

Factors Influencing Spoken English Development among Malaysian ESL Learners: A Qualitative Study of Anxiety, Classroom Experiences, and Learner Expectations

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ABSTRACT

Despite more than a decade of formal English language instruction, many Malaysian tertiary students continue to experience difficulties communicating confidently in English. This study explores the factors that hinder spoken English development among diploma students and examines their perceptions of English language learning as well as their expectations of English lecturers. Guided by Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, and Expectancy-Value Theory, the study employed a qualitative research design using open-ended questionnaires administered to ten diploma students from a private higher education institution in Kelantan, Malaysia. Thematic analysis revealed three interrelated themes: (1) affective barriers and linguistic insecurity, (2) pedagogical limitations and communicative deprivation, and (3) learner expectations of supportive and meaningful learning experiences. Findings indicate that students' speaking difficulties stem not only from linguistic limitations but also from anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, low self-confidence, limited opportunities for authentic communication, and a perceived mismatch between classroom practices and communicative needs. Participants expressed a strong preference for interactive, learner-centred, and supportive learning environments that encourage risk-taking and meaningful language use. The study highlights the importance of emotionally responsive and communicative pedagogies in fostering spoken English proficiency and challenges deficit perspectives that portray learners as unmotivated. The findings contribute to the understanding of spoken English development in Malaysian tertiary education and provide practical implications for lecturers, institutions, and policymakers seeking to enhance graduate communicative competence.

Keywords: Spoken English Proficiency, ESL Learners, Language Anxiety, Communicative Competence, Malaysian Tertiary Education

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

English proficiency, particularly spoken communication, remains a pressing concern within Malaysian higher education despite decades of formal English language instruction. English continues to occupy a strategic position in Malaysia's educational and economic development agenda due to its importance for global communication, academic success, and graduate employability (Zainuddin et al., 2019). Nevertheless, many Malaysian students who have undergone more than eleven years of English language education still struggle to communicate confidently and effectively in authentic situations.

This paradox is especially visible among diploma students from non-elite institutions, many of whom achieve satisfactory grades in national examinations yet experience considerable difficulty when required to engage in spontaneous spoken interaction. Such a discrepancy suggests that linguistic competence acquired through examination-oriented learning does not necessarily translate into communicative competence. As communicative competence has become increasingly valued in the global workforce, the inability of graduates to speak English confidently has emerged as a significant educational and economic concern.

Recent scholarship suggests that spoken language development is influenced not only by linguistic knowledge but also by motivational, emotional, pedagogical, and socio-cultural factors (Akhadali Ugli et al., 2025; Bai et al., 2025). Research synthesized through Scopus AI indicates that intrinsic motivation and integrative motivation remain among the strongest predictors of learner engagement and language achievement. Students who view English as a tool for personal growth, cultural participation, and future professional development demonstrate greater persistence and willingness to communicate than learners motivated solely by examination requirements (Suliman et al., 2024; Tanaka & Kutsuki, 2018).

Furthermore, positive teacher-student relationships play a critical role in sustaining learner motivation and self-efficacy. Teacher support, emotional encouragement, and culturally responsive instructional practices have been found to significantly influence learners' engagement and participation in English language learning (Bai et al., 2025; Zorba, 2020). This is particularly relevant in Malaysian classrooms where cultural norms emphasizing face-saving and fear of embarrassment may discourage students from actively participating in oral activities.

The Scopus synthesis further highlights the importance of culturally responsive teaching and learner-centred approaches that acknowledge students' sociocultural backgrounds, learning preferences, and personal identities. Studies have demonstrated that collaborative learning, kinesthetic activities, and multimodal instructional approaches significantly enhance learners' speaking proficiency and engagement (Komlosi-Ferdinand, 2018; Zhang et al., 2026). However, many ESL classrooms continue to emphasize grammar drills, written exercises, and examination preparation, thereby limiting opportunities for meaningful communication.

