




The Power of Environment: Examining Emotional and Social Factors Affecting ESL Learners' Speaking Performance in Secondary School

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ABSTRACT

Speaking remains one of the most challenging skills for ESL learners, both globally and within the Malaysian context. This study investigates the influence of emotional and social environments on the speaking performance of secondary ESL learners in Selangor, Malaysia. Adopting a descriptive quantitative design, data were collected from 60 students aged 13-17 via an online questionnaire comprising 5-points Likert-scale questions. The instrument explored students' confidence levels, anxiety, classroom experiences and cultural influences. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics using SPSS version 27. Findings indicate that anxiety and fear of making mistakes significantly hinder students' participation in speaking activities. Conversely, supportive classroom environment, characterized by constructive teacher feedback and peer collaboration, enhance students' speaking confidence. Group-based tasks is highlighted as a key strategy to foster comfort and engagement in oral English use. However, limited exposure to English outside of the classroom remain as a barrier to practice and proficiency. These insights emphasize the importance of emotionally supportive teaching practices and increased access to authentic speaking opportunities. This study offers practical implications for ESL educators and curriculum planners aiming to improve speaking outcomes through innovative, learner-centered strategies. Future research could explore targeted interventions to assess their effectiveness in boosting speaking confidence and reducing reluctance among ESL learners.

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1. Introduction

The ability to speak well in English is increasingly acknowledged as a crucial skill for students in Malaysia, where English is widely spoken and used as a second language. However, speaking anxiety is not only limited to Malaysia as it is a global concern among ESL and EFL learners. Eddraoui and Wirza (2020) found that Indonesian and Moroccan high school students exhibited high levels of anxiety related to pronunciation, self-confidence and fears of negative

evaluation. Similarly, Özcanlı and Kozikoğlu (2024) investigated Turkish secondary school students and discovered that personality traits and self-efficacy jointly explained over 27% of the variance in English-speaking anxiety level.

Among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in Selangor, various emotional and social factors within the classroom environment pose significant challenges to the development of their speaking skills. The students' fluency and proficiency depends on several factors, which includes their emotional state, the assistance received from peers and teachers and also their cultural background (Mustapha & Mohamad Uri, 2024; Ganasan et al., 2022). However, there is still a need for more empirical research focusing on how these factors interact to affect ESL learners' oral communication, particularly within the Malaysian secondary school context.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how social and emotional contexts affect the speaking performance of secondary school ESL students in Bestari Jaya, Selangor. Observations indicate that students feel reluctant to participate in speaking practices because they feel insecure, embarrassed or afraid of making mistakes. (Ghazali et al., 2020) Classroom factors, such as peer pressure and lack of teacher support, as well as cultural influences, may discourage English use outside formal settings. (Razawi & Mohamad, 2024).

The following are the research objectives for this study:

- (1) to identify the challenges faced by ESL learners in secondary school
- (2) to examine the factors that contribute to ESL learners' reluctance to speak in the classroom

The need to comprehend the emotional and social elements that influence the speaking abilities of secondary ESL students in Bestari Jaya is the driving force for this study. By identifying the obstacles and elements influencing the students' hesitancy to speak, teachers can create a more engaging and supportive learning environment. Additionally, by understanding these influences, it could also foster students' confidence and promote active participation in English-speaking activities (Ibrahim, 2024)

2. Literature Review

ESL students' speaking skill improvement is still a crucial research topic, particularly in Malaysian classrooms. Speaking fluency is crucial for both academic achievement and successful communication, but students encounter numerous obstacles that make it difficult for them to express themselves clearly in English. These issues are investigated, the theoretical foundations are looked at, and the techniques and approaches used in previous studies are identified in this review of the literature. Additionally, it identifies gaps and new patterns to recommend future research topics.

