Speaking Anxiety during MUET-CEFR Aligned Oral Presentations among ESL Learners in Perak

Zulaikha Zulkflee[1], Premlathadevi Marimuthu[1] & Mohd Haniff Mohd Tahir[1]

[1] Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Tanjong Malim, Perak, Malaysia

Correspondence: Mohd Haniff Mohd Tahir, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Tanjong Malim, Perak, Malaysia. E-mail: haniff.tahir@fbk.upsi.edu.my

Abstract

The newly enforced MUET-CEFR aligned format is one of the government's efforts to upscale Malaysian learners' English proficiency level to be at par with international standards. However, the learners are reported to have high anxiety levels resulting in poor performance, especially in the speaking component. Hence, this study is conducted to investigate the learner's anxiety levels, factors causing anxiety, and strategies to overcome speaking anxiety during oral presentations among MUET-CEFR ESL learners in Perak. The survey research design is employed for this study where a total of 130 participants took part by answering a three-section questionnaire on their background information, McCroskey's Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRSPA), and Nakatani's Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI). Descriptive statistics are used to analyze the data and an independent sample t-test was conducted to investigate the differences in the learners' strategy use based on their course types. A follow-up interview session and classroom observation were also conducted for data triangulation. The findings indicated many of the participants possess moderately high and high anxiety levels based on PRPSA scores. Meanwhile, the responses to OCSI implied that message reduction and alteration are the most used strategies to cope with their speaking anxiety during oral presentations. The findings also showed a statistically significant difference between Diploma and Form 6 students in the use of social affective, fluency-oriented, negotiation for meaning while speaking, accuracy-oriented, message reduction and alteration, and non-verbal strategies while speaking. The findings from this study suggest that teachers should scaffold students' oral presentation skills and manage their speaking anxiety for better performance in the MUET-CEFR aligned speaking examination.

Keywords: speaking anxiety, MUET-CEFR aligned oral presentations, MUET speaking, oral communication strategies

1. Introduction

English is widely used in Malaysia as a second language. The importance of English for international communication and the trend of globalization have resulted in the language being emphasized more in this country. To keep up with global advancement, Malaysian students should be well-equipped with a solid ability to communicate in English. As the second most important language in Malaysia, English is extensively used in the education system from the primary up to the tertiary level. Therefore, it is imperative for Malaysian students to be proficient English language users in the academic setting and later in a more professional environment (Zainuddin, Pillai, Dumanig, & Pillip, 2019).

However, despite having learned the language for many years, there is an increasing concern about Malaysian English as a second language (ESL) learners' proficiency level, especially in speaking English at the tertiary level. Many students still struggle to speak fluently in English due to their lack of competence and confidence in using the language (Yaccob & Yunus, 2019). As a result, they often fail to express themselves when speaking in public. The seriousness of this issue has been brought to attention because such failure may cause students to exhibit feelings of anxiety. This situation is a classic problem related to second language learning. Feelings of anxiety, apprehension, and nervousness are commonly expressed by second language learners in learning to speak languages other than their mother tongue. These feelings tend to exert a negative and detrimental effect on communication in the target language (Marlow, 2021). To address this issue, the source of students' anxiety should be identified, so that appropriate measures can be implemented to increase their proficiency level.

1.1 Problem Statement

Good English communication skills are of utmost importance as a driving force for students to meet the challenges of the 21st century and to compete globally (Zaman, 2019). The Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) through the reformed Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia [MOE], 2015) has outlined a set of skills and competencies that are aligned with the National Educational Policy to give Malaysian students an internationally competitive edge. The transformation in the English language education system is vital in elevating the students' English language proficiency. One of the efforts includes the use of Common European

Framework of Reference (CEFR) as a proficiency measurement of English. Despite the slightly negative perception of the introduction of CEFR in the English curriculum at Malaysian schools due to the additional challenge it brings to an already strenuous language acquisition (Tahir, Albakri, Adnan, Shaq, & Shah, 2020), MOE is still optimistic that it will help improve the of students' language proficiency in the long run.

The MOE's aim for Malaysian students to achieve the desired English language proficiency is translated into the alignment of Malaysian University English Test (MUET) to CEFR. The reformation includes setting a minimum of a Band 3 in MUET as one of the compulsory requirements for Malaysian students to enroll in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Regardless of the advancement of teaching and learning approaches in the 21st century, there are still candidates who fail to meet the minimum entry requirement. A study by Harun et al. (2021) on the most challenging skills to pass MUET revealed that candidates had the most difficulty with the speaking component as they have weak speaking skills. As English language teachers, it is important to uncover the sources of their low proficiency level as they may be attributed to anxiety-provoking factors. Considering the linguistic, psychological, physiological, and cultural factors (Rajitha & Alamelu, 2020) and other conditions that possibly affect the students' performance when speaking will be beneficial for teachers to assist the students accordingly. Hence, this study aims to investigate the anxiety level, the factors causing anxiety, and the strategies to overcome speaking anxiety during MUET-CEFR aligned oral presentations among ESL learners in Perak. This study also investigates whether there is a significant difference between diploma and Form Six students in the strategies used to overcome their speaking anxiety during oral presentations.

