

**Article**

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**ABSTRACT**

English is mandatory for Malaysian students from standard one until form five. The subject per se has been one of the prerequisites to pass *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) and to attain a high school certificate. Regardless of the long years formally learning and acquiring the language within the classroom walls especially, many still fail to speak fluently. Furthermore, the issue of low English proficiency among Malaysians has been one of the primal causes of unemployment in the country. In terms of an individual's speaking performance, it is found that anxiety during speaking a particular language can cause mental barriers that will prevent learners from speaking fluently. This quantitative study examined the levels of speaking anxiety of Form 1 students towards the English language and the contributing factors towards English-speaking anxiety. 138 Form 1 students took part and completed an adapted 33-item English Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (ELCAS) questionnaire. The questionnaire was then analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for the mean and frequency values. The results show that 56.5% of the Form 1 students have moderate levels of English-speaking anxiety. It is also found that the highest contributing factor towards the students' speaking anxiety is Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) with a mean of 2.59. In conclusion, English proficiency level, and socioeconomic as well as geographical factors influence the level of speaking anxiety among ESL learners in Malaysia.

**KEYWORDS:** Speaking anxiety, Speaking skill, Anxiety Scale, Fear of Negative Evaluation

## Introduction

English is the current lingua franca and has become the medium of instruction in Literature, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) in most countries, including Malaysia (Kashinathan & Aziz, 2021). Implementing English across the curriculum in Malaysia is the aftermath of British colonization (Bakar et al., 2021). A study by Bakar et al. (2021) revealed how the English language has penetrated the language domain in Malaysia in two distinct phases, pre- and post-independence. During the pre-independence era, primary schools had four existing instruction mediums: Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, and English. All four languages were exclusively catered to the respective races, which were the Malay, Chinese, and Indian whereas, the English language was explicitly reserved for the privileged ones, such as children who lived in urban areas and daughters and sons of chiefs and royals (Bakar et al., 2021). Now, Malaysia has become one of the countries that recognizes English as the second language (Zulkflee et al., 2023) and the language per se is also deemed as the pertinent aspect of the country's education (Kashinathan & Aziz, 2021) for instance, Malaysia has transgressed from PPSMI to MBMMBI (Ibrahim, 2020). Although English is officially the second language actively used in formal and informal settings, the number of Malaysians with low English proficiency is alarming.

The issues of low English proficiency among Malaysians particularly secondary school leavers and university graduates are not new and has been debated for years by many concern parties. The government through Ministry of Education Malaysia has taken countless of initiatives to overcome this problem, for examples, the teaching of Science and Mathematics subjects in English, The Native Speaker Programme and the most recent initiative is the implementation of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) into the primary and secondary English language syllabus. These are only a few examples of the action taken by the government to improve the quality of English among its people apart from the 11 years of learning English through formal education.

Hazita (2009) mentioned that Malaysian students are accustomed to the English language as it has been a compulsory subject since primary school. According to Goh et al. (2020), since 2010, Malaysian preschool teachers have been instructed to integrate the use of the English language to get the children ready to master the English language before Primary One as a part of the National Preschool Standards-based Curriculum 2010 (NPSbC). This serves as proof that the government is serious about elevating the level of English proficiency among Malaysians through a formal education system. Unfortunately, the Ministry of Education (2013) reported that 3,500,000 Malaysian school students fail to meet the minimum requirement to pass English despite many years of studying English as a compulsory subject in school.

Even worse, the Malaysian Examinations Council (2017) revealed that more than half of Malaysian University English Test (MUET) candidates fail to achieve at least band 4. According to a study by Harun et al. (2021), the speaking test was voted by the candidates to be the most arduous task in MUET as they have weak speaking skills. To explain, Zulkflee et al. (2023) stated that speaking is an anxiety-provoking task for English language learners. As a result, they have difficulty mastering one of the most essential English language skills: speaking skills. According to Badrasawi et al. (2020), affective factors, including anxiety, are one of the main reasons that hinder students from mastering speaking skills. Adding to that, it is found that Malaysian undergraduates struggle with English language speaking anxiety that eventually impacts their

verbal performance negatively in the targeted language despite the many years of learning English formally (Miskam & Saidalvi, 2018; Achanan et al., 2021).

