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THE ROAD TO MUET SPEAKING MASTERY: ADDRESSING COMMON STUDENT FEARS AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Background and Purpose: The MUET speaking test is essential for assessing oral English proficiency, crucial for university admission in Malaysia. While language education includes listening, speaking, writing, and reading, speaking presents unique challenges and is a key proficiency indicator. Despite its importance, research on factors affecting speaking performance is limited. This study aims to identify the specific linguistic challenges and psychological factors that students encounter in MUET speaking tasks. Moreover, it examines the correlation between task complexity and speaking performance to better understand its impact on students' oral proficiency.

Methodology: This study involved 320 MUET-preparing students. Questionnaires collected data on demographic and academic factors, as well as seven components of speaking skills. Responses were analysed using SPSS, employing statistical techniques for comprehensive examination.

Findings: Key findings include grammar and vocabulary as the most challenging aspects; high scores for lack of motivation and anxiety significantly impact performance; strong correlations between

linguistic skills and psychological factors, with better vocabulary and grammar linked to reduced anxiety and shyness; and significant interconnections among anxiety, shyness, and lack of confidence.

Contributions: This study highlights the factors influencing MUET speaking test performance, offering crucial insights for educational strategies and interventions. By identifying specific challenges and proficiency gaps, it underscores the need for tailored educational approaches to meet diverse student needs.

Keywords: MUET speaking test, task complexity, language proficiency, speaking abilities.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian University English Test (MUET) is a crucial assessment of candidates' oral English proficiency, serving as a key criterion for university admission and an indicator of academic preparedness (Zainal & Ismail, 2022). In language education, achieving proficiency in the four fundamental skills—listening, speaking, writing, and reading—is essential (Richards, 2020). MUET comprehensively evaluates these skills, playing a significant role in determining a candidate's overall English proficiency (Yunus et al., 2023).

While MUET provides a thorough evaluation of language abilities, the speaking component presents unique challenges and opportunities for students. Speaking is often considered the most critical skill for demonstrating language proficiency, making it a major focus for learners (Al Hosni, 2020). Unlike reading and writing, which allow for revision and reflection, speaking requires real-time language processing and production, which can be intimidating for students who struggle with linguistic and psychological barriers. Developing fluency and confidence in speaking is a primary goal in language education, particularly for candidates preparing for high-stakes assessments such as MUET.

However, mastering speaking skills is inherently challenging. The ability to articulate ideas clearly and fluently requires a combination of linguistic competence, cognitive processing, and psychological readiness (Goh & Burns, 2021). Educators must develop effective teaching strategies that address all aspects of speaking proficiency, emphasizing areas where students experience the most difficulty. A comprehensive approach should include

exposure to authentic speaking situations, targeted grammar and vocabulary instruction, and activities designed to build confidence and reduce anxiety. Despite its importance, research on the factors influencing performance in speaking tests remains scarce (Jin & Zhang, 2021), highlighting the need for further exploration into the specific challenges faced by MUET candidates.

One of the most significant barriers to success in the MUET speaking test is task complexity, which requires students to process and articulate ideas under time constraints. Task complexity refers to the cognitive demands imposed on learners during language tasks, including retrieving vocabulary, applying grammatical rules, and organizing thoughts coherently. Studies suggest that increased task complexity can lead to a higher cognitive load, affecting fluency and accuracy in speech (Robinson, 2021). Furthermore, students with weaker foundational language skills may experience heightened anxiety, further impairing their ability to perform well in speaking assessments. Understanding how task complexity influences speaking performance is essential for designing effective instructional strategies that support students in overcoming these challenges.

This study aims to identify the specific linguistic challenges, including grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, as well as psychological factors such as anxiety, confidence, and motivation, that students face in MUET speaking tasks. The difficulty in acquiring grammar and vocabulary may stem from instructional methods that do not emphasize interactive or communicative language use. In many educational contexts, students are primarily exposed to written forms of English, with limited opportunities for spoken interaction, which may hinder their ability to apply grammatical structures and lexical knowledge in spontaneous conversation. Additionally, pronunciation difficulties can result from inadequate phonetic instruction and limited exposure to native or fluent English speech models. These linguistic obstacles, combined with psychological barriers such as anxiety and low self-confidence, contribute to students' struggles in MUET speaking tasks.

