Challenges in English Speaking: A Study of Malaysian University English Test (MUET) Candidates

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Abstract – Mastering the skill of speaking has long posed a significant challenge for language learners, necessitating the development of effective pedagogical strategies to address this vital aspect of language acquisition. This study aims to investigate the aspect of task complexity encountered by Malaysian University English Test (MUET) candidates during speaking assessments. Through the administration of a set of questionnaires covering various components of speaking, insights into the challenges faced by these candidates were obtained. The data analysis in this study employed a quantitative approach, primarily utilizing mean and standard deviation as the key parameters for analysis. The reliability of the questionnaire was initially tested and Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.97 was obtained, affirming the instrument's reliability. Further analysis of the data revealed that these students considered vocabulary as the most challenging component when speaking English, identified by the highest mean score of 3.43 which indicate a high level of difficulty. This urges English instructors to prioritize expanding students' vocabulary to enable them to communicate more confidently without being hindered by lexical limitations. The findings of this study hold significance as they provide valuable insights for English instructors to comprehend the challenges students face when speaking English. With this understanding, instructors can devise targeted strategies and tailor the teaching modules accordingly to improve candidates' overall proficiency levels.

Keywords – Task complexity, speaking performance, pedagogical strategies, vocabulary challenges, lexical limitations, MUET Speaking Test

I. INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian University English Test (MUET) speaking test plays a crucial role in evaluating candidates' oral proficiency in English. MUET serves as an assessment tool to evaluate students' English proficiency level. It is a prerequisite for students seeking admission to local tertiary institutions (Sukri et al., 2023). In language education, students acquire four essential language skills namely listening, speaking, writing, and reading (Miralpeix, & Muñoz, 2018). These elements are integral parts of the MUET test, with each one contributing to the overall score (Naaim, & Hashim, 2019; Jin, 2020).

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While the MUET test comprehensively evaluates candidates' linguistic abilities, it is the speaking component that often presents unique challenges and opportunities for students. Besides, speaking typically emerges as the predominant language skill to assess one's proficiency in language acquisition. Consequently, many students prioritize achieving proficiency in speaking as their primary objective in language learning (Rao, 2019). Thus, developing the ability to speak confidently and effectively is essential in mastering a language.

Mastering speaking skills can be challenging, making it essential for educators to develop comprehensive teaching modules that encompass all necessary aspects for achieving proficiency. In addition, these modules should prioritize addressing the areas that students find most challenging. To effectively accomplish this, it is necessary for educators to firstly identify the hurdles faced by the English language learners. However, despite its significance, there has been limited research on the specific factors influencing candidates' performance in speaking assessments.

Therefore, this study aims to delve into the task complexity in order to determine the aspects of speaking that student perceive as challenging. Task complexity, which refers to the cognitive demand required to complete a speaking task, is a key factor that could potentially affect candidates' performance. By exploring this aspect, educators can better tailor teaching methodologies to address the challenges faced by learners.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In today's globalized world, speaking skills are recognized as essential for international mobility, entrance to higher education, and employment (Fulcher, 2015; Isaacs, 2016), and are now a major component in most international and local language examinations, due at least in part to the rise of the communicative movement in language teaching and assessment (Fulcher, 2000). In language education, students have to master four key skills which are listening, speaking, writing, and reading (Miralpeix, & Muñoz, 2018) in order to have good proficiency in the language. Among these, speaking often serves as the primary indicator of language acquisition success. Therefore, many students prioritize achieving proficiency in speaking as their ultimate goal in language learning (Richards & Rendaya, 2002; Rao, 2019).

Students' difficulties speaking English were reported by Shen and Chiu (2019) as psychological problems (such as nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence), linguistic problems (inadequate vocabulary, grammar, expressions, sentence organization, etc), and

environmental problems (e.g., the absence of a context for learning English). According to Ahsan, Asgher, and Hussain (2020), lack of confidence is a major psychological factor which occurs when students believe that their communicative peers have not understood what they are trying to convey. Therefore, communication anxiety is unavoidable for students who lack confidence in their English communication skills (Nunan, 1999). Moreover, it is also common for students who lack self-confidence and low self-esteem to become anxious as soon as they encounter linguistic difficulties (Hanifa,2018). In some cases, it is linguistic factors such as a lack of vocabulary and a lack of understanding of grammar and collocation that ruin confidence and cause anxiety, as highlighted by some linguists (Kasbi, & Elahi Shirvan, 2017; Rahman, 2017).