2.1 Challenges in ESL Speaking Skills

Several studies show that because of their lack of exposure, anxiety, and practice changes, secondary ESL learners in Malaysia view speaking English as a major obstacle. Anxiety and insecurity represent significant barriers to ESL learners' oral participation. As suggested by Nadesan and Shah (2020) and Kashinathan and Aziz (2021), students frequently refrain from engaging in speaking activities due to fear of making mistakes and receiving negative feedback, whether from teachers or peers. This fear and anxiety substantially hinders their speaking performance and overall language development. This concern is a result of traditional educational settings that value accuracy over communication. Students become reluctant and disinterested when they feel under pressure to communicate flawlessly. Teachers can create a more encouraging environment where errors are seen as learning opportunities rather than failures to solve. Students' confidence can be increased by promoting interactive speaking exercises, peer cooperation, and positive reinforcement. Speaking practice can also feel less daunting and more natural by incorporating real-life communication scenarios such as using casual conversations. In the end, providing a safe environment for expression will assist ESL students in overcoming their nervousness and enhancing their communication abilities. Nonetheless, it is important to question how far these strategies are implemented

consistently across classrooms, and whether teachers are adequately supported to shift away from traditional norms.

Malaysian classrooms are dominated by traditional teacher-centred methods, which leave little opportunity for communicative and participatory exercises. Paneerselvam and Mohamad (2019) critique the traditional teacher-centred approaches commonly employed in Malaysian classrooms for prioritizing rote memorization over meaningful speaking practice. They argue that such methods limit students' opportunity for purposeful language use as students expressed preference over dynamic activities that promote active engagement and lower stress levels, such as role-plays and group discussions. Although planned classes are beneficial, putting too much focus on memorizing hinders pupils' ability to communicate in the actual world. Speaking is a dynamic process that needs to be practiced in a variety of interesting settings. As a result, incorporating engaging exercises like debates, role-plays, and group discussions can assist students in becoming more at ease while speaking English in casual settings. By reorienting the emphasis from accuracy to successful communication, these interactive techniques not only improve fluency but also lessen anxiety. While previous studies point to anxiety as a key barrier, it is worth considering whether these findings have been adequately translated into classroom interventions or remain largely theoretical in practice. Teachers should develop a well-rounded strategy that blends organized instruction with interactive activities to help students improve their speaking abilities. This will guarantee that students become more competent and confident speakers of the language.

Speaking abilities are frequently undervalued due to cultural norms that place a higher priority on memory and test-focused education. According to Yahaya et al. (2021), learners' perceptions and practice opportunities are influenced by society's attitudes about English as a second language. The undervaluation of speaking abilities in favor of memorization and test-focused education also reflects a deeper cultural mindset that places a higher priority on academic achievement than on effective communication. This method restricts pupils' capacity to utilize English successfully in everyday contexts. Although achieving high academic standing is crucial, language is used for more than just tests. To highlight the value of speaking abilities in addition to reading and writing, there needs to be a change in society's perceptions. Parents should promote English communication at home, and schools should include more interactive speaking exercises in the curriculum. Students will get the practice and confidence necessary to utilize English outside of the classroom if speaking is valued as a necessary ability. It becomes evident that systemic and societal factors must also be addressed if we are to see a meaningful shift in how speaking skills are developed and valued.

Although technology can help with speaking practice, its uptake is still uneven. Bakar et al. (2013) investigated how asynchronous online forums might improve speaking abilities, but they discovered that widespread adoption was hampered by restricted access and a lack of teacher preparation. It was discovered that although technology can improve speaking practice, its efficacy is limited by its uneven adoption. The biggest issues are not just availability but also the way that technology is incorporated into language instruction. It is insufficient to merely offer online platforms; educators must receive training on how to use them efficiently, and students require appropriate direction to practice speaking in a meaningful way. Schools must spend money on digital literacy initiatives and make sure that technology is utilized to enhance, not replace interactive, real-time communication. Technology can be a potent instrument to give ESL students more chances to improve their speaking abilities flexibly and interestingly by removing these obstacles.

