# The Relationship between English Proficiency and Public Speaking Anxiety among Second Language Learners

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**Abstract**
Having good English proficiency is crucial in today's borderless world for developing individuals with communicative competence. The ability of students to interact with others and share information in a common language is essential, particularly as Malaysia upholds English as a second language. However, despite receiving formal exposure to the English language since primary school, there are still cases where students, especially university students in Malaysia, still frequently encounter public speaking anxiety, which affects their academic participation and performance. While most students are seen to be scoring well in language proficiency tests conducted in universities, many students are reported to have high levels of anxiety during presentations, oral exams, and group discussions. This study aimed to explore English proficiency of second language learners and its relationship with public speaking anxiety. A questionnaire comprising 35 questions was administered to 121 English language learners at a public university in Malaysia. Findings depicted that there is no significant relationship between students' overall English language proficiency and their public speaking anxiety ($r = .025$, $p = .784$). Future recommendations for studies to be conducted on giving emphasis on students' communicative competence to match their English proficiency performances and achievement.
**Keywords:** Communicative Competence, Public Speaking, Anxiety, Proficiency, English Language.

**Introduction**
Malaysia is a diverse nation, comprising 69.4% Bumiputera, 23.2% Chinese, 6.7% Indian, and 0.7% from other ethnic groups (Department of Statistics, Open DOSM, 2023) resulting in having many spoken languages. Without compromising Bahasa Malaysia as the main

language, English is an indispensable language and is widely used and spoken as a second language (L2) in Malaysia by its citizens of various ethnicities, as it also plays a crucial role in connecting people all around the world. Additionally, Article 152 of the Federal Constitution recognises English as the country's second language (Nor Hashimah et al., 2008), making English serve as a vital second language in Malaysia, which reinforces its role in facilitating cross-cultural communication within the nation and fostering global connections. According to the English Proficiency Index (EPI) by EF, an international education company that focuses on language, academics, cultural exchange, and educational travel, Malaysia consistently ranks among the top 25 countries globally and within Asia for high English proficiency (New Straits Times Online, 2023). The ranking is based on five levels, which are very high, high, moderate, low, and very low.

In Malaysia, English is taught in primary schools for six years, followed by five additional years in secondary education. Despite Malaysia consistently ranking among the top 25 countries for English proficiency and the formal inclusion of English in the curriculum for over a decade, many students still struggle with using the language effectively (Fadhli & Akmal, 2023).  They further elaborate that Malaysian students, particularly those in tertiary education, find speaking in public challenging as they need to use and interact using English with all their peers and instructors in public. These experiences often lead to feelings of intimidation, which reduces their willingness to use the language, making them anxious and less confident in their ability to speak English. This situation is concerning because students are required to pass English subjects in school, and it is also compulsory for them to take the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) as an entrance and exit requirement for tertiary education in both public and private universities in Malaysia (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2019).

MUET serves as a tool to measure students' proficiency in English, which is essential for effective communication in general and, particularly, preparing them for the workplace. Administered by the Malaysian Examinations Council, MUET assesses candidates' abilities across the four language skills, which include listening, speaking, reading, and writing, using an aggregated scoring system from 1 to 360, corresponding to bands from 1 to 5+. A certificate is awarded to candidates who complete all test components (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2019), providing a recognised benchmark of their English proficiency. As candidates are tested on all four language skills, MUET is designed to assess both language competence and task performance (Karnine et al., 2022). The speaking and writing tests aim to evaluate test-takers' abilities to complete specific communicative tasks, while the listening and reading tests expose them to English in a receptive manner. Additionally, MUET emphasises a communicative approach to language testing, focusing more on practical use than on grammatical accuracy (Zulaikha et al., 2023). This approach highlights the ability to apply and understand language within specific communicative contexts.

As Malaysia moves towards a more progressive and modern nation, communicative competence in English becomes increasingly vital for navigating both educational and professional challenges. Communicative competence involves more than just knowing grammatical rules; it includes the ability to use language effectively and appropriately in diverse contexts. Originally introduced by Dell Hymes, this concept highlights the importance of not only linguistic competence but also sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic skills, which

are deemed crucial for conveying and interpreting messages accurately (Hymes, 1972). In the context of Malaysian students, developing communicative competence in English is essential to building confidence and proficiency, especially in high-stakes settings like public speaking and the workplace. Thus, exploring the relationship between English proficiency and public speaking anxiety among second language learners is essential in identifying the factors contributing to students' lack of proficiency. This research is beneficial as it aims to provide insights for stakeholders, including educators and policymakers, to support better planning and equip students with the communicative competence skills needed for academic and professional success.