Students encountering difficulties in speaking English commonly face challenges categorized as affective-related, socially-related, and linguistically-related issues (Afshar, & Asakereh, 2016). According to Hanifa (2018), affective factors involve the learners' emotions and personality traits. Affective-related issues encompass factors such as attitude, self-confidence, motivation, anxiety, exposure duration to the language, classroom environment, familial background, and both student and teacher competencies. Meanwhile, socially-related issues involve the ability to practice English outside the classroom and comprehension within speaking sessions, while linguistic-related issues include vocabulary, fluency, grammar, and pronunciation (Jaya, Petrus, & Pitaloka, 2022).

As mentioned above, speaking skills involves many various components to enable effective communication using the language. There have been many research studies highlighting the difficulties faced by language learners when speaking the language. For instance, Suryani, Suarnajaya, and Pratiwi (2020) reported that it is difficult for students to speak well when they lack grammar knowledge, pronunciation skills, and vocabulary knowledge. Other study by Faridi, & Joko Yulianto (2021) found that language anxiety is triggered by several factors, including communication anxiety, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Language anxiety can discourage students from engaging in verbal activities. In MUET speaking assessment where students have to speak in a group discussion, this is undeniably a very important aspect that can affect students' performance. Besides, Leyaley (2023) stated that students' lack of motivation, shyness, anxiety, and lack of confidence are other common aspects that hinder their participation in English class discussions. Brown (2001) emphasized that anxiety hinders students' ability to effectively communicate in English, despite their knowledge of the subject matter, as they struggle to express themselves.

Recently, task complexity emerged as one of the factors influencing language acquisition including speaking performance among language learners. Task complexity is especially relevant in the context of task-based instructional approach, which is a concept introduced by Prabhu in 1987 (Prabhu, 1987). In his task-based concept, Prabhu (1987) emphasized that learners attain greater proficiency in the target language through active engagement in meaningful task-based activities tailored to achieve specific objectives. This concept contributed to the development of task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) approach, which has been implemented globally in language teaching.

Robinson's Cognition Hypothesis theory (2005) has been widely employed as the theoretical framework in task complexity research (Frear & Bitchener, 2015; Yang et al., 2020; Mora et al., 2024) and will also be used in this work. The theoretical framework proposes that pedagogic tasks should be tailored for language learners, gradually increasing in cognitive complexity to better align with the challenges of real-world target tasks (Robinson, 2005; Wang, 2020).

Therefore, students' speaking proficiency may be influenced by diverse factors, with each student facing distinct challenges in English speaking. Recognizing these difficulties can aid English instructors in devising appropriate pedagogical approaches to address this issue.

III. METHOD

In this study, a pilot test was done by analyzing 30 samples using SPSS version 25. The reliability of the questionnaire employed for the project was determined using Cronbach's alpha test.

IV. INSTRUMENTATION

The questionnaire employed in this study was adopted and adapted from Parima Verapornvanichkul (2011), and Rizki, Prawati, and Masyhur (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.

TABLE I: QUESTIONNAIRE'S COMPONENTS

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

V. PROCEDURES AND DATA COLLECTION

The questionnaires used for data collection were distributed to Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Sultan Ismail Petra (KIAS) students, specifically those preparing for the MUET examination in session 1 of 2024. These MUET candidates are currently undertaking a preparatory course to equip themselves for the upcoming MUET examination.

Within the questionnaire, the purpose of the survey was briefly outlined to ensure that the participants understood the significance and purpose of their participation. A total of 32 completed questionnaires were finally gathered, comprising 22 female participants and 10 male participants.

VI.   DATA ANALYSIS

For data analysis, 30 out of 32 samples were taken for pilot testing. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was determined to assess the reliability of the questionnaire. Further analysis was conducted by calculating the mean and standard deviation of each item. This facilitated the identification of components and items that respondents found challenging when learning to speak English in the MUET speaking test. The level of difficulty for each item and component was interpreted from the mean score obtained. The interpretation was adapted from Alias (1997) as tabulated in Table II below.

TABLE II: INTERPRETATION OF MEAN SCORE

Mean score	Interpretation
1.0-1.80	Very low
1.81-2.60	Low
2.61-3.40	Average
3.41- 4.20	High
4.21-5.00	Very High

Adapted from Alias (1997)

VII.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

TABLE III: DEMOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

Demography	Frequency N=30	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	9	30
Female	21	70
English score (SPM)		
A+ - A	3	10.0
B+ - B	7	23.3
C+ - C	6	20.0
D+ - D	8	26.7
E - failed	6	20.0

Table III displays the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Out of the 30 participants, 9 were male students (30%) and 21 were female students (70%).