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2.2 Theoretical Frameworks

Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT) provides a fundamental framework for comprehending how speaking abilities develop in ESL classes in Malaysia. SCT places a strong emphasis on how social interaction and cultural background affect language learning. Building students' confidence and competence requires a lot of scaffolding from peers and teachers (Irene et al., 2023). The Sociocultural Theory (SCT) of Lev Vygotsky emphasizes the importance of social contact in language acquisition, which is especially pertinent in ESL classes in Malaysia. When students receive support from peers and teachers, their speaking abilities can be greatly enhanced. Teachers should provide collaborative learning environments where students participate in group projects, peer evaluations,

and facilitated conversations rather than depending just on direct instruction. In a nurturing environment, this method aids students in progressively gaining fluency and confidence. Speaking activities that incorporate real-life circumstances and culturally relevant issues can also make learning more meaningful, especially given Malaysia's broad cultural heritage. Through shared learning experiences and social involvement, SCT principles can help ESL learners improve their speaking abilities.

Another strategy that is frequently used is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which places a high priority on real-world communication. According to research by Tunku Mohtar et al. (2015), CLT creates a motivating and encouraging atmosphere that greatly improves speaking ability. Because it emphasizes real-world conversation, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is a successful strategy for improving the speaking abilities of ESL students. CLT's focus on interactive exercises makes learning more interesting and useful. CLT enables pupils to use language in a real way, which increases their confidence and fluency, in contrast to traditional techniques that emphasize memorization. However, the ability of teachers to lead lively debates and establish a safe space where students feel free to express themselves is essential to the implementation's success. CLT should be regularly included in Malaysian classrooms to optimize its advantages and give students lots of chances to practice speaking in engaging and relevant ways.

2.3 Emerging Trends and Effective Practices

Learner autonomy and active involvement are becoming increasingly important. According to Marzuki (2023), learner autonomy is a critical concept in contemporary educational theory and practice that emphasizes the learner's active and self-directed involvement in their own educational process. It was also further pointed out that the growing focus on student autonomy and active engagement in ESL instruction is a beneficial development. Speaking abilities can be greatly improved by empowering students to take charge of their education through group debates and peer collaboration. Students become more involved and comfortable using English when they actively participate in discussions as opposed to simply listening to lectures. In addition, compared to teacher-led assessments, peer interaction fosters a positive atmosphere where kids experience less stress and anxiety. Teachers can provide exercises that let students openly express their ideas while offering helpful criticism to further encourage autonomy. ESL students can improve their speaking fluency and confidence by creating a collaborative, student-centered learning environment.

Digital tools, such as online communication platforms and apps for language learning offer flexible and interesting practice opportunities. However, the availability of resources and the skills of the teachers are key factors in their performance (Nik Fauzi et al., 2022). Digital tools offer ESL students beneficial chances to practice speaking flexibly and interestingly. These tools can improve language acquisition, but how well they are used will determine how effective they are. Instead of adopting technology as a passive supplement, teachers need to be trained to incorporate it into their lessons in a meaningful way. Additionally, pupils may have learning gaps as a result of unequal access to digital resources. Schools should make investments in teacher training and make sure all students have access to the materials they need to optimize the advantages of online platforms and language apps. Effective use of digital resources can increase speaking practice's accessibility outside of the classroom, personalization, and interactivity.

A common issue is the necessity of providing teachers with training in technical and communication techniques. Research emphasizes how crucial it is to give teachers the tools they need to successfully apply creative approaches. According to Behera (2024), teachers need skills and competency in various innovative methods and approaches to make the teaching-learning process active, meaningful, and enjoyable, which inherently requires strong technical and communication skills to implement effectively. Despite these calls for innovation, the question remains whether institutional support and policy implementation have kept pace with pedagogical recommendations. The successful use of creative and successful teaching techniques depends on providing educators with the appropriate resources and techniques. Despite having a solid understanding of the subject matter, many teachers are not skilled in incorporating innovative teaching methods or new technologies into their lessons. This gap can be filled by ongoing professional development programs, which guarantee that educators are comfortable utilizing digital resources and contemporary teaching methods. By offering this assistance, educational

institutions can create a climate in which educators are encouraged to try out novel approaches, thereby improving the learning results and experiences of their students.