Speaking anxiety impedes one's learning process of the targeted language (L2 & FL) and will cause learners difficulties achieving the expected language fluency. Much research has found that students deal with speaking anxiety by being reluctant or even refusing to partake in English conversation in class, whether voluntarily or when required by the teacher (Wijewantha, 2021; Ismail et al., 2022). Some students show clinical symptoms of anxiety, such as hesitation, verbal staggering, and inconsistent speech (Asif, 2017). She also proves that students predominantly suffer from apprehension regarding speaking skills. Thus, anxiety indeed affects one's language proficiency. Rajita and Alamelu (2020) highlighted that a lack of confidence in speaking is a dire threat to tertiary-level education. As a result, the continuous decline in speaking proficiency among Malaysians is inevitable as many encounter challenges in communicating in English due to poor command of the language and anxiety (Idrus and Tuan Abd Hamid, 2021; Zukflee, 2023).

The fact is Malaysian high unemployment rate has been frequently ascribed to Malaysians' low level of English proficiency (Ting et al., 2017; Nesaratnam et al., 2020). If students remain passive in English class due to speaking anxiety, the frequency of them practicing spoken English will further decrease and this will definitely not hone their English skill. This problem is not only restricted to solely students as it oscillates between both students and teachers. Teachers have to frequently find ways to ensure students' participation in speaking activities in class. Hence, examining the English language speaking-anxiety level of secondary school students could help the teachers to take interpersonal factor in second language (SL) learning process into consideration to create a judgement-free SL classroom for students. Upon this, the issue of unemployment and low English language proficiency can be assuaged as early as secondary education level before the issue prolongs and subsequently becomes dire in tertiary education level.

## Literature Review

Spielberger (1983), as cited in Král'ová & Sorádová (2015), defined anxiety as the feeling of nervousness, tension, and apprehension related to the nervous system arousal. Scovel (1991), as cited in Král'ová & Sorádová (2015) stated that anxiety is a psychological construct and a state of apprehension that is indirectly related to an object. Spielberger (2010) referred to anxiety as an individual emotional condition, such as apprehension, nervousness, tension, and worry, which is followed by physiological arousal. As stated by Pappamihiel (2002), anxiety can generally be referred to as a threat to self-efficacy. Prolonged anxiety can be a perennial, serious problem as it could affect our quality of life. A relatable example is the anxiety that occurs in second language learning. According to Male (2018), many students talk about having issues with feeling apprehensive and anxious about second language learning, as they believe they have a mental block against the targeted language. Horwitz (2001) found that one-third of second-language students encounter language anxiety. Even though the anxiety level of each learner varies, the existence cannot be denied (Riasati, 2011).

A recent study by Daymiel et al. (2022) mentioned that even though students who are more inclined towards developing SLA are the same ones who experience general anxiety, it is also common for students to struggle when studying a second or foreign language despite scoring excellently in other subjects. Multiple researchers have proved this, including Ran et al. (2022),

that, regardless of the students' proficiency level or gender, they are the most anxious about one of the language skills: listening. Moreover, every learner must have linguistic anxiety when speaking and writing in a particular language (Daymiel et al., 2022). Students at the tertiary level who speak English as a second language suffer from speaking anxiety, which negatively influences their speaking output inside and outside the classroom wall (Ahmed et al., 2017; Elaldi, 2016).