Furthermore, the relationship between linguistic proficiency and psychological factors is bidirectional—while limited vocabulary and grammatical inaccuracies may heighten anxiety, increased anxiety can also negatively affect cognitive processing, making it more challenging for students to access and apply their language skills effectively. Research indicates that students who perceive speaking tasks as overwhelming are more likely to hesitate, experience cognitive overload, and struggle with coherence and fluency (Lee & Park, 2022). Addressing both linguistic and psychological challenges simultaneously is crucial in helping students develop speaking proficiency and perform confidently in MUET.

Additionally, this study seeks to analyse the correlation between task complexity and speaking performance. Understanding the cognitive demands of MUET speaking tasks can inform curriculum development, ensuring that students receive adequate preparation for real-world communication challenges. By examining these factors, the study provides insights into how cognitive load influences students' speaking abilities and informs strategies to improve their performance in MUET. Investigating this area allows educators to develop more targeted teaching methodologies, thereby enhancing learners' speaking proficiency and overall MUET performance.

A key contribution of this study is its potential to improve language instruction by providing empirical evidence on the specific difficulties faced by students in high-stakes speaking assessments. Insights from this research can support the development of tailored interventions, such as structured speaking practice, task simplification techniques, and psychological support strategies. By equipping students with the necessary linguistic tools and confidence-building techniques, educators can create a more supportive learning environment that enables students to excel in MUET speaking tasks. Additionally, findings from this study can inform policy decisions regarding English language education, ensuring that assessment frameworks align with students' linguistic and cognitive capabilities.

In conclusion, the MUET speaking test is a critical component of language assessment in Malaysia, yet many students struggle with the linguistic and psychological demands it presents. By investigating the specific challenges associated with grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, anxiety, confidence, and motivation, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing speaking performance. Additionally, by exploring the correlation between task complexity and speaking outcomes, the research contributes valuable insights into the cognitive dimensions of oral proficiency. Through targeted instructional interventions and policy improvements, students can be better prepared to navigate the complexities of MUET speaking tasks, ultimately enhancing their overall English language proficiency and academic readiness.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The Malaysian University English Test (MUET) is a critical assessment of English proficiency, particularly evaluating speaking skills. Task complexity in language learning, especially in relation to speaking performance, has become a significant area of research. This section explores existing literature on task complexity and its impact on second language speaking

performance, integrating key theoretical perspectives such as the Cognitive Hypothesis, the Limited Capacity Model, and the role of motivation in language learning.

Task complexity refers to the cognitive demands placed on learners during language performance. It involves multiple dimensions, including linguistic demands, conceptual difficulty, and time constraints, all of which influence a learner's ability to process and produce language effectively. The Cognitive Hypothesis (Robinson, 2001, 2021) suggests that increased task complexity requires greater cognitive effort, influencing students' ability to retrieve and produce accurate language under pressure. When tasks become more complex, students must allocate additional cognitive resources to language formulation, leading to potential trade-offs between accuracy, fluency, and complexity. In the MUET speaking test, where candidates must construct coherent arguments within a time constraint, tasks requiring higher cognitive processing often led to difficulties in grammar and vocabulary use, ultimately affecting fluency and confidence. Research indicates that as cognitive demands increase, students with lower linguistic proficiency experience greater challenges, highlighting the need to address task complexity in language assessment and instruction. Studies also suggest that reducing task complexity through strategic scaffolding, such as providing pre-task planning or simplified prompts, can help students improve their performance by allowing them to allocate cognitive resources more effectively.

The Limited Capacity Model (Skehan, 2021) further explains how cognitive resources are constrained, making it difficult for learners to simultaneously focus on multiple aspects of language production. This model proposes that when cognitive load exceeds an individual's working memory capacity, certain aspects of performance, such as fluency or accuracy, may suffer. When students must manage grammar, pronunciation, fluency, and anxiety simultaneously, cognitive overload may occur, resulting in reduced performance. This phenomenon is particularly evident in high-stakes assessments like MUET, where students must quickly organize their thoughts, retrieve appropriate vocabulary, and structure grammatically sound sentences while maintaining confidence. The findings of this study align with this model, showing that students who struggled with vocabulary and grammar also reported higher anxiety, suggesting that cognitive overload affects both linguistic and psychological dimensions of speaking performance. Research has shown that strategies such as breaking tasks into smaller, manageable steps and encouraging practice in low-pressure environments can help mitigate cognitive overload. Balancing task complexity is essential to optimizing students' speaking performance, ensuring tasks remain challenging yet

manageable. Additionally, incorporating task sequencing techniques that gradually increase complexity can enable learners to build confidence and linguistic competence progressively.