2.4 Gaps in Current Research

Even with a wealth of research, a few topics still need investigation. Few studies have looked at how learners' socioeconomic circumstances affect their ability to speak. More inclusive teaching methods can be guided by an understanding of these impacts. Even though a lot of study has been done on different facets of ESL learning, more needs to be done to examine how learners' socioeconomic origins affect their speaking ability. Developing more inclusive teaching strategies requires an awareness of how variables like financial limits, home environment, and resource availability affect language development. Additional difficulties for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds could include fewer possibilities for extracurricular activities or less exposure to English outside of the classroom. To solve this, teachers should modify their methods to accommodate each student's unique needs, making sure that every student has the tools and assistance they require to be successful. Teachers can create a more effective and equitable learning environment that enhances students' speaking abilities regardless of their socioeconomic background by considering these aspects.

It is still unclear how learners' mother tongue influences their English-speaking proficiency. According to Irene et al. (2023), results can be greatly enhanced by addressing linguistic interference. One important topic that needs more research is how learners' mother language affects their ability to speak English. Linguistic interference can provide difficulties, particularly for pupils attempting to transfer patterns from their mother tongue to English. Addressing this interference, however, does not imply ignoring the mother tongue; rather, it entails acknowledging its significance in the educational process. Teachers can assist by offering focused assistance that draws attention to linguistic variations and guides students through these difficulties. For instance, minimizing mistakes and boosting confidence can be achieved by clearly presenting the two languages' differences in syntax, sentence structure, and pronunciation. Teachers can develop more effective tactics that recognize and address the impact of learners' first language on their English competence by comprehending the effects of linguistic interference.

2.5 Summary

In summary, the literature highlights several key challenges among secondary school learners. Consistent themes include fear of negative judgment, traditional teaching methods, undervaluation of speaking skills and underutilization of technology. Theoretical frameworks such as Sociocultural Theory and Communicative Language Teaching support learner-centered, interactive practices while trends emphasize on learner autonomy and teacher competency. However, there are clear research gaps, particularly concerning the role of socioeconomic status, mother tongue interference and technology access disparities. Further investigations into these areas, especially within diverse secondary school populations, is necessary to inform more inclusive and effective pedagogical strategies.

3. Method

The participants of this preliminary study comprised 60 secondary school students aged between 13 and 17 years. The selection of this age group was intentional, as students in this developmental stage are actively engaging in second language acquisition and are likely to face confidence and anxiety-related challenges in speaking English. The sampling technique used was convenience sampling, as participants were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate from the school accessible to the researcher. Although this method limits generalizability, it is appropriate for exploratory research.

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design to explore the factors influencing students' English-speaking confidence, challenges, and experiences in classroom environments. The survey incorporated a 5-point Likert scale to measure various dimensions of the students' experiences, in which the scale ranged from 1 to 5, where higher scores indicated stronger agreement with the statements. The design was chosen over other approaches such as mixed methods due to its efficiency in gathering broad patterns from a relatively large group within a limited timeframe. This method also systematically quantifies students' perceptions and behaviors, allowing for precise analysis of social and environmental factors and their English-speaking experiences, including

their confidence levels, anxiety, difficulties, classroom interactions, and the influence of teacher feedback, group activities, and external resources. By utilizing descriptive statistics, the research aimed to provide clear insights into the patterns and trends among the participants, offering a reliable foundation for interpretation and recommendations.

The data was collected through a newly developed structured online survey, designed to investigate secondary school students' English-speaking experiences across several key areas. To ensure content validity, the survey items were reviewed by two TESL lecturers with expertise in language learning and classroom instruction. Their feedback helped refine the wording, relevance and scope of the items to suit the target group. While formal construct validity and test-retest reliability were not assessed in this preliminary phase, this limitation is acknowledged. Future research will include a more comprehensive validation process, including pilot testing on a larger sample and further refinement of the instrument to ensure robust psychometric properties.

