewing and refining themes against raw data, (5) defining and naming final themes, and (6) producing the analytical report. Qualitative themes were directly integrated with quantitative subscales to triangulate and contextualise statistical patterns.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Quantitative Data Findings

The Levels of Speaking Anxiety Experienced by the English Language Learners while Taking the EET Speaking Test in terms of Communication Apprehension

Table 2 The Levels of Speaking Anxiety Experienced by the English Language Learners while Taking the EET Speaking Test in terms of Communication Apprehension

The Levels of Speaking Anxiety in Terms of Communication Apprehension	Mean	Std. Deviation
It frightens me when I don't understand the tasks given in the EET speaking test.	2.77	1.22
I get nervous when I have to speak during the EET speaking test.	2.80	1.11
I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in English while taking the test.	2.85	1.00
I get nervous when I listen to the tasks given in the EET speaking test.	2.90	1.14
I would be nervous speaking only in English during the EET speaking test.	2.93	1.04
During the EET speaking test, I can get so nervous that I forget things I want to say.	3.33	1.16
I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation during the EET speaking test.	3.40	1.26

Referring to the table on communication apprehension, the lowest mean score was 2.77 for the item "It frightens me when I don't understand the tasks given in the EET speaking test", which falls under the moderate anxiety category. Conversely, the highest mean score was 3.40 for the item "I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation during the EET speaking test", which falls within the moderate anxiety range. The findings revealed a contrast between students' responses to comprehension-based and spontaneous speaking tasks in Suzana Ab. Rahim et al. (2019)'s study. This suggests that while learners are less apprehensive about comprehension-related difficulties, their anxiety rises sharply when required to speak spontaneously.

The Levels of Speaking Anxiety Experienced by the English Language Learners while Taking the EET Speaking Test in Terms of Test Anxiety

Table 3 The Levels of Speaking Anxiety Experienced by the English Language Learners while Taking the EET Speaking Test

The Levels of Speaking Anxiety in Terms of Test Anxiety	Mean	Std. Deviation
The more I prepare for the EET speaking test, the more confused I get.	2.17	1.00

I feel pressured to prepare for the EET speaking test.	2.60	0.99
I don't feel confident when I speak while answering the EET speaking test.	2.64	0.85
I am not usually at ease during the EET speaking test.	2.65	0.80
Even if I am prepared for the EET speaking test, I feel anxious about it.	3.40	1.00
I worry about the consequences of failing my EET speaking test.	3.56	1.22

In terms of test anxiety, the EET results showed that preparation was not a major source of stress, as reflected in the lowest mean score of 2.17 for the item *"The more I prepare for the EET speaking test, the more confused I get"*. However, the highest mean score of 3.56 for *"I worry about the consequences of failing my EET speaking test"* highlights that fear of failure is the main contributor to anxiety. This finding is consistent with Sukunah Pachaiappana et al. (2020), who reported that test anxiety among Malaysian students is strongly linked to socio-demographic factors such as gender and ethnicity. These studies suggest that while preparation does not significantly increase stress, personal and social concerns about performance outcomes play a larger role in shaping learners' test anxiety.

The Levels of Speaking Anxiety Experienced by the English Language Learners while Taking the EET Speaking Test

Table 4 The Levels of Speaking Anxiety Experienced by the English Language Learners while Taking the EET Speaking Test

The Levels of Speaking Anxiety in Terms of Fear of Negative Evaluation	Mean	Std. Deviation
I worry about making mistakes while taking the EET speaking test.	2.41	1.06
I am afraid that I might make many mistakes, which may impede the examiner's understanding.	2.69	1.05
I feel overwhelmed by the number of tasks that I have to respond to while taking the EET speaking test.	2.93	1.04
I feel embarrassed that other candidates might hear me when I respond to the tasks given.	3.02	1.25
I can feel my heart pounding when I'm responding to the tasks given.	3.20	1.20
I keep thinking that the other candidates are better at taking the EET speaking test.	3.66	1.08