Consequently, there is a growing need to understand how learners themselves perceive their speaking difficulties, classroom experiences, and expectations of English lecturers. By foregrounding student voices, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the systemic, emotional, and pedagogical factors that continue to impede spoken English development among Malaysian diploma students.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Despite extensive investment in English language education, Malaysian learners continue to demonstrate relatively low confidence and proficiency in spoken English. This phenomenon presents a persistent contradiction between educational inputs and communicative outcomes. Students spend more than a decade studying English within formal educational settings, yet many remain unable to communicate effectively in real-world situations.

Existing literature has largely attributed this issue to examination-oriented pedagogical practices that prioritize grammatical accuracy and written performance over oral communication (Ramarow & Hassan, 2021). Such practices often create passive learning environments where students become recipients of knowledge rather than active users of language. As a result, opportunities to develop fluency, interactional competence, and spontaneous communication are limited.

Another critical issue concerns affective barriers. Numerous studies have identified speaking anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, low self-confidence, and communication apprehension as major obstacles to oral participation (Alhasan et al., 2024; Miskam & Saidalvi, 2018). According to Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, these emotional barriers can significantly reduce language acquisition by preventing learners from actively engaging with linguistic input.

Recent research also suggests that learner expectations are shaped by broader motivational and sociocultural influences. Learners increasingly expect English classes to be interactive, supportive, collaborative, and relevant to their future careers (Bai et al., 2025). However, a mismatch often exists between these expectations and traditional classroom practices. This mismatch can reduce learner engagement and willingness to communicate, resulting in decreased motivation and persistent speaking difficulties.

Furthermore, while numerous studies have investigated language anxiety and communicative competence, relatively few have focused specifically on learners' expectations of English lecturers and classroom

experiences within diploma-level institutions. Existing Malaysian research tends to focus on university students from public universities, leaving learners from private and non-elite institutions underrepresented.

The Scopus AI synthesis also reveals an important gap in the literature: the scarcity of longitudinal investigations examining how learner expectations, motivation, and speaking confidence evolve over time. Most existing studies employ cross-sectional designs, limiting understanding of how these variables develop throughout learners' educational journeys. Addressing this gap is essential for developing more sustainable and responsive pedagogical interventions.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on ESL speaking development by providing a learner-centred examination of spoken English challenges among diploma students in Malaysia. Unlike studies that focus primarily on test performance or lecturer perspectives, this research foregrounds the lived experiences and expectations of learners themselves.

Theoretical Significance

The study extends the application of Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, and Expectancy-Value Theory within Malaysian tertiary ESL contexts. Furthermore, it complements these frameworks through contemporary motivational perspectives such as the L2 Motivational Self System, which emphasizes learners' ideal future identities as English users (Ou, 2025; Zhang & Hu, 2025). The findings contribute to understanding how emotional, social, and motivational factors interact to influence speaking development.

Pedagogical Significance

The findings provide valuable insights for English lecturers seeking to create more effective speaking environments. Students consistently emphasize the importance of emotional support, encouragement, and meaningful interaction opportunities. These findings support the implementation of communicative, collaborative, and culturally responsive teaching approaches that prioritize authentic communication over examination preparation.

The study also highlights the potential benefits of multimodal and kinesthetic learning approaches, which recent research identifies as effective for enhancing speaking proficiency and learner engagement (Luo, 2024; Zhang et al., 2026). Such approaches may offer practical alternatives to traditional teacher-centred instruction.

Institutional and Policy Significance

At the institutional level, the study underscores the need for professional development programmes that equip lecturers with strategies for reducing language anxiety, fostering learner autonomy, and facilitating meaningful interaction. The findings suggest that improving spoken English proficiency requires systemic changes rather than solely expecting learners to take greater responsibility.

From a policy perspective, the study supports ongoing efforts to shift Malaysian English language education toward communicative competence and graduate employability. By demonstrating the consequences of prolonged exam-oriented instruction, the findings provide evidence for curriculum reforms that prioritize oral communication skills.

