Blank Minds and Stuck Voices: Understanding and Addressing Cognitive Anxiety in High-Stakes ESL Speaking Tests

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DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.922ILEIID0010

Received: 22 September 2025; Accepted: 30 September 2025; Published: 22 October 2025

ABSTRACT

Speaking test anxiety is a recurring challenge among second language (L2) learners, who often perceive the experience as intimidating and paralyzing. Beyond affective discomfort, learners are also susceptible to cognitive anxiety (CA), which manifests in mental blanks, blocked recall, and impaired clarity of speech during high-stakes assessments. Guided by Eysenck et al.'s Attentional Control Theory and Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, this study conceptualizes CA as a disruption of attentional resources and language processing. To explore this phenomenon, a mixed-methods survey design was employed with 258 Malaysian undergraduates enrolled in diploma and technical programmes. Quantitative Likert-scale data were analyzed descriptively, while qualitative open-ended responses underwent thematic coding to capture students' lived experiences. The findings revealed four core patterns: i) performance pressure induces recall blockage, ii) nervous arousal undermines speech clarity, iii) fear of negative evaluation amplifies cognitive disruption, and iv) coping mechanisms remain limited and unsystematic. Together, these results confirm that CA acts as a cognitive barrier to L2 oral performance, preventing learners from demonstrating their communicative ability. The study contributes to theory by extending understandings of test anxiety beyond affective dimensions into cognitive mechanisms, and to practice by recommending that educators integrate mock assessments, scaffold retrieval strategies, and cultivate supportive classroom environments to reduce the cognitive costs of high-stakes speaking tests.

Keywords: Cognitive Anxiety, Speaking Test Anxiety, Attentional Control Theory, ESL Learners, and High-Stakes Assessment

INTRODUCTION

Speaking assessments are integral to English as a Second Language (ESL) learning, yet they remain among the most anxiety-provoking experiences for students. In high-stakes contexts, where grades, examiner judgments, and recordings are involved, learners often describe their experience not merely as stressful but as paralyzing, resulting in what many call blank minds and stuck voices. While the broader phenomenon of second language speaking anxiety has been widely studied (Horwitz, 2001; Young, 1991), much of the literature frames it primarily as an affective condition, emphasizing fear, nervousness, and inhibition. Less attention has been devoted to its cognitive dimensions, particularly how anxiety disrupts working memory, recall, and attentional control, leading to impaired oral performance.

From a theoretical standpoint, Eysenck et al.'s (2007) Attentional Control Theory (ACT) posits that anxiety reduces attentional control, shifting cognitive resources from task-relevant to task-irrelevant stimuli and thereby undermining performance. In parallel, Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis explains how negative affective states raise psychological barriers that limit learners' access to their linguistic competence. Taken together, these frameworks suggest that speaking test anxiety is not only emotional but also cognitive:

anxiety interferes with learners' ability to retrieve and organize language in real time, producing the experience of blank minds and stuck voices.

The Malaysian context underscores the urgency of this issue. The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025 identifies speaking as the weakest of the four English skills among both students and teachers (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). Empirical studies further reveal that many Malaysian learners struggle with speaking due to anxiety, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, and limited vocabulary (Abdullah et al., 2021). Employers, too, consistently emphasize that graduates entering the workforce lack adequate English proficiency and communicative competence, especially oral communication, which directly impacts employability (Meltzoff et al., 2017). These findings highlight a persistent skills gap in spoken English performance, exacerbated by test-related anxiety. Yet, despite these concerns, little empirical research has specifically examined how cognitive anxiety manifests in Malaysian ESL speaking test settings.

Accordingly, this study investigates the cognitive dimensions of speaking test anxiety among Malaysian undergraduates using a mixed-methods survey design. Quantitative Likert-scale items provide an overview of anxiety patterns, while qualitative open-ended responses capture students' lived experiences of blank minds and stuck voices. By integrating these perspectives, the study aims to contribute to theory by extending understandings of test anxiety beyond affective domains into cognitive mechanisms, and to practice by offering evidence-based recommendations for educators to mitigate cognitive anxiety in high-stakes speaking assessments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language Anxiety Research

Language anxiety has long been recognized as a significant barrier in second language (L2) learning. Defined as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 128), it has been consistently linked to poorer academic outcomes, avoidance behaviors, and reduced willingness to communicate (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Horwitz, 2001). Within this broader construct, test anxiety has emerged as a particularly salient dimension, especially in speaking tasks where learners are required to demonstrate competence under evaluative pressure (Young, 1991).