1.2 Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

1.   To identify the overall anxiety level of MUET-CEFR aligned oral presentations among ESL learners in Perak.

2.   To examine the factors that contribute to speaking anxiety during MUET-CEFR aligned oral presentations among ESL learners in Perak.

3.   To investigate the coping strategies employed by the diploma and Form Six students in reducing speaking anxiety during MUET-CEFR aligned oral presentations

1.3 Research Questions

This study is conducted to answer the following research questions:

1.   What is the overall anxiety level of MUET-CEFR aligned oral presentations among ESL learners in Perak?

2.   What are the factors that contribute to speaking anxiety during MUET-CEFR aligned oral presentations among ESL learners in Perak?

3.   How do the diploma and Form Six students cope with their speaking anxiety during MUET-CEFR aligned oral presentations?

1.4 Literature Review

Speaking skills is essential for ESL language learners to become competent speakers of the English language. Speaking skills is also the most important skill because it is one of the abilities needed to carry on a conversation (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021; Singh et al., 2020; Rao, 2019; Rahman & Maarof, 2018). Although many ESL learners find speaking difficult, there is a content need to improve and master speaking skills. The definition of speaking is the ability to communicate; a transactional function in which users communicate and exchange meaningful communication (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021). Speaking skill is an important skill to be mastered by ESL learners so that they can communicate and engage in meaningful conversations.

1.4.1 Theoretical Framework

Since this research paper is concerned with speaking anxiety during oral presentations, the theoretical framework is adopted from Malik, Huang, Oteir, and Soomro (2021). This study is guided by the socio-cultural theory of Vygotsky, the comprehensible input hypothesis of Krashen and the foreign language anxiety theory of Horwitz as presented in Figure 1. The first framework is based on Horwitz's (2000) theory of foreign language anxiety which defined anxiety as a psychological phenomenon of self-perceptions, emotions, and feelings arising from the process of a foreign language acquisition. According to Malik et al. (2021), this theory consists of three anxiety constructs that are speaking anxiety, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (social anxiety caused by others' negative evaluation in social, personal, or academic contexts). The second framework is related to Krashen's (1991) comprehensible input and affective filter hypothesis. This theory is a fundamental theory in the second language acquisition (SLA) domain which explains the relationship between emotional variables (affective filters) and success or failure of the second or foreign language learning or speaking. For instance, if the students' affective filters are high, then, the chances of the students' experiencing anxiety, apprehension or low self-esteem are very high, and as a result, these negative emotional variables can halt success. The third framework focuses on the socio-cultural theory of Vygotsky (1978) which highlighted the importance of learning environments including social, cultural, and historical perspectives in a child's cognitive development. Furthermore, the concept of zone of proximal development (ZPD) is important in Vygotsky's theory as a child will be able to perform better when he is provided scaffolding.
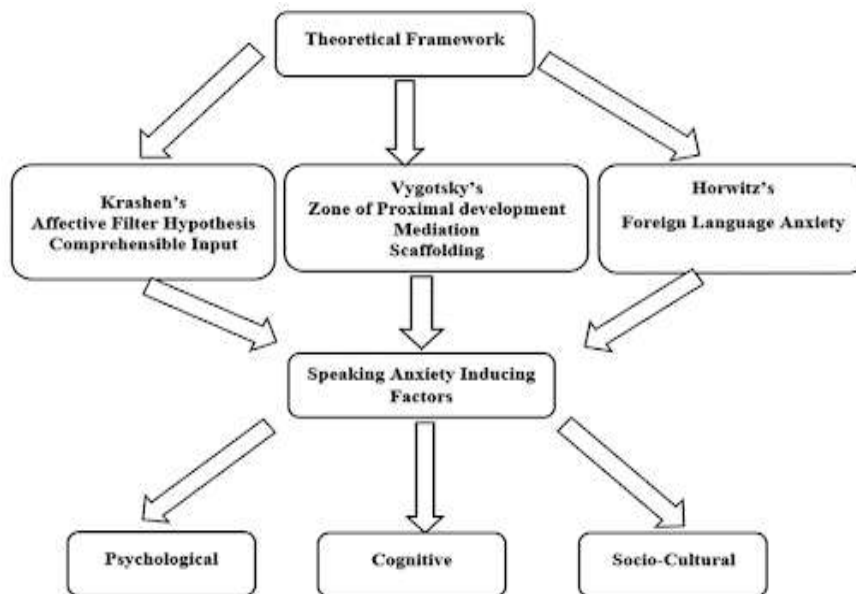
Figure 1. Theoretical framework for anxiety-inducing factors in English language classroom (Malik, Huang, Oteir, & Soomro, 2021)

1.4.2 Malaysian University English Test-Common European Framework of Reference (MUET-CEFR Aligned)

Malaysian University English Test (MUET) was first introduced in 1999 and is administered by the Malaysian Examinations Council (MEC) to measure candidates' English language proficiency. Malaysian students who wish to pursue their tertiary education at local public universities must sit for MUET since it is a mandatory test to enroll in degree courses offered at Malaysian public universities.

The present MUET syllabus has been revised in order to align MUET with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) beginning from the first session of the year 2021 (Malaysian Examinations Council [MEC], 2019). The MUET-CEFR assesses candidates' level of proficiency using aggregated scores ranging from 0-360 which corresponds to Bands 1 to Band 5+ (MEC, 2019). This change involves the assessment and new examination format for the four (4) basic skills: Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing.