Research Significance

Perhaps most importantly, the study addresses an underexplored population within Malaysian ESL research: diploma students from private higher education institutions. It also identifies a significant literature gap concerning the lack of longitudinal investigations into ESL learners' expectations, motivation, and speaking development. Future studies may build upon these findings to examine how learner perceptions evolve across different stages of tertiary education and professional preparation.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- i. What affective, motivational, and sociocultural factors influence Malaysian ESL students' ability and willingness to communicate in English despite prolonged exposure to English language education?
- ii. How do Malaysian ESL students perceive the effectiveness of current English language teaching practices in supporting the development of their spoken English proficiency?
- iii. What are Malaysian ESL students' expectations of English lecturers and classroom learning environments in fostering confidence, engagement, and communicative competence in English?

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the challenges faced by ESL diploma students in developing spoken English proficiency, as well as their perceptions of classroom practices and expectations of English lecturers. A qualitative approach was selected to foreground student voices, enabling rich, descriptive insights into emotional, pedagogical, and contextual barriers often overlooked in quantitative studies. Data were collected using open-ended written questionnaires, which were distributed to ten diploma students from a private higher education institution in Kelantan. Participants were purposively selected to reflect a range of academic disciplines, SPM English grades, and linguistic backgrounds. All responses were anonymised to protect student identity. The questionnaire comprised six open-ended questions aligned with three research objectives and guided by Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, and Expectancy-Value Theory. These theoretical lenses informed the design and interpretation of the questions, particularly concerning learner anxiety, motivation, and interaction. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the responses. Coding was conducted manually to identify recurring patterns and categories across the data. Themes were then interpreted in relation to the study's research questions to uncover underlying factors that hinder or support spoken English development in Malaysian tertiary ESL contexts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of student responses revealed three interconnected themes that collectively explain the persistent difficulties diploma students experience in developing spoken English proficiency: (1) affective barriers and linguistic insecurity, (2) pedagogical limitations and communicative deprivation, and (3) learner expectations of supportive and meaningful English learning experiences. Together, these findings suggest that students' inability to communicate effectively is not primarily caused by inadequate linguistic knowledge but by a complex interaction of emotional, motivational, sociocultural, and instructional factors.

Theme 1: Affective Barriers and Linguistic Insecurity

The most frequently reported challenge among participants was the presence of affective barriers, particularly low confidence, fear of making mistakes, anxiety when speaking, and concern about being judged by peers. Many students acknowledged that they understood English and possessed basic vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, yet hesitated to speak because of psychological discomfort.

This finding strongly supports Krashen's (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which proposes that emotional variables such as anxiety, self-confidence, and motivation can either facilitate or obstruct language acquisition. When learners experience heightened anxiety, their affective filter rises, reducing their willingness to process input and participate in communication. In the present study, students frequently described situations in which they remained silent despite knowing the answer, indicating that psychological barriers often outweighed linguistic limitations.

The findings are consistent with previous Malaysian studies that identify speaking anxiety as one of the strongest predictors of poor oral performance among ESL learners (Baharuddin & Md Rashid, 2014; Miskam & Sidalvi, 2018). Similar patterns have also been reported internationally. According to Suliman (2024), speaking difficulties among ESL learners are frequently associated with fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and limited opportunities for authentic interaction. Likewise, Alhasan et al. (2024) found that students often avoid speaking activities because they anticipate criticism from lecturers and classmates.

Beyond anxiety, participants also demonstrated low linguistic self-efficacy. Many learners doubted their ability to speak accurately despite years of formal instruction. This finding aligns with recent research emphasizing the role of self-belief in shaping willingness to communicate. Students with stronger self-efficacy are generally more willing to take risks and engage in communicative activities, whereas those with low confidence often avoid situations requiring spontaneous language production (Liu et al., 2025).

