

# Barriers to Speaking in English Among Maritime Students

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**Abstract:** *This study analyses the contributing factors to problems with regard to speaking in English among maritime students at two tertiary institutions in Malaysia. This study looks at five paradigms: learners' personality, amount and quality of exposure to English, learners' attitude, learners' motivation, and pedagogical management of the English Language courses at the campus. The study also compares the causes of the speaking problems in English between male and female students. Survey questionnaires are distributed to 150 final-year maritime students. Data were analysed descriptively via SPSS. It is found that the main causes of the students' speaking problems stem from the teachers' pedagogical management of the English subjects, exposure to English, and personality which contribute moderately to the learners' predicaments. However, motivation and attitude are identified to have contributed the least to the students' oral skills inadequacies. Several ensuing implications for initiatives to help enhance students' speaking proficiency in the English Language are also discussed.*

**Index Terms:** *Attitude, English, Maritime students, Personality, Speaking*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In 2015, Malaysia was officially integrated with ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). AEC 2015 was significant to our economy as entrepreneurs in ten member countries can invest anywhere in these countries. Resulting from this synergy, there has been a free flow of goods, services and skilled workforce across the ten nations [1]. For communication purposes, all members have agreed to use English as an official language for business. In addition, English is today considered the global lingua franca as it dominates in the international business, technological, scientific and academic domains [2].

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In the field of maritime, English language is an important tool for communication among different cultures where the native tongues are other than English [3]. In order to ensure effective maritime safety, security, navigation and maritime business, good communication among seafarers and mariners is compulsory. Communication onboard vessels and on land is predominantly in English. As the workforce in the maritime industry comprise people from multicultural backgrounds, a common language is needed to communicate, and English is used for this purpose. Since maritime professionals are mobile globally, they need to acquire the skills of effective communication.

Nunan defines speaking as the act of uttering words, to interconnect with others as by conversing, to express statements of request, and to deliver a speech or oral presentation [4]. Brown [5] and Burns and Joyce [6] define speaking as an interactively meaningful process which includes the production, reception and processing of information. Another definition of speaking by Chaney concerns the use of verbal and non-verbal signs in different contexts in the production and sharing of meaning. [7]. Humans are naturally automated to speak before they are exposed to reading and writing. In most situations, people express themselves orally rather than in the written form. Speaking is thus deemed the principal productive language skill. This is because it is mainly needed in a conversation. Speaking in any second or foreign language is challenging as speakers are expected to have sufficient knowledge of significant components of the language like pronunciation, grammatical elements, diction, fluency, and comprehension in order to communicate effectively.

Despite the realisation of the critical importance of the English Language in various industries, numerous research have shown poor English Language communication abilities among graduate employees [8], [9], [10]. Students who are proficient in English normally have better employment opportunities with multi-national companies upon graduation. This is because sheer academic excellence is not the only merit required by employers from their graduate employees as the latter's proficiency in the second language is another crucial criterion for employability. Selection of the best graduate employees by employers these days does not only focus on those who have excellent technical know-how but also those who possess the necessary soft skills. Among the much-needed soft skills is the ability to communicate in English effectively at the workplace.

Since most job interviews are also commonly conducted in English, confidence in speaking in English is thus important for graduates to prove their suitability for the positions applied.

In most instances, employers in the private sector favour recruiting graduates from multi-national private universities due to their relatively better proficiency in English. This is so despite the fact that graduates from Malaysian public universities are more accustomed to the local environment, industrious, resolute and have lower salary expectations [11].

In a nutshell, in Malaysia, the position of English is as the second language and the second most important language to tertiary students in most academic programmes. It is because they need to master the language in order to excel in their studies and to equip them for the competitive job market. The stiff competition will come from those graduates who are excellent academically with impeccable communication skills in English. The preferred choice for employment would then be those who possess the satisfactory proficiency in English in addressing the endeavours of the companies to meet the demands of globalisation. It is thus vital for all parties to take appropriate measures for optimising the acquisition and mastery of the speaking skills in English among our students.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are several factors that lead to a poor English speaking performance among Malaysian maritime students even though they have been exposed to English since primary school. To search for the contributing factors to the problem, this present study examined five areas namely attitude, motivation, learners' personality, the quality of the learners' exposure to English, and finally the teachers' pedagogical management of the English Language courses taught.