As for the Speaking test, the primary purpose is to assess the ability of test-takers to give an oral presentation of ideas individually and to interact in small groups in both more formal and less formal academic contexts (MEC, 2019). The MUET-CEFR aligned test adopts a communicative approach to language testing, focusing not so much on grammatical knowledge, but rather on communicative language ability which comprises knowledge or competence and the capacity to use and understand knowledge appropriately in a specific situational context of communication (MEC, 2019). As a result, it is crucial for MUET test-takers to master speaking skills so that they can communicate fluently and competently.

1.4.3 Speaking Anxiety

Speaking is a difficult skill for ESL learners. According to Balemir (2009), speaking anxiety refers to the fear of using the language orally. Leong and Ahmadi (2017) noted that second language learners often perceive that having to speak in the English language is to welcome criticism. Thus, this fear of speaking causes many ESL learners to remain silent rather than attempt to speak during lessons. Tian and Mahmud (2018) also indicated that anxiety is one of the main factors affecting oral presentation performance, especially for foreign and second language learners.

There are many ESL students who experience speaking anxiety when there is an oral presentation in class. A study done by Singh et al. (2019) revealed that ESL students were reluctant to speak and communicate with their lecturers. They were found to be slow in giving responses and feedback to their lecturers and this slowed down the teaching process. The students were lacking in English proficiency and experienced fear of speaking up and making mistakes. As a result, the teachers were not able to conduct student-centered speaking activities due to the lack of confidence among students in the speaking lesson.

1.4.4 Sources of Speaking Anxiety

Although Malaysian ESL students have been learning English since kindergarten, many students still have the fear of speaking in front of many people or preparing for an oral test. Even though different studies have revealed varied factors associated with anxiety, a few common issues have been identified among students who exhibit speaking anxiety. One of the sources of speaking anxiety is 'performance anxiety.' This 'performance anxiety' was found in a study conducted by Radzuan and Kaur (2011) whereby demanding and provocative evaluation panels and limited knowledge and barriers in students' English language proficiency became sources of anxiety associated with delivering presentations. This study showed that giving comments during presentations would also arouse anxiety. Therefore, when teachers provide feedback during oral presentations, students feel anxious, and this uncomfortable feeling leads to

speaking anxiety.

Besides that, psychological effects or physical effects can lead to speaking anxiety among ESL learners. Kho and Leong (2015) conducted a study on polytechnic students in Sarawak and their findings indicated three major sources of academic oral presentation which are related to preparation, linguistics factors, and psychological factors. The psychological factors included self-perceived oral proficiency, self-perceived accuracy of pronunciation and self-perceived personality (Tian & Mahmud, 2018). Personality traits like shyness can also cause speaking anxiety among ESL students.

The thought of having to prepare for public speaking or an oral examination is another contributing factor to speaking anxiety. This is also known as 'preparation anxiety' by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986). This 'test anxiety' is linked to 'preparation anxiety' as students prepare for their oral test. According to Cassady (2004), test anxiety includes test preparation, test performance, and test reflection. Oral presentations such as public speaking, debates, role-plays, and individual oral presentations in class can also lead to speaking anxiety. As students start preparing for their oral tests, they tend to have the fear of failing their tests. This negative thought leads to anxiety among students.

A study by Razawi, Zulkornain, and Razlan (2019) was conducted on the probable causes of anxiety in oral presentations among learners taking English subjects in Dungun district of Terengganu. The findings of the study showed that all four factors: language ability, personality traits, preparation, and audience interest affect the learners' oral presentation. This study has indicated that students who take English language subjects have exhibited speaking anxiety during oral presentations.

As a result, it is important for ESL teachers to identify these sources of speaking anxiety so that they can help ESL students overcome their speaking anxiety. As mentioned by Miskam and Saidalvi (2019), anxiety in oral presentations will cause harmful impacts on learners' performance in a communication-based classroom that involves second language learning. The impact of anxiety will become a hindrance to ESL students in mastering speaking skills. Hence, it is crucial to identify suitable coping mechanisms to help ESL students overcome their speaking anxiety.

1.4.5 Coping Strategies to Reduce Anxiety

Though considered a classic problem, recent studies have revealed that anxiety continues to be one of the main problems that inhibit students' ability to speak confidently especially in the academic context. Past researchers have shown great interest to identify the students' use of strategies to reduce their anxiety during oral presentations. Tian and Mahmud's (2018) study on oral presentation anxiety and strategy employed by EFL graduate students, revealed that there is a statistically significant difference in the use of strategies between high anxiety and low anxiety students. Their study indicated that highly anxious students tend to use fewer message abandonment strategies, which contradicted a more recent study by Ya-Chen (2021). The students with high anxiety in Ya-Chen's study used more message abandonment strategies while the students with lower anxiety level used more active strategies including accuracy and fluency-oriented strategies.