The topic of SLA/FLA is not new in the Malaysian context. There are myriad studies concerning SLA/FLA in Malaysia using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FCLAS) by Horwitz et al., (1986) as a tool for measuring speaking anxiety, particularly with English as the targeted language. In 2014, a study to calibrate Malaysian undergraduates' language anxiety in English was conducted by Darmi and Albion (2014); it was observed that there is no significant difference in the three types of SLA, namely communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. In similar studies, Badrasawi et al. (2020) investigated the level of L2 speaking anxiety among Malaysian IIUM postgraduates at the Faculty of Education. James et al. (2020) concocted a similar investigation on Malaysian undergraduates' English language anxiety and found that FNE contributes to the highest language anxiety among undergraduates. Another study by Sim et al. (2020) examined the level of English speaking among university students from two Sarawak public universities, and the findings demonstrate that the highest contributor to English-speaking anxiety is communication apprehension.

Previous studies conducted on undergraduates from public universities by James et al. (2020); Sim et al. (2020) revealed that fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension are the contributing factors which caused high speaking anxiety. In contrast, a group of UKM undergraduates admitted that test anxiety was the main factor in their high levels of speaking anxiety. University students' speaking anxiety level in an online classroom setting was investigated too. It was found that speaking anxiety among the students is still prevalent despite having moderate levels of speaking anxiety. They also acknowledged communication apprehension as the main factor causing speaking anxiety even though classes were conducted online (Raja & Mimi, 2022).

Many studies conducted on ESL learners' speaking anxiety focus on undergraduate students with very little attention paid to the school students. One of the studies conducted on secondary school students revealed that the students have moderate levels of speaking anxiety too (Anthony, 2023). A study with the aim of investigating the students' speaking anxiety in three different gender-based types of schools found that the majority of the students experienced low speaking anxiety levels (Zulkiflee & Nimehchisalem, 2022). Interestingly, female students were found to experience higher speaking anxiety compared to their counterparts. Moreover, the results of this study highlighted a statistically significant difference between the students' speaking anxiety mean scores in single-gender and co-educational schools. By far, numerous studies related to second language speaking anxiety conducted locally involved university students and two studies involving secondary school students. Nonetheless, the existing studies conducted on secondary school students focus on national secondary. No study has been conducted involving boarding school students or high-performing schools. The present study intends to fill in the existing gap by investigating boarding school students' speaking anxiety at a high-performing school. Therefore, this study is interested to address the following objectives: to examine high-performing school students' level of English language speaking anxiety and to identify the factors that contribute to English language speaking anxiety among high-performing school students.

## Methodology

### *Research Design and Respondents*

The research design selected for this study is the quantitative method because quantitative research is more absolute and accurate than qualitative research design as it offers empirical data via statistical, computational, or mathematical techniques (DeVault, 2018). Moreover, a study by Mohajan (2021) on the historical context and strengths of quantitative research highlighted that there are currently two-thirds of research and articles published using quantitative data which are highly valid, and these provide a high quality of research.

One hundred thirty-eight secondary school students from an all-girls school in Selangor participated in this study and they were chosen based on purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was used in respondent selection as it is deemed suitable for choosing respondents for the study that fulfils the predetermined criteria. The pre-determined criteria set were: 1) the participants must be Form 1 students and 2) studying at one of the high-performance schools in the country. Only the Form 1 students were chosen and involved in this study because they represent the lower and upper secondary school students and did not sit for any national standard examination such as SPM. To avoid the probability of students' speaking anxiety due to their low proficiency in English (Toubot et al., 2018), participants from a high-performance school located in an urban area were selected. They were more likely to be more familiar with speaking English than other students with low-level proficiency from semi-urban and rural areas.

### *Instrumentation*

A questionnaire from Aarif et al. (2019), widely known as the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), was adopted and adapted for this study. The total number of 33 questionnaire items was retained, no additional statements were added and none of the existing statements were deleted. However, a necessary change was made to suit the objectives of this study, including replacing the term foreign language with English Language since the present study focuses on ESL learners speaking anxiety, not EFL learners or EFL classrooms. Another significant change was the reduction of the Likert scale point from 5 points scale to 4 points scale only, ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' (1= strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = disagree, and 4 = *strongly disagree*). The four 4-point Likert scale was to avoid too many neutral answers that would negatively affect the survey results (Bilqis & Haidlor, 2018). After the modification, the adapted version of the questionnaire, the English Classroom Anxiety Scale (ELCAS), was distributed to the respondents during the data collection. The questionnaire consists of three parts: communication apprehension, text anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. The total number of questionnaire items is 33.