Regarding the fear of negative evaluation, the EET results showed that learners were less concerned about making mistakes, as indicated by the lowest mean score of 2.41 for the item "I worry about making mistakes while taking the EET speaking test." In contrast, the highest mean score of 3.66 for *"I keep thinking that the other candidates are better at taking the EET speaking test"* indicates that social comparison and peer perceptions contribute more strongly to their anxiety than error-making itself, suggesting that competitiveness intensifies speaking anxiety. This aligns with Djigunović (2009), who emphasised that factors such as intelligence, gender, age, motivation, and communication ability influence learners' experiences in the foreign language classroom, leading to different levels of speaking anxiety. Even within the same class, learners may interpret mistakes, peer performance, and personal achievements differently, which explains why anxiety levels vary from one student to another.

The Levels of Speaking Anxiety Based on Dimensions

Table 5 Levels of Speaking Anxiety Based on Dimensions

The Levels of Speaking Anxiety Based on Dimensions	Mean	Std. Deviation
Test Anxiety	2.84	0.52
Fear Of Negative Evaluation	2.99	0.69
Communication Apprehension	3.00	0.75
Total	2.94	0.56

The analysis showed that learners experienced a moderate level of speaking anxiety overall (M = 2.94), with communication apprehension (M = 3.00) being higher than test anxiety (M = 2.84). This means students felt more nervous in direct communication than in test-related situations. Similar results were reported by Sukunah Pachaiappana et al. (2020), where most Malaysian students showed low to medium levels of test anxiety, while only a smaller group reported high levels. These findings suggest that communication tasks create stronger pressure than exams. Brown (2004) explains this by pointing out that speaking involves both macroskills, such as fluency and discourse, and microskills, such as sounds and collocations. Since both skill levels present difficulties depending on the learning stage, learners may feel greater anxiety when required to manage them simultaneously in real-time communication.

The Levels of Speaking Anxiety Between Genders

Table 6 Levels of Speaking Anxiety Between Genders

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Mean Comparison Between Genders	Male	26	2.72	0.49
	Female	62	3.03	0.57

The mean comparison between genders shows that female students (M = 3.03, SD = 0.57) reported higher levels of speaking anxiety compared to their male counterparts (M = 2.72, SD = 0.49). Both group means fell within the moderate anxiety range according to the study's classification criteria.

Table 7 Comparison of Speaking Anxiety Levels Between Male and Female Students

The Levels of Speaking Anxiety Between Genders		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Significance	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Two-Sided p			Lower	Upper
	Equal variances assumed	0.37	0.55	-2.42	86.00	0.02	-0.31	0.13	-0.56	-0.06

Note. Equal variances assumed. The comparison is male minus female; negative values indicate a higher mean among female participants. Cohen's d is estimated from the reported group sample sizes and rounded means and standard deviations.

Levene's test for equality of variances was not statistically significant (F = 0.37, p = .55). Accordingly, the equal-variances-assumed row was used to interpret the independent-samples t-test. The t-test showed a statistically significant difference in speaking anxiety between male and female students, t(86) = −2.42, p = .02 (two-tailed). Using male minus female as the comparison, the mean difference was −0.31 (SE = 0.13), with a 95% confidence interval of [−0.56, −0.06]. The negative difference indicates that female students reported higher speaking anxiety than male students. The confidence interval excludes zero, supporting the conclusion that the group means differed statistically.

The estimated effect size was Cohen's d = −0.57, indicating a medium effect. The mean speaking anxiety score among female students was approximately 0.57 pooled standard deviations higher than that among male students. These findings address RQ2 by identifying a statistically significant gender difference in speaking anxiety within the sampled group. This result reflects an association between gender and self-reported speaking anxiety among the participants; it does not establish that gender determines speaking anxiety.

Qualitative Data Findings

Semi-structured interviews with 25 respondents revealed five thematic strategies employed by learners to mitigate speaking anxiety during the online EET 699 test:

i) Cognitive restructuring

The respondents stated that they challenged negative thoughts and replaced them with more positive and realistic ones.

Respondent 1 said*:*

"Instead of thinking 'I'll fail,' try 'I'll do my best, and even if I make mistakes, it's part of the learning process."