Besides the oral communicative strategies used to cope with anxiety during oral presentations, several studies have been conducted to identify the effectiveness of specific activities and technological tools to help students prepare for oral presentations. Kelsen (2019) reported that preparation and allocation of time for rehearsals may help alleviate students' anxiety and allow them to perform better in oral presentations. Shah, Shak, and Tahir (2019) investigated the use of Telegram application to reduce anxiety during oral presentations and their study suggested similar findings that the students can gain confidence to express themselves publicly by rehearsing and correcting their mistakes during presentations on their own using the Telegram bot features. This is supported by the findings of a more recent study by Pabro-Macquidato (2021). Her studies revealed that students' initiatives and open-mindedness helped reduce their anxiety levels and increased their confidence level in developing their English-speaking skills.

From the previous literature, ESL and EFL students exhibit speaking anxiety during oral presentations in class. There are many factors that contribute to speaking anxiety among ESL and EFL students. Although a significant number of studies have been conducted on speaking anxiety among ESL learners during oral presentations, not much research has investigated academic oral presentation anxiety which is also an increasingly important challenge that needs attention and interest among ESL teachers and students. While a considerable number of studies have highlighted the importance of ample preparation to help alleviate students' anxiety, not many studies are available on the use of oral communication strategies while making oral presentations. Besides that, the studies related to MUET-CEFR aligned are relatively scarce. Therefore, this present study aims to narrow the research gap by focusing on speaking anxiety during MUET-CEFR aligned oral presentations among ESL learners in Perak, the factors contributing to their anxiety, as well as the coping strategies employed by them.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design to examine the relationship between dependent and independent variables. More specifically, this study was conducted using survey as the primary method of data collection. Survey was chosen as it has been used extensively for data collection in most areas of social inquiry, including education and linguistics (Nunan & Bailey, 2009). In addition, survey research also allows numeric interpretation of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To further clarify the findings from quantitative data collection, qualitative data were also gathered through

interviews with selected respondents and observation.

2.2 Sampling

A total of 130 participants participated in this study. The participants were selected based on convenience sampling because of their availability to participate in the survey (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The participants were identified based on two criteria. They were either Form Six students from Form Six Colleges or Diploma students from Polytechnics in Perak and have enrolled in MUET-CEFR preparatory courses. These two groups of students were chosen because they have attended the MUET-CEFR preparatory courses at their respective institutions. Choosing participants with the same criteria is important to avoid threats to internal validity (Tahir, Albakri, Adnan, & Karim, 2020). Form Six students attended a preparatory course for at least a year prior to taking the exam while the diploma students attended a short course of 10 weeks as preparation for the exam. Taking the course duration into consideration, this study is conducted to investigate whether there is any significant difference in the coping strategies employed by these two groups.

Among the respondents who participated in the survey, 14 students were chosen for semi-structured interviews: seven from each institution. A semi-structured interview was chosen because it is less rigid, saves time, and is easy to follow (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The interview was conducted to gain more insights on the students' perceptions of their English-speaking skills, their feelings during oral presentations, the problems they faced during oral presentations, their ways of overcoming the problems and other related issues. Four Form Six and four diploma students were also observed during their oral presentations. The observation checklists were analyzed to identify if anxiety cues were evident during their presentations and if there were identifiable coping strategies used by the students to overcome these difficulties.

2.3 Data Collection Methods

Data for this research was collected using an online questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observation. The online questionnaire was distributed to the participants with the help of MUET Coordinators at the institutions. The interviews were conducted right after the collection of responses to the questionnaires while the classroom observations took place within the same week after the questionnaire was administered.

2.3.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire used in this research consists of three parts. Part I includes the background information (4 items), Part II is adopted from McCroskey's (1970) Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA), and Part III is also adopted from Nakatani's (2006) Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI). The PRPSA is chosen due to its high reliability with Cronbach's alpha of .94 and a concurrent validity demonstrated by a correlation above 0.80 (McCroskey, 1970). It includes 34 items on a 5-point Likert Scale that ranges from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). PRPSA was used in this study to identify the anxiety levels and to find out the factors that contribute to speaking anxiety during MUET-CEFR aligned oral presentations among ESL students. The instrument is piloted, and the reliability is at 0.87. The items in the PRPSA were refined to suit the context of this research where the term 'speech' in the items was replaced with 'oral presentation'.

Meanwhile, the OCSI developed by Nakatani (2006) was chosen to investigate the oral communication strategy used by the learners to cope with their speaking anxiety. The instrument was also piloted, and the Cronbach Alpha value is 0.95, indicating high reliability. It consists of 32 items which can be categorized into 8 strategies; social affective strategies (items no. 23 25, 26, 27, 28, 29), fluency-oriented strategies (items no. 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14), negotiation for meaning while speaking (items no. 19, 20, 21, 22), accuracy-oriented strategies (items no. 7, 8, 17, 18, 30), message reduction and alteration strategies (items no. 3, 4, 5), nonverbal strategies while speaking (items no. 15, 16), message abandonment strategies (items no. 6, 24, 31, 32) and attempt to think in English strategies (items no. 1, 2).

2.3.2 Interview

A follow-up semi-structured interview session was conducted with selected participants who responded to the questionnaire. It is used to support the quantitative data and to further clarify the findings from the questionnaire (Tahir, 2017). The interview sessions were conducted based on the interview guide adapted from Tian and Mahmud (2018). The interview guide was originally intended for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) graduate students to investigate their oral presentation anxiety and strategy employment. The questions in the interview guide were refined after a pilot interview with 10 non-participating students. Due to its flexibility, an interview guide can be used in a face-to-face or online conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee. For the purpose of this research, the context of the interview was changed to the students' oral presentation anxiety and strategy employment for MUET speaking component. The interview guide consists of two sections which include the demographic background of the participants and open-ended questions about their self-perceived English-speaking abilities, their feelings during oral presentations, the problems they encountered while making presentations, and their strategies for overcoming the difficulties. The interview sessions were conducted one-on-one using online video conferencing through Google Meet. All 14 participants consented to participate in the interview sessions and each session lasted for about 15 minutes.