TABLE IV: CRONBACH'S ALPHA VALUE

No. of items	Cronbach's alpha
32	0.97

TABLE V: ITEMS OF SPEAKING SKILL

	Item Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
1	I feel afraid to speak in English because my vocabulary is limited	3.28	1.11	Average
2	I find it difficult to express my ideas verbally when speaking in English	3.50	0.95	High
3	I often get confused about using the proper vocabulary to speak	3.66	1.07	High
4	I rarely respond to my friends when speaking because they speak English faster	3.09	0.93	Average
5	I often encounter difficulties in English conversations with my friends due to unknown word meanings	3.59	0.91	High
6	I have difficulty arranging words into sentences when speaking in English	3.38	1.04	Average
7	I only speak in English when I think my grammar is correct	3.25	1.14	Average
8	I have a habit of mixing my mother tongue with English when speaking, to avoid misunderstanding	3.16	0.92	Average
9	I struggle to communicate well with friends because my grasp of grammar is not sufficient	3.47	1.05	High
10	I have difficulty responding to speakers who speak with different accents	3.13	1.01	Average
11	I have trouble responding to a conversation if the speaker's intonation is not understandable	3.34	0.97	Average
12	I feel ashamed to speak in English because I do not pronounce it well	3.09	1.17	Average
13	I frequently face communication issues because of misunderstandings of what I hear and pronunciation problems	3.19	1.12	Average

No	Statement	Mean	SD	Level
14	I often have trouble communicating with friends because I sometimes pronounce words incorrectly or stress them in the wrong way	3.00	1.08	Average
15	I often have inaccurate intonations and thus create confusions in oral communications	3.00	1.11	Average
16	I do not want to make mistakes when speaking because I am afraid of being corrected by others	3.03	1.31	Average
17	I have less confidence in speaking English because I worry that my friends will laugh at me when I speak	3.13	1.29	Average
18	I feel nervous when speaking English in front of other people	3.59	1.07	High
19	I feel anxious when speaking and end up saying nothing	3.09	1.09	Average
20	I suddenly panicked and forgot everything I had planned to say when I started speaking in English	3.53	1.08	High
21	I feel ashamed to speak English because I cannot speak English fluently	3.50	1.05	High
22	I experience communication problems with friends due to my personal trait of avoiding speaking with others	2.63	1.04	Average
23	I avoid communication with friends due to shyness	2.63	1.13	Average
24	I do not want to speak in English because I fear my friends will not understand what I say	2.88	1.01	Average
25	I do not understand what my friends say, so I would rather keep silent	2.72	1.05	Average
26	I tend to avoid speaking English with English-speaking friends as I get nervous around them	3.03	1.03	Average
27	I experience anxiety while speaking in English as I probably have low levels of self-esteem	3.38	1.04	Average
28	I feel uncomfortable while speaking English, probably because I lack of proper practice in speaking in English	3.66	1.15	High
29	I would rather work alone than in a team that will force me to speak English	2.69	1.06	Average
30	I only speak English when my teacher forces me to do so	3.16	1.35	Average
31	I might hesitate to talk to English-speaking friends because I don't fully understand the cultural differences	3.00	1.05	Average
32	I am less motivated to improve my English-speaking skills when I have infrequent opportunities to speak English with friends	3.16	1.25	Average
	Total	**3.18**	**1.08**	**Average**

Table V displays the mean and standard deviation. The questionnaire utilized in this study demonstrated reliability, yielding an internal reliability score of $\sigma = 0.97$ through Cronbach's alpha analysis (Table IV).

Generally, the respondents encounter speaking difficulties at a moderate level (mean= 3.18).

By probing into each of the component outlined in the questionnaire, it becomes evident that vocabulary exhibits the highest mean score of 3.43, as illustrated in Figure 1. This indicates a high level of difficulty. Therefore, this result shows that the respondents perceive vocabulary as the most challenging aspect when speaking English. Meanwhile, other components remain at an average level of difficulty.

The speaking assessment in MUET includes two segments: individual presentations (Task A) and group discussions (Task B). In Task A, candidates are tasked with presenting information, providing explanations, expressing preferences, and making decisions, whereas in Task B, they are required to interact in turns, negotiate shared understanding, conduct discussion, and conclude the discussion (Abas, & Jaffri, 2017). Successful

completion of these tasks depends on students' possession of a diverse vocabulary to enable them to articulate their thoughts and opinions freely. Limited vocabulary may restrict their ability to fully participate in discussions despite possessing extensive knowledge of the topic. Moreover, their inability to contribute opinions and engage in the discussion during the assessment can lead to increased anxiety and diminished self-esteem. Consequently, their speaking performance is likely to deteriorate as the discussion progresses.
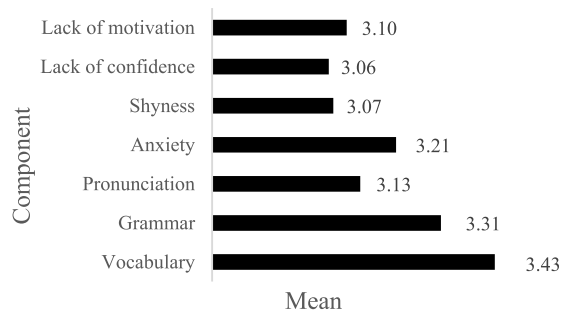