**Problem Statement**

In today's globalised world, English proficiency has become a vital skill for university students, especially in non-native English-speaking countries. As the primary medium of instruction in many institutions, mastery of English is crucial for academic success and professional opportunities. Compared to previous generations, today's university students typically exhibit higher levels of English proficiency due to improved language education systems and the increasing prevalence of English in media and technology (Baker & MacIntyre, 2020). Proficiency assessments reveal that many students achieve high levels of grammatical, lexical, and syntactic competence. However, despite this observable increase in English language proficiency among university students, many of them still face significant challenges in public speaking, often marked by fear, anxiety, and avoidance behaviours (Horwitz, 2010). Even those with a strong command of English may experience anxiety when speaking in public, leading to reluctance to engage in class discussions and fear of negative judgement from peers (Cheng et al., 2022).

Horwitz et al (1986), noted that public speaking anxiety is one of the most commonly reported issues among second language learners, even among those who perform well on standardised English proficiency tests. This suggests that language proficiency alone may not be a sufficient predictor of public speaking success. The reasons for this discrepancy may lie in affective variables associated with second language acquisition, such as self-esteem, fear of negative evaluation, and the desire for social approval (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016). This anxiety not only hinders academic progress but also impacts students' social and professional lives. The issue is particularly pronounced in Malaysia, where English is taught as a second language but increasingly serves as a medium of instruction at most universities. Several studies have shown that students experiencing public speaking anxiety are less likely to participate in classroom discussions, less likely to volunteer for oral presentations, and more likely to encounter academic setbacks (Grieve et al., 2021). This anxiety is often exacerbated by a lack of opportunities for informal practice in real-life contexts, as many English as a Second Language (ESL) programmes focus on formal written assessments rather than spoken communication (Kashinathan & Aziz, 2021). As a result, students' ability to use English in academic, professional, and everyday social contexts is severely compromised. This dissonance between language proficiency and public speaking confidence raises important questions about the underlying causes of anxiety among second language learners.

Public speaking anxiety (PSA) is a form of social anxiety characterised by fear and nervousness when required to speak in public settings. This issue is prevalent among students, suggesting that demographic factors such as age and educational status may also

influence the experience of this anxiety (Buser & Yuan, 2023). For second language learners, PSA may be exacerbated by a perceived deficiency in language proficiency, despite demonstrating substantial competence in academic or formal settings. The gap between proficiency in written English and confidence in oral communication is a recurring theme in the literature. Studies have shown that linguistic proficiency does not always translate into public speaking confidence (Woodrow, 2006; Liu & Jackson, 2008b). This study aims to explore the relationship between English proficiency and public speaking anxiety among second language learners, particularly university students. The relationship between these factors presents a significant research gap in the context of recent studies. While various factors contribute to public speaking anxiety, the role of language proficiency remains underexplored.

## Literature Review
### English Proficiency in Malaysia (MUET)
In further exploring MUET's reliability in measuring one's level of proficiency, a study done by Hanna Insyirah et al (2023), shows that local university students agreed that MUET truly reflects their level of proficiency. Najihah et al (2021), however, highlight that some students faced test anxiety when thinking about test consequences and would proceed to worry about how it might affect their motivation when preparing for the test. In these cases, the anxiety faced by candidates might not indicate their actual proficiency level. Some test-takers might underperform in their speaking test if they allow their anxiety to interfere with their cognition (Buriro and Kakepoto, 2013). While some studies claimed that students' performance on standardised tests might not accurately demonstrate their actual language proficiency (Tsai and Tsou, 2009; William, 1996). In addition, Hanna Insyirah et al (2023), argued that standardised tests such as MUET are a major determinant of university admission and hence can be considered as the best assessor for an individual's proficiency level. Consequently, MUET serves as the transition from secondary to tertiary education for Malaysian students, which should somehow reflect both the effectiveness of English language learning at the primary and secondary level and their overall proficiency in the English language.