According to Bijon Baroi & Noor Muhammad (2024), for many weaker students, second language anxiety can be a paralysing condition that prevents learners from fully learning and slows the use of their second language when speaking, as they are afraid of failure. The data obtained in this study indicated that when they challenged such negative thoughts before taking the speaking test, they were happier with their performance. The respondents also engaged in positive self-affirmations and motivational self-talk before and during speaking situations to overcome their nervousness when performing the most difficult task.

ii) Relaxation techniques

The respondents also stated that they used deep breathing exercises, mindfulness, or progressive muscle relaxation to handle physical symptoms of speaking anxiety.

Respondent 2 mentioned:

"Deep breathing, in particular, can lower my blood pressure and improve my focus. Mindfulness practices, like focusing on the present moment, can help calm my racing thoughts and reduce my anxiety when taking the speaking test."

Cho *et al.* (2016) found that both mindful breathing practice and cognitive reappraisal practice produced large effect sizes in reducing speaking test anxiety. Additionally, the mindful breathing groups scored significantly higher on positive thoughts than the cognitive reappraisal and control groups. The study's findings suggest that both daily mindful breathing and cognitive reappraisal are effective in decreasing speaking test anxiety; however, mindful breathing more effectively increased positive automatic thoughts than cognitive positive automatic thoughts than cognitive reappraisal.

iii) Exposure Therapy

Most of the respondents agreed that gradually increasing the frequency and intensity of speaking situations helps build confidence and desensitise oneself to speaking anxiety triggers. The respondents said that speaking

anxiety occurred because of a lack of confidence, a lack of practice, and less feedback from the teacher.

Respondent 7 explained:

"I get lots of benefits from adopting drilling repetition in enhancing my speaking ability; it is helpful to build my confidence and fluency in speaking English. It helps with automation of common language patterns, which I can use when doing the speaking test."

For second language learners, exposure therapy can be used to improve learners' pronunciation, fluency, and accuracy in speaking practice. The learners can also remember the words in their long-term memory, which can be seen through the improvement in pronouncing the correct words in English.

iv) Focus on fluency over accuracy

The majority of all the respondents agreed that they prioritised speaking comfortably and expressing themselves, rather than striving for perfect grammar or pronunciation.

Respondent 13 mentioned:

"I focus on fluency when speaking in the English language. This is a beneficial approach to me because speaking it fosters confidence and reduces hesitation. I also believe that while accuracy is important, overemphasising it can hinder a learner's willingness to speak and express themselves. Therefore, a balanced approach that incorporates both fluency and accuracy development is still the best."

According to Шевельова-Гаркуша (2024), fluency in speaking a language is achieved when an individual can effectively employ the language's structure, prioritising content over form, and utilising units and structures naturally at conversational speed when necessary. *Marekov ́a & Be ̆n* (2024) define fluency as the ability to use pausing, intonation, stress, speech speed, and speech interruptions in a native-like manner.

v) Preparation strategy

All the respondents said that they used the preparation strategy to help themselves before taking the EET 699 Speaking test. The students also said that they had a hard time formulating the words they wanted to speak because they felt inadequate in their vocabulary and their knowledge of English grammar. Furthermore, students also showed some attitudes related to their anxiety, such as talking, stammering, being shy, and being confused when they have trouble remembering a word.

Respondent 25 said:

"I am familiarising myself with the test format. Practice speaking English regularly, record myself speaking to identify areas for improvement, and seek feedback on my performance. I also focus on clarity over speed."

According to Morovat (2014), speaking is reportedly one of the most challenging of the four proficiency exam abilities evaluated. According to Fitria (2024), the primary determinant of test-takers' success is enhancing their English-speaking abilities in practice. However, all students surveyed in the present study reported not engaging in extensive pre-test preparations, thus indicating room for improvement. Test–takers' anxiety and difficulty understanding the examiner's spoken word definitions further complicate their ability to answer questions. By using strategies outlined in the EET 699 Speaking Exam, test-takers can mitigate disruptions during the speaking test.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Integrating the quantitative FLCAS findings with the qualitative accounts of coping strategies provides a more comprehensive understanding of learners' speaking anxiety. The three dimensions: 1) communication apprehension, 2)fear of negative evaluation, and 3)test anxiety—identify concerns experienced during speaking assessments, while the qualitative findings describe how learners attempted to manage these concerns. The relationships between the anxiety dimensions and coping strategies can therefore be interpreted as connections between reported difficulties and learners' responses to them [7, 12–18]. These connections do not, by themselves, demonstrate that the strategies caused an anxiety reduction.