Figure 1. Mean Score of Each Speaking's Component

TABLE VI: VOCABULARY COMPONENT

No.	Item statement	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
1	I feel afraid to speak in English because my vocabulary is limited	3.28	1.11	Average
2	I find it difficult to express my ideas verbally when speaking in English	3.50	0.95	High
3	I often get confused about using the proper vocabulary to speak	3.66	1.07	High
4	I rarely respond to my friends when speaking because they speak English faster	3.09	0.93	Average
5	I often encounter difficulties in English conversations with my friends due to unknown word meanings	3.59	0.91	High
	Total	**3.43**	**0.99**	**High**

Table VI shows the items included in the vocabulary component of the questionnaire. Item number 2, 3, and 5 exhibited a high degree of difficulty, with mean scores of 3.50, 3.66, and 3.59 respectively. From this data, it is clear that students particularly find it challenging to express themselves clearly and comprehensively due to limited vocabulary. According to Sekhar (2021), having a strong vocabulary is essential for language proficiency, and lacking it presents a considerable obstacle for many

students, especially in second language acquisition. The authors also highlighted that proficiency in all four language skills which are listening, reading, speaking, and writing relies heavily on possessing a sufficient vocabulary. This assertion holds true, as individuals encountering unfamiliar words while listening or reading may struggle to comprehend the content. Similarly, during speaking and writing activities, individuals with limited vocabulary will most likely find it challenging to effectively express their ideas and emotions. Therefore, an extensive vocabulary is essential for effective communication across all language skills.

TABLE VII: GRAMMAR COMPONENT

No.	Item statement	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
6	I have difficulty arranging words into sentences when speaking in English	3.38	1.04	Average
7	I only speak in English when I think my grammar is correct	3.25	1.14	Average
8	I have a habit of mixing my mother tongue with English when speaking, to avoid misunderstanding	3.16	0.92	Average
9	I struggle to communicate well with friends because my grasp of grammar is not sufficient	3.47	1.05	High
	Total	**3.31**	**1.04**	**Average**

TABLE VIII: PRONUNCIATION COMPONENT

No.	Item statement	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
10	I have difficulty responding to speakers who speak with different accents	3.13	1.01	Average
11	I have trouble responding to a conversation if the speaker's intonation is not understandable	3.34	0.97	Average
12	I feel ashamed to speak in English because I do not pronounce it well	3.09	1.17	Average
13	I frequently face communication issues because of misunderstandings of what I hear and pronunciation problems	3.19	1.12	Average

14	I often have trouble communicating with friends because I sometimes pronounce words incorrectly or stress them in the wrong way	3.00	1.08	Average
15	I often have inaccurate intonations and thus create confusions in oral communications	3.00	1.11	Average
	Total	**3.13**	**1.08**	**Average**

TABLE IX: ANXIETY COMPONENT

No.	Item statement	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
16	I do not want to make mistakes when speaking because I am afraid of being corrected by others	3.03	1.31	Average
17	I have less confidence in speaking English because I worry that my friends will laugh at me when I speak	3.13	1.29	Average
18	I feel nervous when speaking English in front of other people	3.59	1.07	High
19	I feel anxious when speaking and end up saying nothing	3.09	1.09	Average
	Total	**3.21**	**1.19**	**Average**

TABLE X: SHYNESS COMPONENT

No.	Item statement	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
20	I suddenly panicked and forgot everything I had planned to say when I started speaking in English	3.53	1.08	High
21	I feel ashamed to speak English because I cannot speak English fluently	3.50	1.05	High
22	I experience communication problems with friends due to my personal trait of avoiding speaking with others	2.63	1.04	Average
23	I avoid communication with friends due to shyness	2.63	1.13	Average
	Total	**3.07**	**1.07**	**Average**