2.3.3 Classroom Observations

Eight students (four Diploma students and four Form 6 students) were observed during their oral presentations by the researcher. The information from the observation was gathered manually using an observation checklist. According to Nunan and Bailey (2009),

classroom observations involve gathering data during actual language lessons mainly done by watching, listening, and recording instead of asking. The researcher notes the students' anxiety cues while making presentations, as well as the strategies they employ to overcome them. The observation used the PRPSA and OCSI as references. The oral presentations were conducted by replicating the real MUET-CEFR speaking examination settings, in which the students were put into groups of four. Two experienced MUET teachers were designated as the examiners during the task. Each student took his or her turn to present based on the stimulus given and was given two minutes to prepare as well as two minutes to present his or her ideas. All eight students agreed to participate in the observations.

2.4 Data Analysis Method

Data from the questionnaire were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics software Version 27. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data using percentages for the participants' background and overall anxiety levels while mean scores were used to interpret data for the factors contributing to participants' anxiety and their use of coping strategies. An independent sample t-test was conducted to investigate the differences in terms of the learners' strategy use based on their course types. Meanwhile, the responses from the interview were selectively transcribed to explain the findings from the questionnaire. To protect the participants' identity, pseudonyms are used in this article since removing details that could be used to identify the participants is an important step to adhere to the research ethics (Adnan, Karim, Tahir, Kamal, & Yusof, 2019). Diploma students are labelled as D1, D2, D3, D4, D5, D6 and D7 while Form Six students are labelled as S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6 and S7. The checklists and researchers' notes from classroom observations were also analyzed for triangulation purposes with the findings from the questionnaires and interviews. Data triangulation is important in research as it allows corroborating evidence to answer the research questions from multiple contexts (Hastings, 2010).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Participants' Overall Anxiety Level

The first research question seeks to identify the overall anxiety level of MUET-CEFR aligned oral presentations among ESL learners in Perak. Table 1 shows the distribution of students' PRPSA scores of the participants which include Diploma and Form 6 students. The scores are divided into five levels which are low (34-84), moderately low (85-92), moderate (93-110), moderately high (111-119), and high (120-170). The scores interpreted are based on a previous study by Kelsen (2019) which further extended the initial three-level scores of high (>131), moderate (98-131), and low (<98) by McCroskey (1970). The breakdown of scores into five levels can provide a clear picture of the students' anxiety levels.

Table 1. Distribution of students' PRPSA scores (N=130)

	PRSPA level	Low (34-84)	Moderately low (85-92)	Moderate (93-110)	Moderately high (111-119)	High (120-170)	Total
Diploma	Frequency	8	8	21	11	17	65
	Percent	12.3	12.3	32.3	16.9	26.2	100
	Cumulative Percent	12.3	24.6	56.9	73.8	100	
Form 6	Frequency	4	2	9	9	41	65
	Percent	6.2	3.1	13.8	13.8	63.1	100
	Cumulative Percent	6.2	9.2	23.1	36.9	100	
Total	Frequency	12	10	30	20	58	130
	Percentage	9.2	7.7	23.1	15.4	44.6	
	Cumulative Percent	9.2	16.9	40.0	55.4	100	

Based on Table 1, Form 6 students and Diploma students exhibited high and moderately high anxiety levels during oral presentations. 26.2% (n=17) of Diploma students recorded high anxiety levels while 16.9% (n=11) of them recorded moderately high anxiety levels. Meanwhile, more than half of the Form 6 students exhibited a high anxiety level at 63.1% (n=41) and 13.8% (n=9) of them recorded moderately high anxiety levels. From the above findings, both groups of students (Diploma and Form 6 students) showed symptoms of anxiety during oral presentations. This anxiety level can be closely linked to the fact that both groups of students are preparing for their MUET examination. These oral presentations are part of performance anxiety mentioned by Horwitz et al. (1986). As students start preparing for their oral tests, they tend to have the fear of failing their tests. Despite having attended preparatory courses longer than the Diploma students, more Form Six students reported higher anxiety levels. The findings of this present study support the findings by Razawi et al. (2019) which indicated that even though students are well prepared, they still tend to be worried when starting the oral presentations. Based on the findings, it can be said that the impact of anxiety will become a hindrance to ESL students mastering speaking skills. Hence it is crucial to identify the factors causing their high anxiety and suitable coping mechanisms to help ESL students overcome their speaking anxiety.

3.2 Factors Contributing to Participants' Speaking Anxiety During Oral Presentations

The second research question deals with the factors that contribute to speaking anxiety during oral presentations among MUET-CEFR aligned ESL learners in Perak.