### Attitude

Siti Khasinah defines attitude as one of the key factors that affects the success or failure for language learners in their language learning effort [12]. A learner's attitude normally correlates with and his/her achievement in learning a language. The success of a learner's learning aims is normally aided by his/her positive attitude. It is consensually agreed by scholars researching second language acquisition that language attitudes and motivation are critical in second language (L2) learning which contributes to differences in willingness to communicate (WTC) and the learners' readiness to interact in the target language [13]. Suzuki et al. made two broad conclusions from the findings of their investigation of the relationship between students' attitude towards English-medium instruction and L2 speaking. The students in the study tend to be frustrated with spontaneous speech production rather than reading and listening comprehension. This may be so since spontaneous speech production requires speakers to express themselves by giving immediate responses to their interlocutors, resulting in the situation where they must rely only on procedural knowledge [14].

Researching into the amalgamated realm of language and socio-politics, Abdullah and Wong study the correlation between attitudes towards learning English and the perception towards the socio-politics in Malaysia. They also

examine the relationship between attitudes towards learning English and the perceived threats posed by learning the language on ethnic and national identity [15]. It was found that the respondents who believed English was socially and politically impactful felt that learning English was worthy. As expected, respondents who believed that English jeopardised their ethnic and national identity were definitely apprehensive towards learning the language.

The relationship between attitude and English speaking skills mastery is corroborated by a study on seventy five Japanese students in an American college [16]. It was revealed that when the students favoured speaking English in a fully immersive environment away from that of their mother tongue, a highly positive attitude towards speaking English was developed among the students. Schroth, Smith and Kyles analysed students' personal preferences in learning the language skills [17]. They hypothesised that if the students preferred a certain part of the language more, they would master the area or skill better. Six out of the eleven respondents in their study expressed preference for speaking. Hypothetically, then that should affect their speaking production in a positive way. However, rather, the students' writing was the language area that was more positively influenced. Strange as it was, the students' preference for speaking strongly influenced the proper verb usage in all forms. It did not, however, affect the production of their spoken verbs significantly.

### Motivation

The term motivation has been distinctly defined by different schools of thought. In second and foreign language learning contexts, Gardner defines motivation as a learner's endeavour in learning a language solely due to his or her sheer passion to undertake the initiative and the sense of elation derived from the learning experience. Oxford & Shearin describe motivation as an important part of the acquisition and retention processes of a new language [19].

The success of learning at all phases of education is determined by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation [20]. Success or failure of any action is reliant on the extent to which people try to achieve their goals, as driven by their desire [21]. This psychological factor i.e. the instinct that generates the action – as motivation. It is a motive that arouses, incites, or stimulates action. Motivation is an important factor that stipulates learners' preparedness to interact with others. Motivation can be deduced as the amalgamation of attempt and determination to accomplish the goal of learning a language coupled with enthusiasm towards the acquisition of a new language. In this context, motivation in second language learning refers to the effort undertaken by learners to learn the language as driven by his or her passion to do so accompanied with the sense of contentment gained from the learning experience. Motivation, however, is not indicated by effort alone. A motivated person takes the effort towards accomplishing the aim, but the expended effort may not suggest that the person is totally and strongly motivated [18].



Motivation equips learners with an aim and direction to act accordingly. Consequently, it is an important factor in language learning.

Due to the lack of motivation, some learners may find it difficult to learn a language. The lack of motivation and drive to learn will impede effective learning.

Alizadeh concludes that there are three key factors to motivation namely the favourable attitude a learner has towards the second language (L2) community, the pleasure derived from the learning processes, and extraneous pressure factors [22]. Positive attitude refers to the notion that a learner's attitudes towards the L2 society and their passion to be part of the discourse group defines the notion of L2 learning motivation. The enjoyment of learning suggests that learners who are intrinsically motivated are more likely to continue learning a L2 than their extrinsically motivated peers. The final factor concerns extraneous burdens that drive learners to embark on an L2 learning curve. Learners are motivated to satisfy some external pressures for various reasons such as to please parents or fulfill certain pragmatic aims.

### Personality

Personality is another factor that influences a learner's development in language learning. Numerous scholars like have conducted studies concerning the relation of a language learner's personality and language learning [23], [24] & [25]. Personality is strongly correlated with second language acquisition. Personality is found to be a determinant of things in the learning process that learners feel comfortable with. A learner's personality can be said to determine the success or failure of the language learning processes. One view of personality trait continuum distinguishes introversion and extroversion characteristics. Zafar, Khan and Meenakshi state that in a second language class which requires learners to reply to triggers in the target language, the introverted ones may be slow in their language acquisition. Therefore, it was surmised that in order to be effective L2 learners, it is crucial for an introverted learner to get acclimatised to the communicative elements and expectations of the target language by employing alternative learning strategies [26].