Although a well-known and established questionnaire by Aarif et al. (2019) was adopted, a pilot study was still conducted to ensure the validity and reliability of the English Classroom Anxiety Scale (ELCAS), especially after some amendments were made. An expert in teaching English as a second language from the Faculty of Education UiTM played the role of the expert panel who validated all 33 items of the questionnaire. Concurrently, a pilot study was conducted to test the reliability of the questionnaire items. The Cronbach's Alpha readings obtained are shown in Table

1. All 33 items of the questionnaire were considered reliable with a high reading Cronbach Alpha of 0.8 and more for all ELCAS components.

*Table 1. Cronbach Alpha for ELCAS Components*

<b>ELCAS components</b>	<b>No. of items</b>	<b>Cronbach Alpha</b>
Fear of Negative Evaluation	7	0.945
Communication Apprehension	11	0.893
Test Anxiety	15	0.830

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

The data collection process started once the UiTM Research Ethics Committee (REC) was approved. The respondents who participated in the study were secondary school students who may have had no prior experience answering questionnaires or being part of a survey. Therefore, a brief explanation of the research objectives, instructions and questionnaire items was provided at the beginning of the survey session to ensure that the respondents were aware of their right not to be part of the research because it was a voluntary participation. Additionally, it was firmly addressed that the respondents' identities would not be collected due to concerns about confidentiality. The duration of time given for them to fill in the questionnaire was around 60 to 90 minutes. Also, they were allowed to ask for clarification during the data collection process when they were uncertain, confused or had difficulty comprehending the questionnaire's statements.

Specifically, SPSS version 26 was used to conduct a descriptive analysis of the data collected using a questionnaire. SPSS was used to calculate frequency and percentages to determine the respondents' level of speaking anxiety. The ELCAS levels and range used to identify the level of speaking anxiety among the respondents were adopted from Bilqis and Haidlor (2018); refer to Table 2.

*Table 2. ELCAS Level of Speaking Anxiety*

<b>ELCAS Level</b>	<b>ELCAS Range</b>
Low	< 65
Moderate	66 – 99
High	100 – 132

Similarly, the mean results for items related to factors that caused English language-speaking anxiety were analyzed using SPSS. Mean was used to determine the level of speaking anxiety among respondents based on the three main contributing factors: fear of negative evaluation (FNE), communication apprehension (CA), and test anxiety (TA). A mean interpretation table adapted from Latif (2015) was used in this study for results interpretation, as shown in Table 3.

*Table 3. Mean value of speaking anxiety*

<b>Anxiety level</b>	<b>Mean value (range)</b>
High	From 1.00 – 2.50
Moderate	From 2.51 – 3.00
Low	From 3.51 – 5.00

## Results

The results of this study are discussed in two parts: the results for the levels of speaking anxiety among Form 1 students and the contributing factors that caused speaking anxiety among them. The results for students' level of speaking anxiety were collected and measured based on three components: Communication Apprehension (CA), Test Anxiety (TA) and Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE).

### A) The Level of Students' English Language Speaking Anxiety

*Table 4. Levels of Students' English Language Speaking Anxiety*

<b>ELCAS Level</b>	<b>ELCAS Range</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Low	< 65	45	32.6
Moderate	66 – 99	78	56.5
High	100 – 132	15	10.9

Table 4 shows the three levels of English language-speaking anxiety among the students. It can be seen that more than half of the students or 56.5%, have a moderate level of speaking anxiety towards English, with ELCAS ranging between 66 to 99. With the difference of 23.9%, 32.6% of the students have low level of speaking anxiety with an ELCAS range of 65 and below, and only 10.9% of them belong to the range of high-level speaking anxiety with ELCAS ranging between 100 - 132. The results indicate that majority of these students are comfortable using English in spoken form since they experience low to moderate levels of anxiety when they speak in English.