Motivation is another crucial factor in second language acquisition (Dörnyei, 2009), significantly influencing students' ability to manage complex speaking tasks. Higher motivation enhances perseverance, while low motivation, as observed in this study (mean score: 2.82), correlates with increased anxiety and lower speaking proficiency. Task complexity interacts with motivation, where overly difficult tasks may discourage students, whereas well-calibrated challenges can foster engagement and improved performance (Kim & Bae, 2021). Understanding the relationship between task complexity and motivation provides valuable insights into how students navigate linguistic and psychological challenges, contributing to the development of more effective instructional strategies for MUET preparation.

Several studies have examined the impact of task complexity on speaking performance. Robinson (2011) argues that complex tasks encourage deeper linguistic processing, potentially enhancing lexical richness and grammatical accuracy. However, Sun and Kim (2022) found that increased complexity can also heighten cognitive load, leading to a decline in fluency. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2023) observed that while complex tasks promote lexical variety, they can also increase anxiety, further affecting performance. These findings underscore the importance of designing language assessments that balance complexity with students' cognitive and affective capacities.

Educational interventions have been developed to mitigate the challenges associated with task complexity. Pre-task planning and scaffolding techniques have been shown to reduce cognitive load, leading to better performance (Zhao & Chen, 2023; Xu & Ren, 2022). In the context of MUET, structured modules that include guided speaking exercises and reflective feedback have proven effective in helping students manage linguistic and psychological barriers (Ng & Tan, 2023). Moreover, technology-enhanced learning environments offer adaptive feedback that supports students in managing cognitive demands more effectively (Lim & Kim, 2023).

Overall, task complexity is a key factor in shaping speaking performance in second language contexts. While complex tasks drive language development through deeper cognitive processing, they also present challenges that must be managed through strategic interventions. By integrating insights from the Cognitive Hypothesis, the Limited Capacity Model, and motivation theories, educators can better understand the factors influencing MUET speaking performance. These theoretical perspectives offer a comprehensive framework for developing

targeted teaching methodologies, ensuring that language learning tasks remain challenging yet achievable for students preparing for high-stakes assessments like MUET.

3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs a quantitative research design to examine the relationship between task complexity and speaking performance in the MUET speaking test. A structured questionnaire was used as the primary data collection instrument to assess the various components of speaking performance, including vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, anxiety, shyness, lack of confidence, and lack of motivation.

3.1 Questionnaire Development and Validation

The questionnaire items were adopted and adapted from Parima Verapornvanichkul (2011), and Rizki et al. (2020). The questionnaire covers a total of 32 five-point Likert scale items, each requiring a response on a scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree, with scores ranging from 5 (for strongly agree) to 1 (for strongly disagree). In the questionnaire, the items are categorized into 7 components: 1) vocabulary, 2) grammar, 3) pronunciation, 4) anxiety, 5) shyness, 6) lack of confidence, and 7) lack of motivation. The items in each component are as tabulated in Table I.

Component	Item No	Total Item
Vocabulary	1 - 5	5
Grammar	6 - 9	4
Pronunciation	10 - 15	6
Anxiety	16 - 19	4
Shyness	20 - 23	4
Lack of confidence	24 - 29	6
Lack of motivation	30 - 32	3

To ensure the reliability and validity of the instrument, a pilot study was conducted with 50 students from a comparable population prior to the main data collection. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.87, indicating high reliability. Construct validity was examined through exploratory factor analysis, confirming that the questionnaire items effectively measured the intended constructs.

3.2 Sampling Strategy and Generalizability

A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure diversity in the participant pool, taking into account different proficiency levels and academic backgrounds. The final sample consisted of 320 students, with a gender distribution of 34.1% male and 65.9% female. While this gender imbalance reflects the actual enrolment trends in certain educational settings, it may limit the generalizability of the findings to a more balanced population. This limitation is acknowledged, and future research is recommended to explore whether gender-based differences impact speaking performance outcomes.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was self- administered in a controlled classroom environment to minimize potential distractions and ensure consistency in responses. Participants completed the questionnaire under the supervision of trained facilitators who provided clarifications when necessary. The controlled setting helped maintain data integrity and reduce the likelihood of response bias. Responses were then analyzed using SPSS, applying statistical techniques such as descriptive analysis and correlation tests to examine relationships between variables.