The data was analysed using SPSS version 27, using the following measurement which is to indicate the students' agreement on the statements regarding the influence of social and emotional environment on their speaking performance.

Table 1
Interpretation of Mean Scores

Mean Score	Interpretation
3.67 – 5.00	High
2.34 – 3.66	Moderate
1.00 – 2.33	Low

4. Results

4.1 Respondents' Profile

The respondents in this study are made up from diverse age groups, ranging from 13 to 17 years old in a secondary school in Bestari Jaya, Selangor. The sample includes both male and female participants, with varying years of experience in learning English. Based on Figure 1, the respondents consist of 56.7% of male respondents and 43.3% female respondents.

Figure 1
Respondents' gender

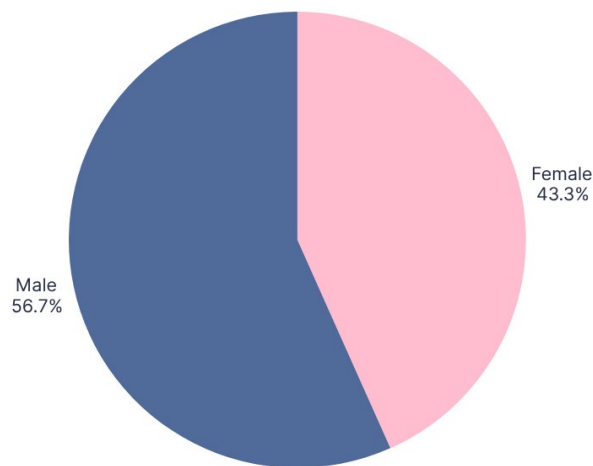


Figure 2 below shows their age ranges from 13 years old (16.7%), 14 years old (23.3%), 15 years old (20%), 16 years old (10%) and lastly 17 years old (30%). Additionally, their self-rated English-speaking ability, shown in Figure 3,

varies from very fluent to very poor, reflecting a wide spectrum of language proficiency levels. The majority of the respondents (43.4%) rated themselves as average while 16.7% and 20% rated themselves as very fluent and fluent. Meanwhile the remaining 20% rated themselves as poor and very poor in their English language proficiency.

Figure 2
Respondents' age group

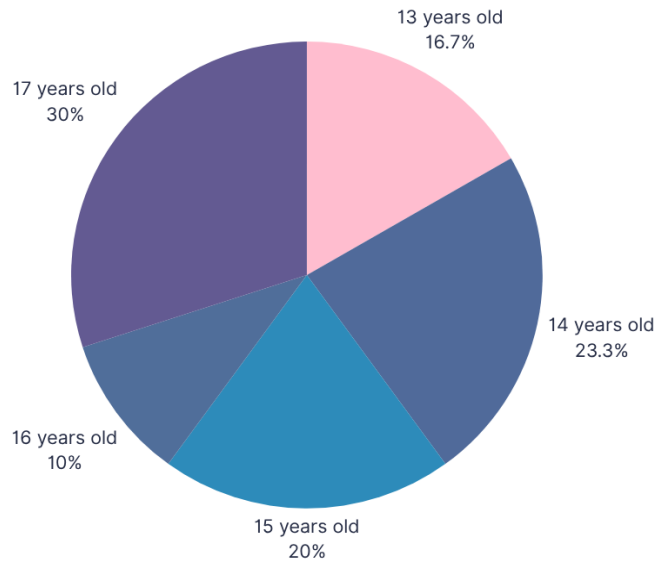
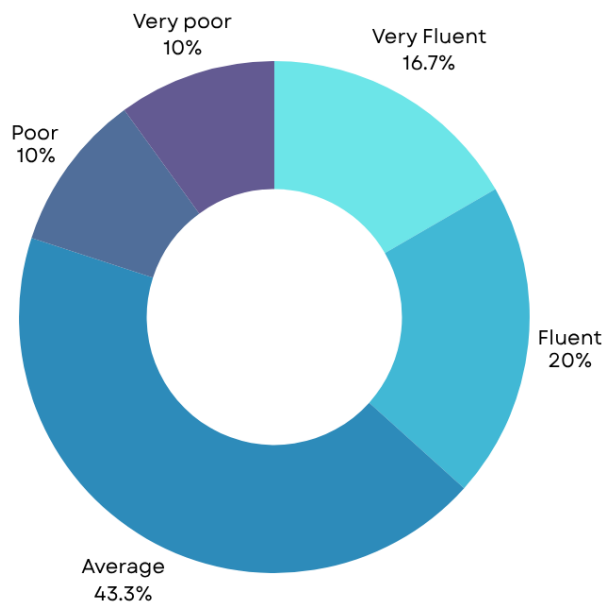