### B) The Contributing Factors of Speaking Anxiety among Secondary School Students towards English Language

The results on the factors which contribute to speaking anxiety among secondary school students focus on three pre-determined factors, namely: the fear of negative evaluation (FNE), communication apprehension (CA) and test anxiety (TA).

*Table 5.* Factors that caused English language speaking anxiety

<b>Anxiety Factor</b>	<b>No. of item</b>	<b>Mean Value</b>
Fear of Negative Evaluation	7	2.59
Communication Apprehension	11	2.34
Test Anxiety	15	2.07

Based on Table 5, it is revealed that the main contributing factors that caused English language speaking anxiety among Form 1 students with a high mean value are the test anxiety and communication apprehension with the mean values of 2.07 and 2.34 respectively. It is followed by the fear of negative evaluation with the moderate mean value of 2.59. The results attest that the students are worried about failing an oral or speaking test and their speaking anxiety arises when they interact with others despite having a moderate level of English language speaking anxiety.

*Table 6.* Fear of Negative Evaluation Factor

<b>No</b>	<b>Statements</b>	<b>Mean</b>
28	I keep thinking that the other students are better at English than I am.	2.95
32	I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do.	2.87
27	I am worried about making mistakes in English.	2.70
33	I am I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I have not prepared in advance.	2.55
32	I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English.	2.44
29	It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in English class.	2.32
30	I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake that I make.	2.32

Table 6 illustrates the results for the first factor that contributes to speaking anxiety among ESL learners in secondary school, which is the fear of negative evaluation. The respondents were asked to rate their agreement or disagreement level for seven statements describing the situations that aroused their speaking anxiety. The overall mean results range from 2.32 to 2.95, a combination of moderate and high level of fear of negative evaluation.

This generally indicates that the respondents have moderate to high level of English-speaking anxiety, and they consider fear of negative evaluation as the factor that caused anxiety when they speak in English. This means the respondents are worried about the judgement from other speakers especially their teachers and friends. This is supported by the statement “*I keep thinking that the*



*other students are better in English than I am*” with a mean of 2.95, is the situation agreed by the respondents as the central situation that could cause a high level of English language speaking anxiety among them. The respondents also admitted that *“I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English”* with a mean value of 2.44, is the situation acknowledged by the respondents as one of the central situations that could arise high level of speaking anxiety. It shows that the teenage respondents are equally afraid and concerned about their peers’ and English teachers’ negative evaluation of their spoken English.

Table 7. Communication Apprehension Factor

No	Statements	Mean
4	I would be nervous speaking English with native speakers.	2.67
5	I get upset when I do not understand what the teacher is correcting.	2.41
3	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class.	2.38
1	I never felt quite sure of myself when I am speaking in English.	2.35
7	I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students.	2.34
9	I get nervous when I do not understand every word the English teacher says.	2.33
2	It frightens me when I do not understand what the teacher is saying in English.	2.29
10	I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you must learn to speak English.	2.26
8	I get nervous when I speak in English class.	2.24
6	I do not feel confident when I speak in my English class.	2.21
11	I would not feel comfortable around native speakers of English	2.21

Besides the fear of negative evaluation, the students were also asked if they consider communication apprehension as one of the main factors that could lead to speaking anxiety. The mean results for 11 statements related to communication apprehension are shown in Table 7. Unlike the results of fear of negative evaluation, it is found that all the respondents display high levels of English-speaking anxiety, with the mean results between 2.21 – 2.67.

The results suggest the students highly consider communication apprehension as one of the contributing factors towards English language speaking anxiety. In specific, there are ten statements with a mean value between 2.21 – 2.41 which indicates high anxiety level. In contrast, there is only one statement with a mean result of 2.67 which indicates moderate anxiety level. One

of the statements with the smallest mean value of 2.21 “*I do not feel confident when I speak in my English class*” is the situation that cause the respondents to experience high level of speaking anxiety. Based on the results, it is found that the respondents have high level of speaking anxiety when they interact with others including their teachers and classmates. Additionally, the students would be more anxious to speak in English with the native speakers as compared to other situations. This proves that interaction with the native speakers aroused them to experience high level of speaking anxiety too.