4.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The demographic and academic factors were analyzed to uncover patterns and insights that can inform targeted educational strategies. The results are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Demographic background

No.	Demography	Frequency (n=320)	Percentage (%)
1	Gender		
	Male	109	34.1
	Female	211	65.9
2	English Score (SPM)		
	A+ - A	77	24.1
	B+ - B	90	28.1
	C+ - C	74	23.1
	D+ - D	50	15.6
	E - Failed	29	9.1
3	Overall Academic Achievement (SPM)		
	0A – 1A	90	28.1
	2A – 3A	102	31.9
	4A – 5A	72	22.5
	6A – 7A	42	13.1
	8A – 9A above	14	4.4

The study involved 320 participants (109 males, 34.1%; 211 females, 65.9%). SPM English scores varied, with 52.2% achieving high grades (A+ - A: 24.1%, B+ - B: 28.1%), 23.1% scoring C+ - C, and 24.7% in the lower bands (D+ - D: 15.6%, fail: 9.1%), indicating a need for targeted support. Overall academic achievement showed 31.9% scoring 2A - 3A, 28.1% with 0A - 1A, and 22.5% attaining 4A - 5A. Higher achievements were less common (6A - 7A: 13.1%, 8A - 9A+: 4.4%), highlighting the need to support students in reaching top results.

Further analysis involved calculating the mean score for each item, which helped identify the components and items that respondents found challenging when learning to speak English for the MUET speaking test. The level of difficulty for each item and component was interpreted based on the mean scores, following the guidelines adapted from Cohen (2021), as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Interpretation of mean score

No.	Mean Score	Interpretation
1	1.00 – 1.80	Very low
2	1.81 – 2.60	Low
3	2.61 – 3.40	Average
4	3.41 – 4.20	High
5	4.21 – 5.00	Very high

Adapted from Cohen (2021)

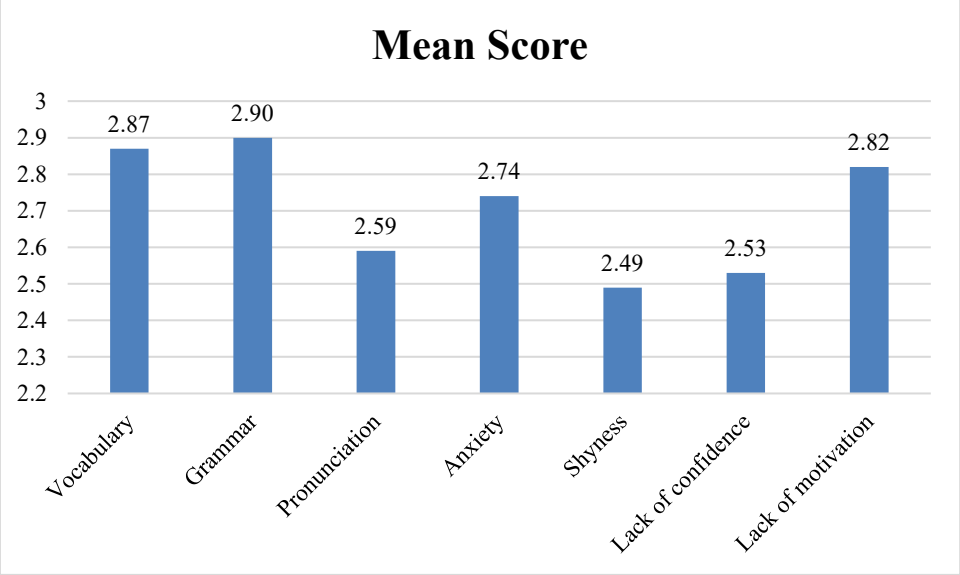

Figure 1: Mean score of each speaking's component

Based on the mean score of each speaking's component from Figure 1 above, the analysis of mean scores for different aspects of speaking reveals that students find grammar to be the most challenging component, with the highest mean score of 2.90. This indicates that students may have more difficulty forming grammatically correct sentences than other speaking aspects. Vocabulary, with a mean score of 2.87, is also challenging but slightly less so than grammar. The relatively high scores for lack of motivation (2.82) and anxiety (2.74) suggest that these psychological factors significantly impact speaking performance. Pronunciation, scoring 2.59, is seen as moderately challenging, underscoring its importance but indicating it is less of a