A learner's willingness to communicate (WTC) in a second or foreign language learning may be affected by learners' personality characteristics. This readiness to converse may be predisposed to by situational variables. Personality characteristics may also be a determinant in learners' willingness to communicate in second or foreign language [27]. Five big personality factors to language learning that are being examined namely extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness. Being extroverted is found to not affect learners' WTC. Agreeableness and conscientiousness both had a direct and negative relationship to WTC in foreign language. While neuroticism was directly and positively related to WTC, openness to experience did not impact learners' WTC. It is thus concluded that personality traits can relate to people's WTC with the foreign language.

The positive relationship between personality and language acquisition is further corroborated by Hassan who conducted a study investigating personality as a factor in the accent acquisition process. The study involved forty-eight

Arabic native speakers who studied and lived in KSA. The participants spoke English with a native-like American accent. Those learners who chose to deliberately associate themselves with the culture of the learned language were found to have better American accent than those who did not. The results indicated that personality is an effective predictor of native accent acquisition in a language learning process [28].

### Exposure to English

Learning a second language may be affected by multiple factors. One of them is the opportunity to use the target language. According to Briere, second language acquisition is heavily influenced by the amount of time in exposure to a target language in linguistic environments, both formally and informally [29]. Language acquisition and the type and proficiency level resulting from the learning process is determined by language exposure. Language learning should then be best conducted both formally and informally. A solely formal exposure to language learning may not guarantee a desirable proficiency as that received in both formal and informal environment [30].

It is suggested that extra language activities conducted outside the classroom should be highly encouraged [31]. The frequency of contact 79 Flemish students who took up English language lessons had with media outside class and its significance on the students' vocabulary acquisition was being investigated. The findings show that the students' exposure to English media outside class is high and that the learners' vocabulary knowledge correlates positively with their exposure to un-subtitled television programmes and films, the online and printed materials. It was also found that out-of-class exposure had a bigger impact on learners' vocabulary acquisition than length of in-class instruction.

Exposure to English environment in schools and prospects for interactions between teachers and students are affirmative factors that help improve students' language proficiency [32]. This study examined the relationship between Spanish-speaking English Language Learners' expressive language skills in English and their classroom-based English exposure. The analysis was performed on the quantity of words and their lexical properties uttered by both teachers and students during lessons. The findings suggest that the more students are exposed to quality interaction in English with their teachers in the classroom, the better their language develops.

The findings above, however, are not supported by a study conducted by Pascual [33]. Pascual examined the possible correlation between learners' exposure to a target language and their speaking skills proficiency in selected tertiary institutions in Davao del Norte. It was found that the respondents' speaking skills ability is generally low with moderate exposure to English. Moreover, there is no impactful correlation between English Language atmosphere and speaking skills mastery among the students.

The participants' exposure to English do not affect their oral skills.

**Management in the teaching and learning of English**

What has caused the difficulties in learning English, more specifically in the acquisition of the speaking skills among Malaysian maritime students? The actual factors of the issue among the learners must be addressed comprehensively in order to optimise students' learning processes. This last factor which may make or break a student's language learning success concerns the way the teaching and learning is managed. This factor concerns teachers' pedagogical applications.

Teachers who prioritise their pedagogy in their language class preparation significantly help increase their learners' performance. The way a teacher teaches is an important factor in a language acquisition process. Hassan and Selamat detect that the syllabus of English Language subjects in the secondary schools in their study merely emphasise two skills namely reading and writing [34]. Grammar is another foregrounded language point in schools. Excessive focus by teachers on final examination with little weight given to the acquisition of the speaking and listening skills among the students is an issue that is plaguing our education system.

The role of effective pedagogy is also highlighted by Ahmed who notes that students who are provided with a detailed explanation of speaking techniques and spontaneous and continuous inspiration and voluntary support from teachers inside and outside the classroom are normally better language learners [35].

A study by Bergil also shows that language learners' motivation and their oral skills may be jeopardised by the inadequate and perhaps unsuitable styles of teaching delivery in the classroom [36]. Language teachers are, therefore, highly encouraged to offer opportunities and space for their learners to explore the target language during their lessons. This is to help the students overcome any language barrier which may hinder their language acquisition.

**III. METHODOLOGY**

**Population and samples**

The study was conducted at two universities offering maritime-based academic programmes in Malaysia.

All the 150 students who participated in this study were in their final year. Thirty of the respondents were female while the rest were male. Stratified Random Sampling Techniques were used to select the participants. Their average age range was 22.