### Language Anxiety and Public Speaking Anxiety
Language anxiety (LA) has been a matter of concern for language educators as it can potentially hinder the learner's ability to perform well and acquire the language. This is reflected in the fact that LA is widely acknowledged as one of the most extensively studied individual-difference variables in the field of second language acquisition (Tsui & Cheng, 2022). Horwitz et al (1986), define language anxiety as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process." (p.128). It manifests as a feeling of unease, nervousness, and apprehension. This definition aligns with MacIntyre & Gardner (1994), who argue that foreign language anxiety is the feeling of pressure and uneasiness specifically linked to second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning.

As indicated by previous research, there are various reasons behind students' anxiety in the context of language learning. These factors include the fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence in language skills, academic pressure, unfamiliar teaching methods or materials, cultural differences, language barriers, limited participation opportunities, peer pressure, performance anxiety, and the quality of the teacher-student relationship (Boukranaa &

Mjahad, 2024). These multifaceted reasons underscore the complexities of addressing and mitigating anxiety in language learning environments. Horwitz et al (1986), propose a theory outlining three interrelated components of language learning anxiety. The first component is communication apprehension, characterised by shyness and reluctance to communicate with others due to fear or anxiety. The second component is the fear of negative evaluation, involving feeling worried and uneasy about how others perceive and assess one's performance or abilities. Finally, the theory includes test anxiety, representing performance-related anxiety stemming from the fear of failure.

These components of language anxiety, particularly communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation, are closely tied to public speaking anxiety (PSA), which is another common form of performance anxiety that can significantly affect language learners. According to Gallego et al (2022), PSA refers to the anxiety experienced by an individual when giving a speech or preparing to speak in front of others. This can lead to symptoms such as sweating, shaking, dry mouth, increased heartbeat, and squeaky voice. Internal factors such as speakers' lack of familiarity with the vocabulary used and the lack of experience can stimulate speaking anxiety. Other than that, an unfamiliar environment, a new audience, and the difference in status between speakers and the audience can induce anxiety before or while delivering a speech. Speakers may also feel isolated and as if they are being scrutinised due to their position while doing so, as they are often separated from the audience. Li (2020) explains that speakers tend to be more focused on their speeches with moderate nervousness in public speeches, reducing the error rate. In contrast, the spike in anxiety, matched with the audience's fixed gaze, can possibly hinder the speech from going smoothly. As a result, speakers may even forget what they were supposed to say during the speech. Considering how seriously this impacts language learners, addressing both language and public speaking anxiety is crucial to helping learners build confidence and improve their speaking performance.

*Motivation or Positive Feelings towards Public Speaking*
While public speaking anxiety can pose a significant challenge to language learners, research suggests that positive feelings and motivation can mitigate its effects and foster better performance. Wijaya & Mbato (2020), cite self-efficacy, the confidence to carry out particular tasks impacting one's continuous life, as a key intrinsic factor in public speaking. When individuals develop a strong sense of self-efficacy, it enables them to effectively regulate their emotions, thoughts, motivation, and actions. This positive mindset also triggers cognitive, motivational, and decision-making processes (Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994). Consequently, language learners who are able to sustain their self-efficacy are more likely to be highly motivated to tackle public speaking tasks in a different language because they are confident that doing so will enhance their language learning capabilities.

Moreover, Wijaya and Mbato (2020), highlight the importance of establishing a supportive speaking learning environment for language learners in order to help them actualise their communicative skills in real-life situations. It is suggested that language teachers incorporate classroom drama in which the learners can freely express their ideas in creative language usage. It is also recommended that language teachers utilise oral presentations and classroom interactions to reduce learners' speaking anxiety. This approach

fosters a sense of comfort and confidence in learners, enabling them to express their ideas more frequently to other classmates (Mukhtar et al., 2019).

In addition to self-efficacy and supportive environments, motivational feedback is another critical factor that fosters motivation and positive feelings toward public speaking. Unlike corrective feedback, which focuses on content improvement, motivational feedback aims to boost learners' confidence and encourage them to persist in their speaking efforts, regardless of setbacks (Saidalvi & Adlina, 2019). This type of feedback is a powerful tool to reorient learners towards their learning goals without dwelling on their performance. This type of feedback helps learners feel valued and competent, which in turn increases their willingness to engage in public speaking tasks. By focusing on the learner's effort rather than their mistakes, motivational feedback helps learners feel a sense of control over their learning, which is crucial for reducing anxiety and fostering a positive mindset.

## Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research approach to explore English language proficiency among second language learners and its relationship with public speaking anxiety. Chua (2020), stated that quantitative data involves numerical analysis and places a strong emphasis on validity, thereby making it suitable for investigating this study. Considering the availability and accessibility of respondents, this study adopted convenience sampling to select the respondents. This method facilitated efficient data collection from 121 students who were readily accessible, ensuring a diverse representation of second language learners and their proficiency levels. A standardised questionnaire assessing both English proficiency and levels of public speaking anxiety was shared using an online platform. The questionnaire included two demographic questions and 33 questions on students' public speaking anxiety, modified from the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) as referenced in Pontillas (2020). The questions were rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." This adaptation was made to better align the instrument with the specific context of second language learners, allowing a more accurate assessment of their public speaking anxiety levels. The results were statistically analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Version 28, which provided both descriptive and inferential statistics. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to identify relationships between proficiency levels and anxiety, offering insights into the correlation between English proficiency and public speaking anxiety among the participants.

## Findings and Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the relationship between public speaking anxiety and students' MUET results, specifically investigating how language proficiency correlates with public speaking anxiety. The first part of the findings focuses on public speaking anxiety, followed by an analysis of the relationship between public speaking anxiety and language proficiency.

Table 1
*Demographic Backgrounds*

| Items | Frequency (121) | Percentage (100) |
|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | | |
| Male | 27 | 22.30 |
| Female | 94 | 77.70 |
| | | |
| **MUET Results** | | |
| Band 1 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Band 2 | 1 | 0.80 |
| Band 2.5 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Band 3 | 43 | 35.50 |
| Band 3.5 | 29 | 24.00 |
| Band 4 | 43 | 35.50 |
| Band 4.5 | 4 | 3.30 |
| Band 5 | 1 | 0.80 |
| Band 5+ | 0 | 0.00 |

Table 1 presents the demographic data of the participants. The majority of the participants were female (77.70%), while male participants accounted for 22.30%. As for MUET results, both Band 3 and Band 4 had the highest percentage of participants, each at 35.50%, followed by Band 3.5 at 24.0%. A similar low percentage of 0.80% was observed for both Band 2 and Band 5. MUET band scores are categorised into three levels, which are for the basic user (Band 1.0 to 2.5), the independent user (Band 3.0 to 4.5), and the proficient user (Band 5.0 and 5+). MUET candidates are required to complete all four components of the examination, which are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The findings suggest that most participants in this study were independent users, with only one participant each in the basic user and proficient user categories.

Table 2
*Students' Public Speaking Anxiety*

| Categories of Students' Public Speaking Anxiety | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|
| Pre-Speech Delivery Anxiety | 3.70 | 0.73 |
| Speech Delivery Anxiety | 3.67 | 0.78 |
| Physical and Cognitive Reactions | 3.22 | 0.89 |
| Confidence and Comfort | 2.89 | 0.73 |
| Overall | 3.37 | 0.78 |

Table 2 presents four categories of questions in the questionnaire related to students' speaking anxiety and their anticipation of public speaking activities in class, with the overall mean for anxiety being moderately high (mean = 3.37, SD = 0.78). These categories include pre-speech delivery anxiety, which has the highest mean score at 3.70 (SD = 0.73), followed by speech delivery anxiety with an average mean score of 3.67 (SD = 0.78). Next are physical and cognitive reactions, with a mean score of 3.22 (SD = 0.89), and lastly, students' confidence and comfort in public speaking, with an average mean score of 2.89 (SD = 0.72). These findings

show that students experience public speaking anxiety even at the thought of performing the activity in front of their peers and instructors. This is evident in the lowest mean score, which indicates that students experience a lack of confidence and comfort when performing public speaking.