Cognitive Anxiety and Attentional Control Theory

While much of the research emphasizes the affective domain, anxiety also exerts powerful cognitive effects. According to Eysenck et al.'s (2007) Attentional Control Theory (ACT), anxiety disrupts the balance between goal-directed and stimulus-driven attentional systems. This results in reduced working memory capacity, blocked recall, and impaired ability to retrieve and organize language in real time. In the context of L2 speaking tests, learners experiencing cognitive anxiety often report their "minds going blank," highlighting the direct impact of attentional interference on language production (MacIntyre, 2017). These disruptions underscore the importance of framing speaking test anxiety not only as an emotional state but as a cognitive barrier to performance.

The Affective Filter Hypothesis

The cognitive perspective intersects with affective explanations, particularly Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis. This hypothesis posits that emotional states such as anxiety, low motivation, or lack of confidence can raise a psychological filter, preventing learners from fully accessing or utilizing their linguistic knowledge. In speaking assessments, this means that learners' communicative competence may remain "locked behind" the affective filter. When combined with the attentional disruptions explained by ACT, the affective filter helps to account for why learners with adequate proficiency may still perform poorly under test conditions: both affective and cognitive mechanisms operate simultaneously to constrain output.

Speaking Assessments and High-Stakes Conditions Speaking assessments are particularly prone to triggering anxiety because they are immediate, public, and high-stakes. Unlike written assessments, oral performance requires spontaneous retrieval, organization, and delivery of ideas, leaving little room for correction (Phillips, 1992). The presence of examiners and peers, coupled with the pressure of grades, heightens self-consciousness and the fear of negative evaluation (Liu & Jackson, 2008). In Malaysian contexts, where assessments are often recorded for moderation and accountability, students report heightened anxiety when faced with the permanence of recordings and the potential for repeated scrutiny (Abdullah et al., 2021). These conditions amplify the likelihood of cognitive blocks, making speaking assessments uniquely challenging for ESL learners.

Teacher Mediation and Supportive Pedagogy Despite the high-stakes nature of speaking tests, research highlights the critical role of teacher mediation in mitigating anxiety. Supportive teaching practices such as creating a low-anxiety classroom environment, providing mock assessments, and offering constructive rather than judgmental feedback, have been shown to reduce both affective and cognitive anxiety (Young, 1991; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). In the Malaysian context, studies recommend increasing opportunities for oral practice, scaffolding speaking tasks, and explicitly addressing students' anxiety through pedagogical strategies (Rahman et al., 2022). Teachers who foster psychologically safe spaces not only reduce learners' affective filter but also help to alleviate the cognitive disruptions associated with blank minds and stuck voices.

In summary, the literature reveals that speaking test anxiety is a multifaceted construct with affective and cognitive dimensions. Attentional Control Theory (Eysenck et al., 2007) and the Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982) provide complementary explanations for why learners experience mental blanks and disrupted fluency in high-stakes contexts. However, little is known about how Malaysian undergraduates specifically experience cognitive anxiety in high-stakes speaking tests, or what contextual triggers and coping strategies characterize this phenomenon. Moreover, existing research has not sufficiently examined the pedagogical role of teachers in mitigating cognitive disruptions. Therefore, this study addresses a critical gap by investigating the cognitive dimensions of speaking test anxiety among Malaysian undergraduates. It aims to identify the symptoms, triggers, and coping strategies associated with cognitive anxiety, while also highlighting implications for educators. These directions are captured in the following research questions:

1. What cognitive symptoms of anxiety do ESL undergraduates in Malaysia experience during high-stakes speaking tests?
2. Which contextual factors influence their cognitive anxiety?
3. What coping strategies do they employ to manage cognitive anxiety, and how effective are these strategies perceived to be?
4. What pedagogical implications can be drawn to help educators reduce the cognitive costs of high-stakes ESL speaking assessments?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods survey design to investigate the cognitive dimensions of speaking test anxiety. The rationale for this approach lies in its ability to capture both the breadth of anxiety patterns through quantitative data and the depth of learners' lived experiences through qualitative narratives (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative data from Likert-scale items provided descriptive insights into the prevalence of anxiety symptoms, while qualitative open-ended responses revealed the contextual triggers and coping strategies underlying blank minds and stuck voices. This integration allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of cognitive anxiety in high-stakes ESL speaking tests. Also, this methodological complementarity enhances the validity and richness of the findings, offering both generalizable patterns and context-specific insights.