Figure 3
Respondents' self-rated English language proficiency



The data from the survey is divided into two parts to answer the two research questions for this study, which is to identify the challenges faced by ESL learners in secondary school in Bestari Jaya and also to determine the factors contributing to their reluctance to speak in the classroom.

4.2 Challenges Faced by ESL Learners

The data in Table 2 shows the challenges faced by ESL learners in secondary school in Bestari Jaya. The biggest challenge identified was fear of making mistakes, which has the mean score of 3.93. The relatively low standard deviation (0.94) for this statement further indicates that this concern is consistently felt across the student group, which confirms it as a widespread challenge. This is consistent with Kashinathan and Aziz (2021) who found that Malaysian ESL learners commonly avoided speaking activities due to fear of being wrong and facing negative feedback. Similarly, Yahaya et al (2021) highlighted that mistake-related anxiety persists due to an education culture that places too much emphasis on correctness and examinations.

Other than that, the data also indicates that the ESL learners moderately feels anxious or nervous when asked to speak English in class, which is shown from the mean score of 3.56 and also a moderate mean of 3.43 for the statements 'I feel confident speaking English in front of my classmates' and 'I avoid participating in speaking activities because I am afraid of being judged'. This highlights that worrying about making mistakes may hinder their confidence and participation in speaking activities. It reflects the impact of an emotional environment on their performance. Therefore, a classroom atmosphere that fosters psychological safety, encourages mistakes as part of learning and could alleviate this worry and enhance students' speaking confidence.

The moderate to high consistency in these scores suggests a shared experience among students, reinforcing the need for teachers to normalize mistakes as part of learning, which supports Nadesan and Shah's (2020) recommendation for a psychologically safe classroom environment where communication is valued over grammatical accuracy.

Table 2
Challenges faced by ESL learners in secondary school in Bestari Jaya

Statements	N	Min	Max	Mean	Standard Deviation	Challenge Identified
I feel confident speaking English in front of my classmates.	60	2.00	5.00	3.4333	1.04000	Lack of confidence
I often feel nervous or anxious when asked to speak English in class.	60	1.00	5.00	3.5667	1.07265	Anxiety or Nervousness
I worry about making mistakes when speaking in English.	60	2.00	5.00	3.9333	.94443	Fear of making mistakes
I avoid participating in speaking activities because I am afraid of being judged.	60	1.00	5.00	3.4333	1.16511	Fear of being judged
Valid N (listwise)	60					

4.3 Factors Contributing to Reluctance to Speak

The data shown in Table 3 is to determine the factors that contribute to the ESL learners' reluctance to speak in the classroom. The data is divided into two categories for easier explanation, which is social and emotional, to see which factors play the most importance in the ESL learners' speaking performance. Emotional factors emerged as dominant, particularly the fear of making mistakes (M = 3.93) and anxiety (M = 3.57). These responses suggest that students avoid speaking not only due to language barriers but due to internal emotions.

Interestingly, while students worry about making mistakes, they simultaneously acknowledge that teacher support helps reduce these fears. For example, the highest overall mean (M = 4.00) was recorded for 'My teacher creates a positive learning environment,' highlighting the significance of teacher-student rapport. This finding supports

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT), particularly the principle of scaffolding, where a supportive teacher provides the structure needed for learners to take risks and engage in communication.