Table 3
*Pre-Speech Delivery Anxiety*

| Items | Statements | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | While preparing to give a speech, I feel tense and nervous. | 4.03 | 0.69 |
| 32 | I feel anxious while waiting to give my speech. | 3.85 | 0.63 |
| 5 | I get anxious when I think about a speech coming up. | 3.83 | 0.77 |
| 2 | I feel tense when I see the words "speech" and "public speech" on a course outline when studying. | 3.74 | 0.75 |
| 9 | When the instructor announces a speaking assignment in class, I can feel myself getting tense. | 3.61 | 0.65 |
| 21 | I experience considerable anxiety while sitting in the room just before my speech starts. | 3.51 | 0.78 |
| 28 | I feel anxious when the teacher announces the date of a speaking assignment. | 3.32 | 0.81 |
| | Overall | 3.70 | 0.73 |

Next, Table 3 presents the participants' responses regarding their feelings before delivering their public speaking presentations, yielding a relatively high overall mean score of 3.70 with a standard deviation of 0.73. The highest mean score in the questionnaire is 4.03 (SD = 0.69), indicating that students feel tense and nervous before delivering their speeches. This is followed by Item 32 and Item 5, with mean scores of 3.85 (SD = 0.63) and 3.83 (SD = 0.77), respectively, showing that students feel anxious while waiting to give a speech and even when just thinking about it. The lowest mean score in this category, reflecting how students feel anxious when they learn about their public speaking assignment, is still relatively high at 3.32 (SD = 0.81). Students' communicative abilities may be adversely affected by the anxiety they experience during language learning, which is made worse by their fear that others might judge their performance, limited confidence in their language skills, and academic pressure from lecturers' expectations or evaluations (Boukranaa & Mjahad, 2024; Horwitz et al., 1986). From the findings, the students also agreed that they feel nervous when thinking about the public speaking activity. This anxiety affects their communication apprehension and contributes to their public speaking anxiety.

Table 4
*Speech Delivery Anxiety*

| Items | Statements | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|
| 14 | I get anxious if someone asks me something about my topic that I don't know. | 3.93 | 0.77 |
| 20 | My heart beats very fast just as I start a speech. | 3.92 | 0.73 |
| 31 | My heart beats very fast while I present a speech. | 3.79 | 0.69 |
| 3 | My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech. | 3.64 | 0.73 |
| 13 | I am in constant fear of forgetting what I prepared to say. | 3.64 | 0.76 |
| 33 | While giving a speech, I get so nervous I forget facts I really know. | 3.64 | 0.82 |
| 29 | When I make a mistake while giving a speech, I find it hard to concentrate on the parts that follow. | 3.56 | 0.82 |
| 23 | Realising that only a little time remains in a speech makes me very tense and anxious. | 3.51 | 0.81 |
| 27 | I do poorly on speeches because I am anxious. | 3.44 | 0.86 |
| | Overall | 3.67 | 0.78 |

The representation of public speaking anxiety during the speech, as shown in Table 4, indicates that students were anxious about receiving questions while presenting, with a mean score of 3.93 and a standard deviation of 0.77. Next, Item 20 and Item 31 scored relatively high, with similar mean scores of 3.92 (SD = 0.73) and 3.79 (SD = 0.69), indicating that students felt pressure to speak in public, with their hearts beating very fast from the start and throughout the speech. Interestingly, Item 3, Item 13, and Item 33 received the same mean score of 3.64, though with different standard deviations. All of these items reflect situations where students felt so anxious that they became confused and forgot their prepared speeches. Lastly, the lowest mean score was for Item 27, with a score of 3.44 (SD = 0.86), demonstrating that students acknowledged their poor performance in delivering the speech due to public speaking anxiety. Presenting a speech in public typically requires individuals to stand out and face the audience. This alone can trigger nervousness, and using a language they are not proficient in may worsen the situation. The findings indicate that students feel pressure, which affects their concentration and speaking performance. This is supported by Gallego et al (2022), who note that public speaking anxiety can occur when individuals give a speech or prepare to speak in front of others, particularly when they are the centre of attention. Li (2020), also emphasises that anxiousness, particularly while speaking in front of an audience, can disrupt delivery and cause presenters to forget their points.