barrier than grammar and vocabulary. The lower scores for lack of confidence (2.53) and shyness (2.49) suggest that these factors are less of a hindrance to speaking, though they still warrant consideration. Overall, these findings highlight the need for targeted interventions to improve grammar and vocabulary skills, as well as strategies to address motivational and anxiety-related barriers to enhance overall speaking performance.

The results of this study provide critical insights into the challenges students face in the MUET speaking test, particularly in relation to grammar and vocabulary. These components emerged as the most difficult aspects of speaking, with mean scores of 2.90 and 2.87, respectively. This difficulty can be attributed to several factors, including instructional methods, the design of the test, and broader socio-linguistic influences. Many students receive insufficient explicit grammar instruction in their prior education, leading to weak syntactic structures in spontaneous speech. Additionally, the MUET speaking test requires candidates to articulate complex ideas within a limited time, exacerbating difficulties in retrieving appropriate vocabulary and constructing grammatically sound responses. Socio-linguistic factors, such as limited exposure to English outside of formal education, may further contribute to these challenges, as students struggle to practice and internalize correct grammatical structures and lexical choices in authentic communication settings.

Following this, a correlation analysis was performed to explore the relationships between the seven components of speaking skills. The findings from this analysis are displayed in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Correlation analysis

No.	Variable 1	Variable 2	Pearson Correlation	p-value
1	Vocabulary	Grammar	0.638	0.000
2	Vocabulary	Pronunciation	0.651	0.000
3	Vocabulary	Anxiety	0.644	0.000
4	Vocabulary	Shyness	0.663	0.000
5	Vocabulary	Lack of confidence	0.633	0.000
6	Vocabulary	Lack of motivation	0.462	0.000
7	Grammar	Pronunciation	0.663	0.000
8	Grammar	Anxiety	0.621	0.000
9	Grammar	Shyness	0.616	0.000
10	Grammar	Lack of confidence	0.566	0.000
11	Grammar	Lack of motivation	0.474	0.000
12	Pronunciation	Anxiety	0.658	0.000
13	Pronunciation	Shyness	0.643	0.000
14	Pronunciation	Lack of confidence	0.690	0.000
15	Pronunciation	Lack of motivation	0.531	0.000
16	Anxiety	Shyness	0.785	0.000
17	Anxiety	Lack of confidence	0.772	0.000
18	Anxiety	Lack of motivation	0.533	0.000
19	Shyness	Lack of confidence	0.777	0.000
20	Shyness	Lack of motivation	0.553	0.000
21	Lack of confidence	Lack of motivation	0.636	0.000

The correlation analysis reveals strong and significant positive relationships between linguistic skills (vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation) and psychological factors (anxiety, shyness, lack of confidence, and lack of motivation). Notably, improved vocabulary and grammar are strongly associated with decreased anxiety and shyness, suggesting that enhanced linguistic proficiency contributes to better psychological well-being. Additionally, strong correlations among anxiety, shyness, and lack of confidence indicate that these psychological factors are closely interconnected, influencing one another in ways that impact speaking performance. All correlations are statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), reinforcing the reliability of these findings and underscoring the intricate link between language proficiency and psychological barriers in second language acquisition.

A key insight from this study is the bidirectional relationship between linguistic skills and psychological factors, particularly anxiety and lack of confidence. Linguistic deficiencies heighten psychological barriers, while increased anxiety further impairs speaking performance