Table 2. Responses to items in PRPSA (*N*=130)

Category	Item	Item statement	*M*	*SD*
Preparation anxiety	1	While preparing for oral presentation, I feel tense and nervous.	4.13	.857
	14	I will get anxious if someone asks me something about my topic that I do not know.	3.98	1.007
	5	I get anxious when I think about the oral presentation coming up.	3.81	.881
Physical effects	33	I feel anxious while waiting to give my oral presentation.	3.82	.947
	20	My heart is beating very fast just as I start the oral presentation.	3.72	.974
Performance anxiety	29	When I make a mistake while giving the oral presentation, I find it hard to concentrate on the parts that follow.	3.66	1.008
	34	While giving the oral presentation, I get so nervous I forget facts I really know.	3.60	1.031
Positive mindset	4	Right after giving the oral presentation, I feel that I have a pleasant experience.	3.79	.929
	7	Although I am nervous just before starting the oral presentation, I soon settle down after starting and feel calm and comfortable.	3.53	1.065

Table 2 indicates the responses to items in PRPSA with the highest mean scores and standard deviations based on the categories by Kelsen (2019). His factorial analysis categorized the items into four factors which include positive mindset (items no. 4, 7, 8, 12, 15, 16, 17, 24), physical effects (items no. 20, 22, 25, 32, 35), preparation anxiety (anticipation) (items no. 1, 2, 5, 6, 9, 14, 26) and performance anxiety (regulation) (items no. 19, 29, 30, 31, 34). Based on Table 2, the findings suggest that the participants in this present study tend to exhibit anxiety while preparing for the presentation. This is because the two items with the highest means are related to the preparation anxiety factor. The items are "While preparing for oral presentation, I feel tense and nervous" (M=4.13, SD= 0.857) and "I get anxious if someone asks me something about my topic that I do not know" (M=3.98, SD=1.007). Other than that, another item that is related to the same factor with a high mean is "I get anxious when I think about the oral presentation coming up" (M=3.81, SD=0.881). The high mean scores indicated that the students felt most anxious when preparing for the oral presentation as they anticipated what was coming up. These findings are similar to Razawi et al. (2019) in which they mentioned preparation as a common cause of students' anxiety. This can be further explained by the findings from the interview sessions with the participants in this study. D2 stated "I find it difficult to be spontaneous if I am not well prepared" while D5 said "I worry if I cannot say what I want". This might be because the students feel the need to do well during the oral presentation so that they can meet the minimum requirements to pass the examination.

In terms of physical effects caused by anxiety, the two items with the highest mean are "I feel anxious while waiting to give my oral presentation" (M= 3.82, SD=0.947) and "My heart is beating very fast just as I start the oral presentation" (M=3.72, SD=0.974). The physical effects caused by anxiety were also noted by the observer during the observation of the Diploma students. During the oral presentation, some of the students "spoke very fast" and ended their presentations before the time was over. When "prompted" to proceed, the students just stared at the examiners blankly before "shaking their heads" to indicate that they did not want to continue. This could be explained similarly to what is perceived as a "mental block" (Horwitz et al., 1986) when put in an anxiety-provoking situation.

Regarding performance anxiety, "When I make a mistake while giving a speech, I find it hard to concentrate on the parts that follow" recorded the highest mean (M=3.66, SD=1.008). During the interview sessions, D7 stated "I forgot what I want to say and become blank" when describing her difficulties during oral presentations while S3 mentioned "I sometimes made mistakes and I cannot speak within the time limit". These students perceived their English-speaking skills as "not that good" and "weak" which may explain their sources of anxiety. This is in line with findings by Kho and Leong (2015) in which they noted that psychological effects and physical effects such as self-perceived oral proficiency may also lead to anxiety. Meanwhile, the item "Right after giving the oral presentation, I feel that I have a pleasant experience" recorded the highest mean (M=3.79, SD=0.929) for factors related to positive mindset. The findings share the same notion as Pabro-Macquidato (2021) where she reported that open-mindedness plays a significant role in regulating the students' anxiety levels during oral presentations. This could be possible because not all students perceive oral presentations as an anxiety-provoking situation since they come from various backgrounds and have different learning styles and personality traits (Razawi et al., 2019).

3.3 Coping Strategies Employed by Participants

The third research question aims to investigate the coping strategies employed by learners in reducing speaking anxiety during oral presentations.

Table 3. Overall Responses to OCSI (N=130)

Strategies	N	Minimum	Maximum	M	SD	Rank
Social affective	130	2.00	5.00	3.36	0.68	3
Fluency oriented	130	1.83	5.00	3.36	0.72	3
Negotiation for meaning while speaking	130	2.00	5.00	3.26	0.83	6
Accuracy oriented	130	1.40	5.00	3.13	0.76	7
Message reduction and alteration	130	1.67	5.00	3.46	0.71	1
Non-verbal strategies while speaking	130	2.00	5.00	3.45	0.80	2
Message abandonment	130	1.00	5.00	2.89	0.73	8
Attempt to think	130	1.00	5.00	3.32	0.77	5
Valid N (listwise)	130					

Table 3 shows the overall responses to OCSI. Based on the table, the findings indicate medium use of oral communication strategies with mean scores of between 2.50 and 3.49. It is also indicated that the respondents most frequently used message reduction and alteration strategies to reduce their speaking anxiety during the MUET-CEFR oral presentations. Meanwhile, non-verbal strategies were the second most frequently used by the respondents, followed by social affective and fluency-oriented strategies. Attempt to think was ranked fifth among the oral communication strategies employed by the respondents in reducing their speaking anxiety, followed by negotiation for meaning while speaking. The two least used strategies were accuracy-oriented strategies and message abandonment strategies.