Table 5
*Physical and Cognitive Reactions*

| Items | Statements | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|
| 10 | My hands tremble when I am giving a speech. | 3.48 | 0.93 |
| 22 | Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while giving a speech. | 3.40 | 0.83 |
| 25 | I breathe faster just before starting a speech. | 3.12 | 0.87 |
| 19 | I perspire just before starting a speech. | 3.10 | 0.80 |
| 30 | I have trouble falling asleep the night before a speech. | 2.98 | 1.03 |
| | Overall | 3.22 | 0.89 |

Following the anxiety experienced during speech delivery, Table 5 presents the students' physical and cognitive reactions related to their public speaking anxiety, with an overall mean score of 3.22 and a standard deviation of 0.89. Item 10 and Item 22 scored similarly at 3.48 (SD = 0.93) and 3.40 (SD = 0.83), respectively, focusing on students' physical and cognitive reactions during the speech. These items indicate that trembling hands and physical tension are prominent and intense anxiety responses for many students. Next, Item 25 and Item 19 scored moderately, with mean scores of 3.12 and 3.10 and standard deviations of 0.87 and 0.80, respectively, showing that students experienced consistent responses before starting their speeches. Physiological changes, such as rapid breathing and perspiration, are other common reactions to public speaking anxiety. However, Item 30, which had the lowest mean score at 2.98, indicates that public speaking anxiety did not significantly affect students' sleep, though the responses varied widely, as reflected in the highest standard deviation of 1.03. According to Gallego et al (2022), public speaking anxiety has a negative impact on people's physical and emotional well-being, as well as their cognitive ability. When people feel anxious, they often experience physical sensations such as perspiration, shaking, dry mouth, rapid heartbeat, and a shaky voice. These psychological symptoms could worsen students' anxiety about public speaking and make it more difficult for them to communicate or deliver their ideas clearly and effectively.

Table 6
*Confidence and Comfort*

| Items | Statements | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|
| 4 | Right after giving a speech, I feel that I have had a pleasant experience. | 3.87 | 0.74 |
| 7 | Although I am nervous just before starting a speech, I soon settle down after starting and feel calm and comfortable. | 3.63 | 0.85 |
| 24 | While giving a speech, I know I can control my feelings of tension and stress. | 3.17 | 0.74 |
| 16 | I feel that I am in complete possession of myself while giving a speech. | 3.00 | 0.67 |
| 15 | I face the prospect of giving a speech with confidence. | 2.96 | 0.69 |
| 12 | I enjoy preparing for a speech. | 2.88 | 0.69 |
| 8 | I look forward to giving a speech. | 2.82 | 0.73 |
| 18 | I do not dread giving a speech. | 2.66 | 0.69 |
| 17 | My mind is clear when giving a speech. | 2.65 | 0.74 |
| 26 | I feel comfortable and relaxed in the hour or so just before giving a speech. | 2.61 | 0.82 |
| 11 | I feel relaxed while giving a speech. | 2.31 | 0.68 |
| 6 | I have no fear of giving a speech. | 2.10 | 0.69 |
| | Overall | 2.89 | 0.73 |

Finally, Table 6 presents the analysis of the mean scores and standard deviations of students' confidence and comfort levels regarding public speaking. Item 4 and Item 7 received relatively high mean scores of 3.87 (SD = 0.74) and 3.63 (SD = 0.85), respectively. These items suggest that, although students may experience anxiety before and at the early stages of delivering their speeches, they tend to adjust their nervousness as the speech progresses and feel relieved once their presentations are completed. Meanwhile, Item 24 and Item 16 scored moderate mean scores of 3.17 and 3.00, indicating that while some students manage their anxiety, others still struggle. The relatively low standard deviations of 0.74 and 0.67 suggest that many students share similar experiences. It is also important to note that the remaining items scored slightly lower mean scores, with values below 3.00 along with consistently low standard deviations. The overall mean score is 2.89, with a standard deviation of 0.73. These findings demonstrate that many students have only moderate confidence and comfort when speaking in public, with a significant portion experiencing anxiety, particularly before and during their speeches. When students believe in their ability to speak in front of others and use the language, their chances of successfully performing specific tasks or achieving certain goals increase. Wijaya and Mbato (2020), agree that self-efficacy, or the confidence to perform specific tasks, is a crucial intrinsic factor in public speaking. Language learners with high self-efficacy are more likely to feel motivated to engage in public speaking in a foreign language, believing it will improve their language skills. Moreover, when students feel comfortable and confident in a supportive and conducive learning environment, they are more likely to present and express their ideas freely and effectively, reducing their fear of using the language and minimising anxiety (Mukhtar et al., 2019).

Next, the second part of the findings focused on the relationship between public speaking anxiety and language proficiency. Since the study used MUET to measure students' English proficiency, the analysis was conducted based on students' MUET results to explore the relationship between public speaking anxiety and their language proficiency.