Participants

The study involved 258 undergraduates enrolled in diploma and technical programmes at a Malaysian public university. Participants were between the ages of 17 and 23, representing both male and female students across various engineering and technical fields. This population was selected because diploma and technical undergraduates are often required to meet English communication demands for both academic progression and employability, yet they are reported to struggle particularly with oral assessments (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). All participants provided informed consent before completing the survey.

Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire comprising two main components. The quantitative section consists of a set of Likert-scale items adapted from established language anxiety measures (Horwitz et al., 1986; Phillips, 1992; MacIntyre, 2017), focusing specifically on cognitive symptoms during speaking tests. Items measured constructs such as nervousness, blocked recall, fear of judgment, and clarity of speech. The qualitative section contains three open-ended questions invited participants to elaborate on: What makes them most anxious about English-speaking tests; How they attempt to overcome speaking test anxiety; and What teachers can do to help reduce their anxiety. This dual structure ensured that both measurable patterns and nuanced student perspectives were captured.

Using QR code, the survey was distributed electronically via student official WhatsApp groups where they were given one week to respond. Participation was voluntary, and students were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Consent was obtained through an online checkbox before proceeding with the survey. To ensure validity, items were first piloted with a small group (n = 20) for clarity and cultural appropriateness, and minor wording adjustments were made before full distribution.

Data Analysis

Responses to Likert-scale items were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, percentages) to identify patterns of cognitive anxiety. Cross-tabulations were also conducted to examine relationships between demographic variables (e.g., gender, self-rated proficiency) and anxiety levels. Open-ended responses were subjected to thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. Codes were inductively developed to identify recurrent themes related to blank minds, stuck voices, triggers, coping mechanisms, and perceptions of teacher support. Findings from both data strands were compared and integrated to triangulate results, allowing quantitative prevalence to be interpreted alongside qualitative explanation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed four major themes that illustrate how cognitive anxiety manifests in Malaysian undergraduates during high-stakes ESL speaking tests. Each theme is presented with quantitative prevalence, qualitative accounts, and interpretation through Attentional Control Theory (Eysenck et al., 2007) and Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, alongside relevant literature.

Performance Pressure Induces Recall Blockage

Quantitatively, 42.6% of students agreed or strongly agreed that their minds go blank during speaking tests, with 14% strongly agreeing. More than half (52.7%) reported feeling nervous before a test, and nearly half (48.8%) worried that their pronunciation was not adequate. Students' reflections reinforced these results:

"Blank. What was my point? Whenever I speak."

"The grades and scores I will receive make me feel stressed."

"When the examiner calls me, suddenly I forget what I wanted to say."

These findings support earlier research which identified performance pressure as a central trigger of speaking anxiety, often resulting in blocked recall and avoidance behaviors (Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). From the perspective of Attentional Control Theory, this reflects the diversion of cognitive resources from task-relevant processing to worry-related thoughts, impairing working memory and retrieval (Eysenck et al., 2007). In high-stakes Malaysian classrooms where marks determine progression, students' competence may be masked by anxiety-driven recall blockages. Pedagogically, this underscores the need for mock assessments and rehearsal under simulated conditions, a strategy shown to reduce cognitive overload in oral performance tasks (Phillips, 1992).

Nervous Arousal Undermines Speech Clarity

Nervous arousal further compromised fluency and clarity. 42.6% of students agreed that nervousness affected their ability to speak clearly, while 34.9% reported greater anxiety in group settings compared to one-on-one. Students described these struggles:

"I'm afraid if I can't speak fluently."

"My hands shake, I take a deep breath, but still the words come out unclear."

"I will try to calm myself down… so that I can focus better."

This resonates with findings by MacIntyre (2017), who demonstrated that physiological arousal from anxiety reduces fluency and coherence in spontaneous speech. According to ACT, such arousal limits attentional control and increases susceptibility to distractions, thereby reducing clarity (Eysenck et al., 2007). Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis complements this interpretation: nervousness raises the filter, preventing learners from accessing their full linguistic repertoire. This dual explanation accounts for the stuck voice phenomenon. Pedagogically, studies have shown that gradual exposure to speaking situations—from low-stakes peer conversations to higher-stakes oral presentations—helps desensitize learners and improve clarity under pressure (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014).

Fear of Negative Evaluation Amplifies Cognitive Disruption

Fear of judgment exacerbated cognitive anxiety, though less prominently than recall blockage. 29.1% of students worried about examiner evaluation, and 10.5% strongly agreed they felt more anxious if the test was recorded. Students explained:

"I'm scared the teacher will think I am not good enough."