Constructive feedback from teachers (M = 3.87) also played a key role. This aligns with Bakar et al (2013), who emphasized that students' confidence increases when feedback is delivered in a non-threatening, developmental manner. However, the emotional factor 'I enjoy speaking activities' received a moderate score (M = 3.37), suggesting a lack of intrinsic motivation may also hinder engagement. This could be due to task design or prior negative experiences, which can reduce interest and motivation.

Peer support, particularly in group activities (M = 3.77) was also positively received, reinforcing the value of collaborative learning environments. As SCT suggests, interaction with more capable peers enables learners to construct knowledge and develop speaking skills in low-pressure settings. However, concerns about peer judgment (M = 3.43) remained and it indicates that peer dynamics can be either positive or negative. While group work helps, it must also be carefully structured to ensure positive interdependence rather than social comparison.

Another concern raised by respondents was the limited availability of speaking opportunities, both in and outside the classroom (M = 3.23 for both items). This indicates a possible structural gap in the curriculum, where speaking is not heavily emphasized or facilitated frequently enough. As suggested by Paneerselvam and Mohamad (2019), Malaysian ESL classrooms often prioritize grammar and written skills due to exam-oriented instruction, leaving oral language practice underutilized.

Table 3

Factors contributing to ESL learners' reluctance to speak in the classroom

Statements	N	Min	Max	Mean	Standard Deviation	Factors
I worry about making mistakes when speaking in English.	60	2.00	5.00	3.9333	.94443	Emotional
I often feel nervous or anxious when asked to speak English in class.	60	1.00	5.00	3.5667	1.07265	Emotional
I avoid participating in speaking activities because I am afraid of being judged.	60	1.00	5.00	3.4333	1.16511	Social / Emotional
I feel comfortable speaking English because my teacher creates a positive learning environment.	60	1.00	5.00	4.0000	1.14470	Social
I feel that my teacher gives me constructive feedback to improve my English speaking skills.	60	2.00	5.00	3.8667	.97320	Social
My classmates are supportive when I speak English in class.	60	1.00	5.00	3.5333	1.19578	Social
I feel that I have enough opportunities to practise speaking English in the classroom	60	1.00	5.00	3.2333	1.07265	Social
Group activities in class help me feel more comfortable speaking in English.	60	2.00	5.00	3.7667	1.04000	Social
I have access to resources that help me improve my English speaking skills	60	1.00	5.00	3.7000	1.20773	Social
I feel motivated to improve my English speaking skills because it is important for my future.	60	1.00	5.00	3.7000	1.34293	Emotional

I enjoy participating in activities that require me to speak English.	60	1.00	5.00	3.3667	1.21721	Emotional
My school provides enough speaking practice opportunities outside the classroom	60	1.00	5.00	3.2333	1.16511	Social
Valid N (listwise)	60					

In summary, the data clearly indicates that emotional factors, particularly the fear of making mistakes, anxiety and the impact of enjoyment levels, are significant factors of ESL learners' reluctance to speak. These internal feelings are often combined together by social dynamics, such as the positive classroom environment, the provision of constructive feedback and the supportive nature of classmates. Moreover, the perceived inadequacy of both in-class and out-of-class speaking opportunities also contributes to reluctance.

5. Discussion

The study's findings reveal that ESL learners' reluctance to speak in second school classrooms in Bestari Jaya stems from a complex connection of emotional and social related factors. Emotionally, the fear of making mistakes stands out as the biggest internal barrier. This apprehension is often influenced by anxiety and nervousness when asked to speak in English, leading to reluctance and avoidance of using the English language. While the ESL learners generally recognize the importance of the English language for their future, this external motivation may not always be enough to overcome immediate emotional discomfort. Furthermore, a significant lack of enjoyment in speaking activities also contributes to their hesitancy, suggesting that intrinsic interest plays a role in their willingness to engage.