From the perspective of Expectancy-Value Theory, students who perceive themselves as likely to fail communication tasks are less inclined to invest effort in speaking activities. The present findings suggest that repeated experiences of difficulty, correction, and embarrassment may gradually diminish learners' expectations of success, creating a cycle of avoidance that further limits speaking development.

Furthermore, the findings can be interpreted through the lens of the L2 Motivational Self System. Recent studies indicate that learners who possess a vivid "Ideal L2 Self"—a future vision of themselves as competent English speakers—demonstrate greater resilience and communicative engagement (Ou, 2025; Zhang & Hu, 2025). However, many participants appeared unable to envision themselves as confident English users, suggesting that their future-oriented motivation may have weakened over years of unsuccessful speaking experiences.

Consequently, the issue extends beyond language proficiency and reflects a broader psychological challenge involving identity, confidence, and perceived competence.

Theme 2: Pedagogical Limitations and Communicative Deprivation

A second major theme concerned dissatisfaction with existing classroom practices. Although students appreciated certain speaking activities such as presentations, role plays, and group discussions, many felt that English classes continued to focus heavily on examinations, grammar exercises, worksheets, and written assessments. As a result, opportunities for meaningful communication remained limited.

These findings reinforce criticisms of examination-oriented language instruction that have long been associated with Malaysian ESL classrooms (Ramarow & Hassan, 2021). Despite national curriculum reforms emphasizing communicative competence, students continue to perceive a disconnect between what is taught and what is required in real-world communication. Participants repeatedly suggested that they needed more opportunities to practise speaking in authentic contexts rather than merely learning grammatical rules.

The findings support Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which argues that language development occurs primarily through social interaction and collaborative meaning-making. According to Vygotsky (1978), learners acquire language most effectively when they participate in communicative activities within supportive social environments. However, the experiences described by participants suggest that many classrooms still offer limited opportunities for interaction, thereby restricting the social processes necessary for language development.

Recent Scopus-indexed studies similarly highlight the importance of interaction-rich environments. Bai et al. (2025) found that collaborative learning significantly improves learner engagement and self-regulation. Likewise, Achieng (2025) demonstrated that communicative and culturally responsive pedagogies positively influence learner motivation and participation.

An important insight emerging from the data concerns students' preference for active learning approaches. Several participants expressed appreciation for role plays, presentations, and collaborative activities because these methods allowed them to use English meaningfully. This finding aligns with contemporary literature indicating that kinesthetic, multimodal, and collaborative learning approaches enhance speaking proficiency and learner engagement (Komlosi-Ferdinand, 2018; Luo, 2024; Zhang et al., 2026).

The preference for interactive activities may also reflect students' desire for experiential learning. Rather than passively receiving linguistic knowledge, learners wish to develop communicative competence through participation, practice, and authentic interaction. Such preferences suggest that future pedagogical reforms should move beyond traditional lecture-based approaches toward more learner-centred and communicative methodologies.

The findings therefore reveal a significant mismatch between students' communicative needs and the instructional practices they experience, contributing to the persistent gap between academic achievement and real-world communicative competence.

Theme 3: Learner Expectations of Supportive and Meaningful Learning Experiences

The third theme highlights students' expectations of English lecturers and learning environments. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of supportive lecturers who demonstrate patience, encouragement, empathy, and understanding. Many indicated that they were more willing to participate when lecturers created a safe atmosphere where mistakes were viewed as part of the learning process.

This finding reinforces the growing body of research emphasizing the central role of teacher-student relationships in language learning. According to Bai et al. (2025), teacher support significantly influences motivation, self-regulation, and classroom engagement. Similarly, Liu et al. (2025) found that positive teacher-student relationships contribute directly to learners' confidence and persistence.

The findings further support Vygotsky's notion that learning is socially mediated. Within sociocultural perspectives, lecturers serve not merely as knowledge providers but as facilitators who scaffold learning and support participation within learners' Zones of Proximal Development. Students' emphasis on encouragement and emotional support suggests that effective language teaching extends beyond instructional techniques and includes relational and affective dimensions.