"If the test is recorded, I feel nervous because someone can replay my mistakes."

Fear of negative evaluation has been consistently identified as one of the core components of language anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; Liu & Jackson, 2008). In this study, it compounded cognitive disruption by shifting attention away from task performance and toward self-monitoring. This is consistent with ACT, which highlights how attention is misallocated under evaluative threat (Eysenck et al., 2007). The recording of tests adds permanence to mistakes, amplifying the affective filter (Krashen, 1982) and reinforcing the cycle of anxiety. Similar findings in other contexts show that transparent assessment practices and supportive feedback reduce the impact of evaluative fear (Young, 1991; Rahman et al., 2022).

Coping Mechanisms Remain Limited and Unsystematic

Students' coping strategies were inconsistent. While some reported calming themselves, breathing, or pretending the audience was absent, quantitative data indicated only moderate success in managing anxiety. Examples included:

"Breathe calmly."

"Just smile and pretend that no one is there."

"I will calm myself down or sit apart so that I can focus better."

These self-reliant strategies mirror what previous studies have identified as surface-level coping mechanisms, which provide temporary relief but do not address underlying cognitive disruption (Oxford, 2011). Without explicit guidance, students rarely adopt structured preparation techniques such as strategy rehearsal or controlled exposure (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). This reinforces the critical role of teachers as mediators. Research confirms that teacher-led interventions, including explicit anxiety management training and strategy instruction, are more effective in lowering both affective and cognitive anxiety (Rahman et al., 2022).

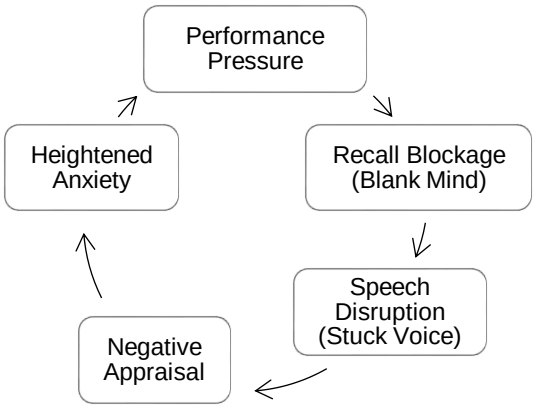

Figure 1 Cycle of Cognitive Anxiety in High-Stakes ESL Speaking Tests

In summary, the findings depict a reinforcing cycle as shown in Figure 1: performance pressure → recall blockage (blank minds) → speech disruption (stuck voices) → heightened anxiety through evaluation → reliance on limited coping strategies. This model illustrates how performance pressure in high-stakes speaking assessments can trigger recall blockage ("blank minds"), which disrupts speech production ("stuck voices"). The resulting negative appraisal further heightens anxiety, reinforcing the cycle and preventing learners from demonstrating their full communicative competence.

This cycle validates ACT's prediction that anxiety undermines attentional control, while also illustrating the affective barriers described by Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis. It also supports earlier research documenting how test anxiety is particularly detrimental in speaking assessments due to their immediacy, spontaneity, and evaluative nature (Phillips, 1992; Young, 1991). The novelty of this study lies in its empirical demonstration of how these mechanisms operate within the Malaysian higher education context, where English proficiency is central to both academic success and employability but remains a persistent challenge (Abdullah et al., 2021; Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013).

Pedagogical Implications

The findings highlight that cognitive anxiety in high-stakes ESL speaking tests manifests through blank minds, stuck voices, fear of negative evaluation, and reliance on limited coping strategies. These patterns underscore the need for educators to adopt proactive interventions. Several pedagogical implications can be drawn.

Students reported mental blanks and blocked recall when faced with high-stakes performance pressure. This supports the idea that familiarity with test conditions reduces cognitive load (Phillips, 1992). Teachers should implement mock speaking tests that replicate exam conditions in a low-stakes setting, allowing learners to practice retrieval under pressure. This gradual exposure can desensitize students to evaluative stress and lower both affective and cognitive barriers (Young, 1991).

Nervous arousal was found to undermine fluency and clarity of speech, consistent with research showing that anxiety disrupts real-time language processing (MacIntyre, 2017). Pedagogically, teachers should design a progressive speaking curriculum that begins with low-pressure tasks (pair discussions, small group activities) and incrementally moves toward higher-stakes performances (whole-class presentations, recorded tasks). This stepwise exposure can build learners' tolerance to physiological arousal and reduce the likelihood of "stuck voices."