Table 7
*Correlation between Students' MUET Results and Public Speaking Anxiety*

|  |  | Overall Attitude | Overall Motivation |
|---|---|---|---|
| MUET Results | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .0.25 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) |  | .784 |
|  | N | 121 | 121 |
| Public Speaking Anxiety | Pearson Correlation | .0.25 | 1 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | .784 |  |
|  | N | 121 | 121 |

Table 7 presents the correlation between students' MUET results and their public speaking anxiety. The correlation analysis indicates that there is no significant correlation between students' MUET results and their anxiety levels when speaking in public (r =.025, p =.784). These findings suggest there is no direct relationship between their MUET scores and their ability to speak in public. This could be due to the fact that the MUET tests all four skills—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—whereas public speaking anxiety solely focuses on their ability and nervousness when speaking in public. This aligns with Karnine et al (2022), who noted that although MUET is designed to assess both language competence and task performance, all four language skills are considered and tested in evaluating students' performance, thereby acknowledging their proficiency levels based on the marks from all four skills. Cheng et al (2021), further elaborate that even students with a high level of English proficiency can experience public speaking anxiety, which may result in their reluctance to participate in class activities, such as presentations or public speaking tasks. Other studies concur that standardised tests like MUET, which assess all four skills, may not accurately determine students' speaking proficiency (Horwitz et al., 2020; Tsai and Tsou, 2009; William, 1996), as linguistic proficiency does not always correlate with public speaking confidence (Liu & Jackson, 2011a & Woodrow, 2006). To speak the language confidently in public, students need a supportive environment that encourages them to use the language without fear of being judged by others. Wijaya and Mbato (2020), also agree that it is crucial to provide a supportive speaking learning environment for language learners to help them develop their communicative skills in real-life situations.

**Conclusion**
In Malaysia, people recognise English as a second language, and it serves as a significant lingua franca, connecting individuals worldwide. Learning the language gives people access to a multitude of knowledge and information shared by English-speaking people, which not only promotes successful communication but also empowers them. This is especially crucial in globalised society, when communication and cross-cultural understanding are vital. Despite years of formal English education, many Malaysian students struggle to use the language

successfully, particularly in public speaking settings. This difficulty is worsened by public speaking anxiety, which can drastically reduce their confidence and impair their ability to explain their thoughts clearly. Students may have a strong mastery of English grammar and vocabulary, but the fear of being judged or making mistakes can impair their attempts to speak in front of others. Furthermore, the stigma associated with public speaking failures prevents students from participating in class discussions or presenting their ideas, limiting their opportunities to practice and grow. Effective communication may be hampered by this cycle of avoidance and anxiety since it might result in a lack of linguistic fluency and comfort. To mitigate this issue, it is critical to address anxiety about speaking in public directly, as this can improve students' overall proficiency in English. Creating a supportive learning environment that stimulates practice, promotes peer collaboration, and provides constructive feedback is critical. Such an environment not only helps students gain confidence but also allows them to experiment with language in an enjoyable environment, thereby improving their public speaking skills. Activities such as group discussions, presentations, and role-playing can also be useful. These activities allow students to use the language in real-world settings, which helps them overcome their concerns. Integrating technology, such as video recordings of practice sessions, can also provide useful insights and chances for self-reflection. Finally, managing anxiety about speaking in public while promoting English proficiency can provide Malaysian students with the necessary skills and confidence to communicate effectively both locally and abroad.

Fostering students' public speaking capabilities is essential for them to fully utilise their language abilities, thereby enhancing their pursuit of academic and professional opportunities in an increasingly interconnected world. It is equally important to reflect on the factors that may hinder Malaysian students from excelling and effectively using the English language. As the new format of MUET follows the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), an international standard for describing language ability, student performance should be evaluated accordingly. However, assessing proficiency solely through a standardised test that evaluates all four skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking) may not accurately reflect a student's speaking proficiency. Efforts to ensure that students develop strong communication skills, including confidence in public speaking, should be encouraged and prioritised in their learning journeys. Future research should focus on assessing students' speaking abilities based on specific aspects of speaking proficiency rather than considering all four skills together. Additionally, comparing high and low proficiency students and examining the effects of public speaking anxiety could provide insights into the universality of such anxiety, regardless of proficiency level. This could encourage students to participate more freely and express their ideas without the fear of judgement, ultimately enhancing their ability to use the language effectively.

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