Table 8. Test Anxiety Factor

No	Statements	Mean
16	I worry about the consequences of failing my English classes.	2.62
17	I understand why some people get so upset over English classes.	2.41
19	Even if I am well prepared for English class, I feel anxious about it.	2.33
21	I can feel my heart pounding when I am going to be called in English class.	2.30
12	I tremble when I know that I’m going to be called in English class.	2.29
18	In English class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.	2.24
14	During English class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.	2.18
15	I do not feel at ease during tests in English class.	2.10
23	I feel pressured to prepare very well for my English class.	2.02
24	English class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.	2.00
13	It would bother me to take more English classes.	1.80
22	The more I study for an English test, the more confused I get.	1.72
20	I often feel like not going to my English class.	1.72
25	When I’m on my way to English class, I do not feel very relaxed.	1.67
26	I feel more nervous in my English class than in my other classes.	1.62

The mean results for the test anxiety factor are shown in Table 8. Similar to the results of communication apprehension factor, all of the students admitted they have high levels of speaking anxiety except for one statement. Statement number 16 “*I worry about the consequences of failing my English classes*” is the only situation which put the students under moderate level of speaking anxiety with a mean of 2.62. There are nine statements with a mean value range between 2.00 – 2.41 and five statements with a mean value range between 1.61 – 1.80. Test anxiety factor is the only factor with a mean value of less than two which demonstrate that the number one factor that causes speaking anxiety among the students is test anxiety factor compared with fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension. Statement 26 “*I feel more nervous in my English*

*class than in my other classes*” is the situation that caused the students to have high level of speaking anxiety. The results confirm that students are anxious to speak in English for test or assessment purposes despite having moderate level of speaking anxiety and coming from a high performing school.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

It is evident that while previous study such as Kamarulzaman et al. (2013) found that a group of gifted learners had low levels of speaking anxiety, this limitation appears contextual. It is because the results of this study suggest that Form 1 students from a high performing school have moderate levels of English language-speaking anxiety. The apparent similarity between the present research and a study by Kamarulzaman et al. (2013) is that students who are gifted or go to a high performing school do not have high levels of speaking anxiety. Nonetheless, gifted or advanced learners with moderate or low levels are not free from English language anxiety (Darmi & Albion, 2014).

Surprisingly, these 13 years old secondary school students have similar moderate levels of English language-speaking anxiety with the much older university undergraduate students as stated in a study by Siti and Fuzirah (2023). Another study conducted to a different group of undergraduates from another university suggests similar findings too (Raja & Mimi, 2022). Although the students generally have moderate levels of speaking anxiety, the results show that the two main contributing factors to the students’ English-speaking anxiety are communication apprehension and test anxiety. The students’ moderate levels of speaking anxiety do not exclude them from experiencing communication apprehension during interactions using English. This is because speaking anxiety can be provoked due to the involvement of two or more interlocutors. Failure to appropriately relay messages causes the interlocutors to feel awkward and uneasy (Mohammad et al., 2016). So, for the test anxiety factor, the students are generally anxious with the idea of speaking in English for evaluation and assessment purposes in class with the presence of their English teacher and classmates. Moreover, Siti and Fuzirah (2023) found similar feeling of anxiety while presenting and speaking in English class among the non – English majoring undergraduates in a public university.

In conclusion, these students still lack confidence when interacting with others using English although they are considered proficient in the language and go to a high performing school. Despite their English language proficiency level and moderate levels of speaking anxiety, the students still believe in the possibility of not getting good scores or even failing English subject. This study also serves as evidence towards the assumption that students with excellent academic achievements do not experience high levels of English language speaking anxiety because they are proficient English users and go to a high performing school is inaccurate. Future studies should collect data using qualitative methods such as interviews or observation. Also, future studies should consider the involvement of secondary school students with low and moderate English proficiency levels from semi–urban and rural areas.

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