Interestingly, participants also expressed expectations that English classes should be enjoyable, interactive, and relevant to their future careers. These expectations align closely with recent findings on intrinsic and integrative motivation. Research suggests that learners are more engaged when they perceive English as personally meaningful and connected to their future aspirations (Suliman et al., 2024; Akhadali Ugli et al., 2025).

Moreover, students appeared to value learning environments that acknowledge their backgrounds and experiences. This finding resonates with research on culturally responsive teaching, which emphasizes the importance of connecting instructional content with learners' identities, communities, and lived experiences (Zorba, 2020). When learners perceive classroom activities as culturally relevant and personally meaningful, they demonstrate higher levels of motivation, participation, and willingness to communicate.

The participants' expectations therefore reflect a shift away from traditional teacher-centred models toward more collaborative, supportive, and learner-centred approaches. Rather than viewing lecturers solely as evaluators, students increasingly expect them to function as facilitators, mentors, and communicative partners.

Integrative Discussion

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that the persistent inability of many diploma students to speak English confidently cannot be attributed solely to deficiencies in linguistic knowledge. Instead, the problem emerges from the interaction of affective barriers, limited communicative opportunities, and unmet learner expectations.

The three theoretical frameworks adopted in this study collectively explain these findings. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis explains how anxiety and low confidence inhibit language production. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory highlights the importance of meaningful interaction and supportive learning communities. Expectancy-Value Theory explains how learners' beliefs about success and the perceived value of English influence motivation and participation.

The findings additionally resonate with contemporary motivational perspectives such as the L2 Motivational Self System. Students who struggle to envision themselves as successful English users are less likely to engage in communicative activities, whereas supportive teaching environments can strengthen learners' ideal future identities and willingness to communicate.

Most importantly, this study challenges deficit perspectives that portray students as unmotivated or unwilling to learn English. The data suggest that learners are highly aware of their weaknesses and genuinely desire improvement. Their frustrations stem not from a lack of motivation but from educational experiences that fail to adequately address their emotional, communicative, and developmental needs.

Consequently, improving spoken English proficiency in Malaysian tertiary education requires more than curriculum revisions. It demands a systemic shift toward emotionally responsive, culturally relevant, interaction-focused, and learner-centred pedagogies that empower students to become confident and active users of English. Such a transformation is essential if higher education institutions are to bridge the long-standing gap between examination success and communicative competence.

LIMITATIONS

This study is limited by its small sample size and single-institution focus, which may affect the generalisability of findings as stated across diverse Malaysian ESL contexts. Moreover, studies with small samples may face replication issues when scaled up, as the initial findings may not hold true in larger, more diverse samples (McNeish, 2017). As data were self-reported through written questionnaires, responses may also be influenced by students' willingness to disclose personal challenges. Additionally, the absence of follow-up interviews limits the depth of clarification or elaboration. Future studies could incorporate multiple institutions, triangulate data through interviews or classroom observations, and examine lecturers' perspectives to gain a more comprehensive understanding of spoken English development in tertiary ESL settings.

CONCLUSION

This study reinforces the persistent gap between students' exam-based proficiency and their real-world communicative competence (Arumugam et al., 2021; Wang & Lee, 2024). Despite years of English instruction, many diploma students remain unable to speak fluently because classroom practices continue to prioritise grammar and written assessments over oral interaction. The data reveal that students desire interactive, supportive, and emotionally safe environments where they can practise without fear of ridicule, in line with calls for more communicative and learner-centred teaching approaches (Too, 2023). To address these challenges, lecturers should integrate activities such as roleplays, peer discussions, and spontaneous speaking opportunities while adopting teaching strategies that lower anxiety and build self-efficacy. Institutions must also recognise their role in providing training and structural support for lecturers to create more communicative classrooms. Future research should expand to multiple institutions, triangulate student and lecturer perspectives, and employ classroom observations to provide a fuller understanding of the systemic barriers to spoken English development in Malaysia's tertiary education sector.

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