Socially, the classroom environment, particularly the teacher's role in fostering a positive learning atmosphere and providing constructive feedback, is crucial in reducing this reluctance. A less supportive environment would undoubtedly heighten the ESL learners' apprehension, which is also shown in how although peer support is important, the fear of being judged by classmates remains as a significant factor in the ESL learners' reluctance, highlighting that a balance of social dynamics in promoting or hindering speaking confidence is needed. This connection between personal fears and peer dynamics illustrates how learners' psychological states are embedded in social contexts, and how classroom relationships shape speaking performance beyond surface-level participation.

The analysis also points to a critical challenge regarding speaking opportunities. Students perceive a moderate to low adequacy of chances to practice English, both within the classroom and through extracurricular activities. This perceived scarcity of consistent exposure and practice outside of structured lessons can significantly contribute to their reluctance, as they may feel unprepared or lack sufficient confidence to engage in spontaneous communication. The findings highlight how even students who value English language may remain disengaged without consistent opportunities to build fluency in low-pressure environments. This deepens our understanding of how motivation, anxiety and opportunity interact.

These findings have clear implications for ESL pedagogy, emphasizing the need for a holistic approach. Teachers should prioritize creating psychologically safe, non-judgmental learning spaces where mistakes are viewed as part of the learning process. Actively promoting constructive feedback, encouraging peer support and strategically increasing engaging, low-stakes speaking opportunities, especially through collaborative activities, can significantly reduce students' emotional and social barriers. Examples of activities include role-plays based on real-life situations (such as ordering food, asking for directions), think-pair-share tasks to reduce pressure during whole-class speaking, and small group discussions on familiar topics to encourage risk-taking in a supportive environment. These activities not only provide practice but also reframe speaking as meaningful and relevant rather than evaluative and intimidating.

However, the study has limitations, including its reliance on self-reported data and a focused scope. The biggest constraint is the small sample size which was drawn from a small, specific area within Bestari Jaya. While it provides adequate initial findings for a preliminary study, the generalizability is restricted, and the findings may not be

representative of the diverse experiences of ESL learners across the state. Self-reported responses also carry the risk of bias, including social desirability effects and limited self-awareness, which may affect the accuracy of data. This localized and limited sample size means the observed patterns and identified factors of reluctance, while relevant to this specific group, might not apply for other populations of ESL learners who may face different contexts, teaching methodologies or socio-cultural influences. Additionally, the absence of triangulated data such as teacher interviews or classroom observations, limits the depth of the analysis and constrains interpretations of how observed patterns are used in real classroom dynamics.

Nevertheless, the study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on affective factors in ESL speaking, particularly by drawing attention to students' perceptions of classroom safety and the different ways social interactions shape oral participation.

Future research could use qualitative methods to explore the specific reasons behind these fears, conduct longer-term studies to observe changes over time and investigate targeted interventions to assess their effectiveness in boosting speaking confidence and reducing reluctance among ESL learners. Mixed-methods approaches may be particularly valuable in capturing both measurable patterns and deeper contextual insights and ultimately informing more personalized and adaptive pedagogical strategies.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study confirms how social and emotional environments have a significant influence on secondary ESL students' speaking abilities in Bestari Jaya, Selangor. Students' reluctance to participate in speaking activities is influenced by social demands from peers and teachers, as well as emotional barriers, including nervousness, insecurity, and fear of making mistakes. Despite their intellectual background, these obstacles make it difficult for them to develop their speaking abilities. The study highlights the importance for teachers to design more encouraging and stimulating learning settings that lower anxiety and promote involvement. Such environments should actively foster psychological safety and peer support. Policymakers should also consider professional development programs that help educators better support learners' emotional needs. Ultimately, this study confirms that a holistic approach addressing both students' emotional readiness and social dynamics is crucial for empowering ESL learners to overcome their reluctance in speaking in English and achieve greater confidence and fluency in the language. Future research should further investigate intervention strategies that effectively reduce emotional barriers and enhance classroom interaction.

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