Table 4. Responses to items in OCSI (N=130)

Strategy	Item	Item Statement	Mean	SD
Social affective	26.	I do not mind taking risks even though I might make mistakes.	3.05	1.044
	28.	I try to relax when I feel anxious.	3.52	0.874
	29.	I try to encourage myself to express what I want to say.	3.62	0.839
Fluency oriented	10.	I take my time to express what I want to say.	3.48	0.770
	12.	I try to speak clearly and loudly to make myself heard.	3.65	0.878
	13.	I pay attention to my rhythm and intonation.	3.04	1.137
Negotiation for meaning while speaking	19.	While speaking, I pay attention to the listener's reaction to my speech.	3.53	0.908
	22.	I make comprehension checks to ensure the listener understands what I want to say.	2.99	1.023
Accuracy oriented	8.	I try to emphasize the subject and verb of the sentence.	2.98	1.000
	17.	I correct myself when I notice that I have made a mistake.	3.46	0.855
	30.	I try to talk like a native speaker.	2.89	1.051
Message reduction and alteration	3.	I use words which are familiar to me.	3.80	0.848
	4.	I reduce the message and use simple expressions.	3.36	0.898
	5.	I replace the original message with another message because of feeling incapable of executing my original intent.	3.22	0.932
Nonverbal strategies while speaking	15.	I try to make eye-contact when I am talking.	3.47	0.908
	16.	I use gestures and facial expressions if I cannot communicate how to express myself.	3.42	0.834
Message abandonment	6.	I abandon the execution of a verbal plan and just say some words when I do not know what to say.	3.24	0.963
	24.	I leave a message unfinished because of some language difficulty.	2.73	0.947
	32.	I give up when I cannot make myself understood.	2.48	0.990
Attempt to think	1.	I think first of what I want to say in my native language and then construct the English sentence.	3.18	0.976
	2.	I think first of a sentence I already know in English and then try to change it to fit to the situation.	3.47	0.749

Table 4 illustrates the descriptive statistics of the items in OCSI with the highest and lowest mean scores and their respective standard deviations. It indicates the coping strategies that were most frequently and least frequently employed by Diploma and Form 6 students to overcome their speaking anxiety. With reference to Table 3, the coping strategy with the highest frequency of use (M=3.46, SD=0.71) is 'message reduction and alteration.' One way Diploma and Form Six students cope with their anxiety level as indicated in Table 4 is by reducing their message or altering what they want to convey during oral presentations. This is done when they use familiar words (M=3.80, SD=0.484) and simple expressions to overcome anxiety (M=3.36, SD=0.898). Several students prefer to replace the original message with another message because they feel that they are not capable of executing their original intent (M=3.22, SD=0.73). Therefore, they choose to alter the real or original message. This is also supported by the interview findings where D5 stated "I think about what I know and give example" when asked about her ways of overcoming difficulties while making oral presentations.

The second most frequently used coping strategy (M=3.45, SD=0.80) is the use of non-verbal strategies while speaking. The non-verbal strategies include 'making eye-contact (M=3.47, SD=0.908), and the use of gestures and facial expressions (M=3.42, SD=0.834).' This non-verbal can be an effective strategy and sometimes is able to convey the intended message effectively. The use of non-verbal strategies can be said that it is a part of communication with actions. Anxious students tend to replace spoken words with universal gestures such as nodding, smiling or any other suitable words with actions. This is evident during the observation of the Form Six students during their oral presentations. The observer indicated that students "tend to make eye contact with each other and the examiners have to look for affirmation" when they "hesitated in the middle of the presentation". According to the observation notes, the students "look relieved when receiving a slight nod from the examiners or other students" and they could continue with the presentation with ease.

The coping strategy used least frequently among the respondents (M=2.89, SD=0.73) is 'message abandonment'. Under this 'message abandonment,' the coping strategy that is least used is 'I give up when I cannot make myself understand' (M=2.48, SD=0.990). This shows that most probably students do not give up when they do not understand something. This is indeed a positive sign as this indicates that Diploma and Form Six students realize the importance of not giving up. This is also in line with another item that comes under 'message abandonment' strategy which is 'I leave a message unfinished because of some language difficulty,' (M=2.73, SD=0.947). This is another signpost that suggests that students do not give up although they are experiencing speaking anxiety. However, these findings contradict a study done by Ya-Chen (2021) which indicated that students with high anxiety use more message abandonment strategies compared to the present study. Although the Diploma and Form Six students experience speaking anxiety, the mean score for using 'message abandonment' strategy is the lowest (M=2.89, SD=0.73) among them.

3.4 Differences in Coping Strategies Employed by Diploma and Form Six Students

A comparison of OCSI scores between Diploma and Form Six students was conducted to look at whether there is any significant difference in the coping strategies employed by the learners in reducing speaking anxiety during oral presentations between the two groups of students. These students attended MUET preparatory courses with different duration. The Diploma students have attended a short preparatory course while the Form Six students have attended a year-long preparatory course. Table 5 shows the comparison of OCSI scores between the two groups based on their use of oral communication strategies.