Fear of negative evaluation was a significant trigger of cognitive disruption, echoing Horwitz et al.'s (1986) findings that evaluation heightens anxiety. Teachers can mitigate this by adopting constructive feedback approaches that emphasize growth rather than judgment. Clear assessment rubrics, formative feedback, and opportunities for self-reflection help reframe evaluations as learning opportunities rather than punitive judgments (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Transparency in the use of recordings is also essential, ensuring that students perceive them as developmental tools rather than permanent records of failure.

Moreover, students' coping strategies were largely self-reliant and unsystematic, such as breathing or avoidance. This aligns with previous research showing that without explicit strategy instruction, learners often rely on ineffective anxiety management techniques (Rahman et al., 2022). Teachers can mediate this by explicitly teaching retrieval and fluency strategies such as using key words or prompts, practicing pauses, and engaging in vocabulary rehearsal. Creating classroom spaces where students can safely acknowledge and discuss anxiety may also lower the affective filter and normalize the experience of cognitive disruptions (Liu & Jackson, 2008).

Overall, the study underscores that educators are pivotal in transforming high-stakes speaking tests from anxiety-inducing to competence-revealing experiences. By simulating test conditions, scaffolding exposure, offering constructive feedback, and teaching coping strategies, teachers can disrupt the cycle of blank minds and stuck voices. These practices address both the cognitive mechanisms identified by ACT and the affective barriers explained by the Affective Filter Hypothesis, offering a dual-pathway solution to improving ESL speaking performance.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the cognitive dimensions of speaking test anxiety among Malaysian undergraduates, highlighting how high-stakes conditions lead to blank minds and stuck voices. Through a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative survey items with qualitative reflections, the analysis revealed four interrelated themes: (i) performance pressure induces recall blockage, (ii) nervous arousal undermines speech clarity, (iii) fear of negative evaluation amplifies cognitive disruption, and (iv) coping mechanisms remain limited and unsystematic.

Theoretically, the findings extend Attentional Control Theory (Eysenck et al., 2007) by illustrating how attentional disruption manifests in real-world L2 oral assessments, where recall blockage and speech disruption represent observable outcomes of reduced working memory capacity. Simultaneously, the results reaffirm Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), showing how heightened affective states raise psychological barriers that prevent learners from accessing their linguistic competence. By combining these perspectives, the study advances current understandings of test anxiety as both an affective and a cognitive phenomenon, thereby contributing to the refinement of theoretical models of second language anxiety.

Practically, the study underscores the critical role of educators in mediating the effects of cognitive anxiety. Students' reliance on limited self-directed strategies highlights the need for structured pedagogical interventions. Recommendations include integrating mock assessments to simulate high-stakes conditions in a low-pressure environment, designing curricula with gradual exposure to speaking tasks, adopting constructive and transparent feedback practices, and providing explicit strategy training for managing recall and fluency. These implications are particularly relevant for the Malaysian higher education context, where speaking proficiency remains a national priority (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013) and a key factor in graduate employability (Abdullah et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, several research limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study relied on self-reported survey data, which may be subject to social desirability bias or selective recall. Second, while the mixed-methods design provided both breadth and depth, the qualitative data were limited to open-ended survey questions rather than in-depth interviews, which may have constrained the richness of insights. Third, the sample was drawn from a single Malaysian public university, potentially limiting the generalizability of findings across different institutional or cultural contexts. Finally, the study did not directly measure performance outcomes, meaning that the link between cognitive anxiety and actual speaking test scores remains inferred rather than empirically tested.

Building on these limitations, future studies could adopt longitudinal designs to track how repeated exposure to speaking tests affects the trajectory of cognitive anxiety over time. Experimental research could test the effectiveness of specific pedagogical interventions, such as structured mock tests or retrieval strategy training, in reducing cognitive disruptions. Comparative studies across institutions or countries would shed light on whether the patterns observed here are universal or context-specific. Finally, integrating performance-based data (e.g., test scores, examiner ratings) with self-reported anxiety would allow for a more direct examination of how blank minds and stuck voices translate into measurable outcomes.

In conclusion, speaking test anxiety should not be understood solely as a matter of nerves but as a cognitive barrier that obstructs learners' ability to demonstrate their true communicative competence. By recognizing and addressing the interplay between affective and cognitive mechanisms, educators can help break the cycle of blank minds and stuck voices, enabling learners to perform to their potential in high-stakes ESL speaking assessments.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank our university for the support, the participants for their time and cooperation, and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful and useful suggestions.

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