Communication apprehension recorded the highest mean among the three dimensions (M = 3.00, SD = 0.75). Learners reported panic when required to speak without preparation (M = 3.40, SD = 1.26) and difficulty remembering what they intended to say (M = 3.33, SD = 1.16). These responses suggest that spontaneous speaking presented challenges in organising ideas and producing language in real time. Repeated exposure to speaking activities and drilling of familiar language patterns may help learners develop greater familiarity with language use and reduce perceived difficulty in retrieving expressions. Similarly, prioritising fluency over grammatical perfection may help learners sustain their responses despite linguistic uncertainty. These strategies

offer possible explanations for how learners sought to manage communication apprehension, although improvements in automaticity and cognitive processing were not directly established.

Fear of negative evaluation also contributed to speaking anxiety (M = 2.99, SD = 0.69). The belief that other candidates were better test-takers received a higher mean score (M = 3.66, SD = 1.08) than concern about making linguistic mistakes (M = 2.41, SD = 1.06). This descriptive pattern suggests that comparison with peers was a more prominent concern than error-making among the respondents. Cognitive restructuring corresponds to these concerns by encouraging learners to reconsider negative interpretations of their abilities and anticipated performance. Reframing failure-oriented thoughts and recognising mistakes as part of learning may help learners approach speaking tasks with more realistic expectations and less perceived evaluative pressure.

Test anxiety was particularly evident in learners' concerns about the consequences of failing the speaking assessment (M = 3.56, SD = 1.22). Learners also reported experiencing a pounding heart (M = 3.20, SD = 1.20), although this item was classified under fear of negative evaluation in the questionnaire. Relaxation strategies, including mindfulness and deep breathing, may be understood as attempts to manage perceived physiological arousal and maintain concentration. However, the findings do not establish changes in heart rate, blood pressure, or autonomic functioning. Preparation strategies, such as familiarisation with the test format, regular speaking practice, and attention to clarity rather than speed, similarly represent attempts to manage uncertainty and the demands of the assessment.

The gender comparison revealed that female participants reported higher mean speaking anxiety (M = 3.03, SD = 0.57) than male participants (M = 2.72, SD = 0.49). The difference was statistically significant, $t(86) = -2.42$, p = .02, with an estimated Cohen's d of -0.57. Using male minus female as the comparison, the negative values indicate higher anxiety among female participants. This finding identifies a difference in self-reported anxiety within the sampled group and does not establish that gender determines speaking anxiety.

The observed gender difference also does not establish whether the underlying anxiety mechanisms or responses to coping strategies differ between male and female learners. The comparison concerned mean anxiety scores and did not directly assess the effectiveness of individual strategies across genders. Consequently, the findings cannot demonstrate that cognitive and affective pathways are identical across groups or that the strategies are equally effective for all learners. The synthesis instead suggests that the reported strategies address concerns associated with spontaneous speaking, negative evaluation, and assessment outcomes. Their effectiveness, including possible variation across gender groups, requires further investigation.

Overall, the study shows that speaking anxiety is not just about language ability. It also involves emotions, social situations, and personal experiences. This means that emotional support is just as important as language instruction. Language programmes that include real-life speaking practice and anxiety-reduction techniques can help students feel more confident and perform better in speaking assessments like the EET 699.

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Ethical Consideration

Prior to data collection, all participants were provided with detailed information regarding the study's objectives, procedures, and the intended use of their data. Electronic written informed consent was obtained from each respondent. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that declining to take part or withdrawing at any point would not affect their EET course grades or academic standing. To protect anonymity

and confidentiality, alphanumeric codes were assigned to qualitative transcripts, and all personally identifying information was removed from the quantitative survey data

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