by causing hesitation and reducing fluency. Students with weaker vocabulary and grammar knowledge often fear making mistakes, leading to greater anxiety and reluctance to speak. At the same time, heightened anxiety can result in cognitive overload, making it more challenging for students to retrieve and use appropriate linguistic structures effectively. These findings align with Lee and Park (2022), who emphasize that task complexity significantly influences speaking anxiety, especially among learners with lower proficiency levels. The cognitive demands of the MUET speaking test require rapid language processing, which can be particularly overwhelming for students lacking confidence, perpetuating a cycle of poor performance and heightened anxiety. Addressing both linguistic and psychological challenges simultaneously is essential in breaking this cycle and fostering better speaking outcomes.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of addressing both linguistic and psychological factors simultaneously in language instruction. While strengthening students' grammar and vocabulary proficiency is essential, reducing their anxiety and building confidence through structured practice, scaffolded support, and exposure to authentic speaking situations can significantly improve speaking performance. These findings contribute to the broader literature on task complexity and speaking performance, supporting the need for a holistic approach that integrates linguistic development with psychological resilience. Future research should explore intervention strategies that effectively balance task demands with students' proficiency levels, ensuring that MUET candidates can perform at their best under exam conditions.

This study has certain limitations that may affect the generalizability of its findings. The sample, consisting of 320 MUET candidates, may not fully represent the diverse student population across Malaysia. Variations in regional dialects, educational backgrounds, and exposure to English could influence speaking performance, limiting the applicability of the results to a broader context. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data for assessing psychological factors such as anxiety, confidence, and motivation may introduce bias, as participants' responses could be influenced by personal perceptions or social desirability rather than objective measures of their speaking proficiency.

Another limitation is the study's cross-sectional design, which captures students' speaking challenges at a single point in time. Speaking proficiency evolves with consistent practice and exposure, and a longitudinal analysis would provide deeper insights into how task complexity affects performance over time. Furthermore, external factors such as prior exposure to English, socio-economic background, and access to speaking opportunities outside the

classroom are not extensively controlled in this study. These variables may contribute significantly to students' speaking proficiency but fall beyond the scope of this research.

Lastly, while the study effectively uses quantitative methods to identify trends and correlations, it lacks qualitative insights that could provide a deeper understanding of students' experiences with MUET speaking tasks. Interviews or open-ended responses would help uncover individual struggles, coping strategies, and perspectives on task complexity. Future research could benefit from a mixed-methods approach to offer a more comprehensive analysis of linguistic and psychological barriers affecting MUET candidates.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing student performance in the MUET speaking test, emphasizing the significance of demographic, academic, and psychological aspects in shaping effective educational strategies. The findings reveal notable gender-specific differences and proficiency gaps, underscoring the need for tailored support to address the unique challenges faced by students, particularly those struggling with English proficiency. Grammar and vocabulary emerged as key areas of difficulty, highlighting the necessity of targeted language instruction to enhance students' linguistic competence. Furthermore, the study establishes strong links between linguistic skills and psychological factors, such as anxiety and lack of confidence, reinforcing the need for a supportive learning environment. These insights are critical for informing educational policy and practice, enabling the implementation of evidence-based strategies to improve speaking performance. By addressing both linguistic and psychological challenges, educators can equip students with the skills and confidence needed to excel in the MUET speaking test and achieve academic success.

Beyond MUET preparation, the study's implications extend to broader second language acquisition contexts. Educators and policymakers should adopt a holistic approach that not only strengthens linguistic competence but also nurtures motivation, resilience, and self-efficacy among learners. A well-rounded instructional design that integrates psychological support, such as confidence-building exercises and anxiety-reduction techniques, can foster an optimal learning environment for students aiming to enhance their speaking proficiency.

Future research should take a longitudinal approach to track students' speaking development over time, offering insights into how linguistic and psychological challenges evolve across different stages of English instruction. Additionally, investigating the effectiveness of instructional methods such as task-based learning, scaffolding techniques, and digital tools could help identify the most effective strategies for improving fluency, confidence,

and cognitive processing in MUET speaking tasks. Comparative studies on different teaching approaches could provide valuable insights into best practices for preparing students for high-stakes speaking assessments. Further research should also explore external factors such as students' exposure to English outside the classroom, socio-economic background, and cultural attitudes toward language learning, as these variables may significantly impact speaking proficiency. A mixed-methods approach combining quantitative surveys with qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups, could provide a deeper understanding of students' experiences with task complexity.

By contributing to the existing body of research on language acquisition, this study lays a strong foundation for future research aimed at advancing language education and improving student outcomes. Through continued exploration of effective teaching methodologies, curriculum enhancements, and supportive learning environments, educators can ensure that students are well-prepared to meet the challenges of the MUET speaking test and beyond, ultimately fostering greater language proficiency and academic success.

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