Table 5. Differences in Coping Strategies Employed by Diploma and Form Six Students

Strategies	Group	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p*
Social affective	Diploma	3.58	0.70	3.932	.000
	Form 6	3.14	0.59		
Fluency oriented	Diploma	3.64	0.70	4.769	.000
	Form 6	3.08	0.63		
Negotiation for meaning while speaking	Diploma	3.61	0.76	5.267	.000
	Form 6	2.91	0.74		
Accuracy oriented	Diploma	3.44	0.64	4.970	.000
	Form 6	2.82	0.76		
Message reduction and alteration	Diploma	3.65	0.76	3.187	.002
	Form 6	3.27	0.60		
Non-verbal strategies while speaking	Diploma	3.65	0.87	3.073	.003
	Form 6	3.24	0.66		
Message abandonment	Diploma	2.93	0.84	0.633	.528
	Form 6	2.85	0.59		
Attempt to think	Diploma	3.38	0.80	0.802	.424
	Form 6	3.27	0.73		
Total score	Diploma	3.48	0.55	4.602	.000
	Form 6	3.07	0.46		

The independent sample t-test results depicted in Table 5 showed that there is a significant difference between Diploma and Form Six students in the use of social affective strategies (t=3.932, p=0.000), fluency-oriented strategies (t=4.769, p=0.000), negotiation for meaning while speaking (t=5.267, p=0.000), accuracy-oriented strategies (t=4.970, p=0.000), message reduction and alteration (t=3.187, p=0.002), and non-verbal strategies while speaking (t=3.073, p=0.003). Despite the high percentage of highly anxious students in both groups, the type of preparatory course attended by the students seems to have affected their use of strategies in coping with anxiety during oral presentations. This is reflected through the significant differences in six out of eight strategies listed in the OCSI. Meanwhile, there is no significant difference in the use of message abandonment strategies and attempt to think strategies between the two groups.

According to Nakatani (2006), students with good English proficiency tend to be more aware of their use of strategies during the presentation, especially with the use of social affective, fluency-oriented and negotiation for meaning strategies. This is supported by the interview findings with the students who perceived their English-speaking proficiency as "good", "average," and "moderate". Two out of seven Form Six students perceived themselves as good speakers of English while three of them regarded their speaking proficiency as moderate. S2 mentioned that he tries to "keep calm and listen to other candidates," which is like S5 who stated, "I calm my mind in two to ten seconds before starting the presentation." These students were the ones who regarded themselves as good speakers of English, and the strategies they employed are related to the Social Affective category as they try to control their own anxiety (Nakatani, 2006). Meanwhile, five out of seven Diploma students perceived their speaking proficiency as average and they indicated that they "spent a significant amount of time to prepare and practice for the presentation" (D1, D2, D6). When asked further questions, they mentioned that they practice either individually (D1) or with group members (D2 and D6) for "supportive feedback" (D2) and to "increase my motivation" (D1 and D6). This is aligned with the findings from Kelsen's (2019) study which highlighted that preparation and rehearsals may allow them to perform better in oral presentations. This could be possible as the Diploma students only had 10 weeks to prepare for MUET-CEFR aligned examination which includes all four skills while the Form Six students had a year to prepare for the same examination.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study was conducted to investigate the learner's anxiety levels, the factors causing anxiety, and the strategies to overcome speaking anxiety during oral presentations among MUET-CEFR ESL learners in Perak. The findings showed that many of the participants possess moderately high and high anxiety levels. The findings also showed a statistically significant difference between Diploma and Form Six students in the use of social affective, fluency-oriented, negotiation for meaning while speaking, accuracy-oriented, message reduction and alteration, and non-verbal strategies while speaking. To sum up, Diploma and Form Six students experience speaking anxiety. Although the Form Six students have a longer preparation time for their MUET examination compared to the Diploma students, the Form Six students exhibited higher anxiety levels compared to the Diploma students.

The limitations of this study are the samples are taken from only one state which Perak. As a result, the findings cannot be generalized to a bigger population even though there were 130 respondents. Future research may want to involve more participants from other states for

more extensive studies to identify similarities and differences between the participants' anxiety-inducing factors and strategy use. This study also did not consider the differences in terms of the participants' backgrounds, which may have impacted the way they perceive oral presentations for MUET-CEFR aligned speaking component. Therefore, it is suggested that future studies take the students' backgrounds into consideration. As for future research, it is also recommended that researchers identify specific ways to assist these students in overcoming their anxiety as we get to add more information and new insights to studies related to MUET-CEFR, whether in speaking or other language skills.

The findings from this research are useful for language teachers as it helps to understand the contributing factors to speaking anxiety and how teachers can help students to overcome their speaking anxiety by providing scaffolding. When students are not able to perform independently, then, they need assistance from more educated groups of people like teachers to help them cope with these challenges. If there are students who are experiencing social anxiety and are always not able to take part in speaking activities, then it will be a good idea to provide support so that they are able to overcome their shyness and fear to speak in front of an audience. This research will provide new knowledge to the teachers, especially MUET teachers, counselors, and policy makers so that they can come up with suitable speaking activities and assessments that are tailored to one's needs and differences so that no one is left behind in the education fraternity.

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