TABLE XI: LACK OF CONFIDENCE COMPONENT

No.	Item statement	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
24	I do not want to speak in English because I fear my friends will not understand what I say	2.88	1.01	Average
25	I do not understand what my friends say, so I would rather keep silent	2.72	1.05	Average
26	I tend to avoid speaking English with English-speaking friends as I get nervous around them	3.03	1.03	Average
27	I experience anxiety while speaking in English as I probably have low levels of self-esteem	3.38	1.04	Average
28	I feel uncomfortable while speaking English, probably because I lack of proper practice in speaking in English	3.66	1.15	High
29	I would rather work alone than in a team that will force me to speak English	2.69	1.06	Average
	Total	**3.06**	**1.06**	**Average**

TABLE XII: LACK OF MOTIVATION COMPONENT

No.	Item statement	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
30	I only speak English when my teacher forces me to do so	3.16	1.35	Average

31	I might hesitate to talk to English-speaking friends because I don't fully understand the cultural differences	3.00	1.05	Average
32	I am less motivated to improve my English-speaking skills when I have infrequent opportunities to speak English with friends	3.16	1.25	Average
	Total	**3.10**	**1.21**	**Average**

Table VII to XII present the perceived difficulty levels for the grammar, pronunciation, anxiety, shyness, lack of confidence, and lack of motivation components respectively. According to the respondents' perceptions, these components were generally regarded as having an average level of difficulty. Upon closer examination of the items within each component, it was found that in the grammar component (Table VII), all items were perceived as having an average difficulty level except for item 9, "I struggle to communicate well with friends because my grasp of grammar is not sufficient". This particular item stood out with a high difficulty level (mean= 3.47), suggesting significant challenge in this particular item. In the anxiety component (Table IX), only item 18, "I feel nervous when speaking English in front of other people" indicated a high anxiety level (mean= 3.59), highlighting specific concern during public speaking situations.

Regarding the shyness component (Table X), items 20 and 21, "I suddenly panicked and forgot everything I had planned to say when I started speaking in English" and "I feel ashamed to speak English because I cannot speak English fluently" respectively, demonstrated high difficulty levels, with mean scores of 3.53 and 3.50. In the lack of confidence component (Table XI), item 28, "I feel uncomfortable while speaking English, probably because I lack proper practice in speaking English," revealed a high difficulty level (mean= 3.66), underscoring challenges stemming from insufficient practice. This situation may instil fear in students, as they may worry about being negatively judged due to their inability to speak fluently. On the other hand, all items in the pronunciation (Table VIII) and lack of motivation (Table XII) components exhibited moderate difficulty level.

VIII.   CONCLUSION

The pilot test conducted for the speaking task questionnaire utilizing 30 samples yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.97, indicating a high reliability of the instrument. Therefore, the questionnaire items are deemed reliable, suggesting that this instrument can be extensively utilized for future research study.

Among the components covered by the questionnaire, the vocabulary component emerged as the most challenging aspect for students when speaking, with mean score of 3.43. These group of students appear to particularly struggle with limited vocabulary which hinder their ability to engage in effective communication and discussion. This finding suggests that the students tend to resort to speaking in short sentences. During MUET speaking assessment, these students are likely to face difficulty in elaborating on their points and expressing opinions, despite having valid justifications due to their inability to find appropriate English words. This is particularly concerning as a strong vocabulary is crucial for successful speaking to facilitate clear communication through the use of suitable structures and functions (Hutabarat, & Simanjuntak, 2019).

Other speaking aspects revealed moderate difficulty levels, with the grammar component scoring a mean value of 3.31, the pronunciation component scoring a mean value of 3.13, the anxiety component scoring a mean value of 3.21, the shyness component scoring a mean value of 3.07, the lack of confidence component scoring a mean value of 3.06, and the lack of motivation component scoring a mean value of 3.10. English instructors are advised to consider all aspects outlined in the instrument when developing and preparing teaching modules, with more emphasis on enhancing students' vocabulary. Furthermore, it is recommended for instructors to ensure that the teaching and learning process is enjoyable, especially considering that the students seemed to have good motivation in learning English. By amplifying this motivation, students will be more inclined to enhance all other aspects of their speaking skills as well.

This study offers valuable insights for language educators regarding the challenges students face in their speaking performance. By gaining a deeper understanding of these challenges, educators can customize their teaching methods to effectively address them. Tailoring instructional tasks to encompass all identified components, with particular emphasis on those perceived as more challenging by students will enable the educators to provide targeted support. This approach can facilitate improved linguistic proficiency among the students, thereby enhancing overall language learning outcomes. Furthermore, educators can evaluate their task designs by periodically assessing the students' speaking performance and adjusting the task structures accordingly. This repetitive process can ensure continuous improvement in teaching strategies and consequently enhance students' speaking performance.

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