**Research instrument**

Data in this research were collected via the distribution of a two-part self-compiled questionnaire. The first part consisted of open-ended survey items revolving around respondents' demographics such as gender, age, semester and programme of study. The second part consisted of close-ended questions containing thirty-seven items. Each question was measured in a five-point Likert scale which guided the participants to express their perception with regard to respondents' attitude, motivation, personality, amount and quality of exposure to the English Language, and the language teachers' pedagogical management. The measures used for assessing the degree of problems are: lowest (1.00-1.49), low (1.50-2.49), moderate (2.50-3.49), high (3.50-4.49), and

highest (4.50-5.00). The questionnaire was piloted on a group of thirty students with similar demographics at a private maritime college in Malaysia prior to the actual data collection. The reliability index based on Cronbach's Alpha was 0.920.

**Data analysis**

The statistical analysis for the data was conducted via the use of the Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21.0 for Windows applications. Descriptive statistics were utilised to rank the items on the questionnaire from the highest to the least. Then, a t-test was performed to determine the differences of the mean scores between two variables.

**Results**

This study was aimed to answer the following research questions.

Research question 1: What are the factors that affect the English Language speaking skills among maritime students?

The first purpose of the present study is to investigate the factors which affect the English Language speaking skills among maritime students. The findings of this study showed that generally, the students' problems in acquiring the speaking skills in English were identified as moderate. When each factor was weighed, it was found that the pedagogical management, amount and quality of exposure to English, and learners' own personality were considered moderate by the respondents. Nevertheless, they expressed that their motivation and attitude factors as low in the acquisition of their English Language speaking skills.

**Table. 1 Factors affecting the English Language speaking skills among maritime students**

Factors	Total (N =150)		
	Mean	SD	Frequency of factors
1. Attitude	2.30	0.73	Low
2. Motivation	2.15	0.66	Low
3. Personality	2.72	0.87	Moderate
4. Exposure to English	2.88	0.95	Moderate
5. Management	3.10	0.98	Moderate
Total	2.54	0.62	Moderate

Table 1 above indicates the descriptive statistics of the factors affecting the acquisition of the English Language speaking skills and the average frequency of the factors as expressed by the 150 maritime students.

The results showed that generally the factors which affected the speaking skills in English were moderate (Mean = 2.54). Three out of five factors were rated as moderate i.e. management in the teaching and learning of English (Mean = 3.10), followed by exposure to English (Mean = 2.88), and



finally students' personality (Mean = 2.72). The factors which were deemed to be low by the respondents were students' own attitude (Mean = 2.30) and their motivation (Mean = 2.15).

Research question 2: Do male and female language learners have different perception Are there significant differences in the factors affecting the English Language speaking skills between male and female maritime students?

This part presents the comparison of five causes affecting English oral proficiency skills between male students and female maritime students in the study. A t-test was run to identify the significance level of the difference. The value of significance was set <.05.

**Table. 2 Comparison of five factors affecting the English speaking skills between males and females maritime students**

Fact ors Affect- ing Engli sh Speak- ing skills	Gender				t	P
	Male		Female			
	Me an	S D	Me an	S D		
1. Atti- tude	2.3 4	0. 76	2.2 1	0. 62	0. 90	0.3 65
2. Mo- ti-va- tion	2.2 1	0. 66	2.0 3	0. 64	1. 54	0.1 21
3. Per- so-nal- ity	2.7 2	0. 89	2.7 3	0. 86	-0 .05	0.9 66
4. Ex- po- sure to English	2.9 2	0. 98	2.7 4	0. 88	1. 03	0.3 07
5. Ma- nage- ment	3.0 6	1. 06	3.2 2	0. 76	-0 .84	0.4 08
Total	2.5 8	0. 65	2.4 8	*0 .50	0. 75	*0. 465

\* Statistical significance at .05 level

Table 2 above displays that the mean scores of overall factors affecting English speaking skills indicated by the male students in the study (2.58) were higher than that of the female students (2.48), but not at a significant level  $p < .05$  as the reading was 0.65. This is to say that there was no statistical difference between the factors contributing to the English Language speaking skills between the male and female students in the study.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

##### Discussion of Finding One

As shown by the results of this study, none of the contributing factors to the barriers in students' speaking skills in English was rated as of high value by the respondents. Three out of five factors were expressed as moderate i.e. pedagogical management of the English Language lessons, quality of exposure to English, and students' personality. Attitude and motivation factors were rated low by the respondents.

Firstly, the factor concerning the management of the teaching and learning of English consists of teachers' pedagogical techniques mainly the classroom activities conducted. The students expressed their biggest favour for fun field trip activities which highlighted the culture of the target language i.e. trips to the drama or theatre (Mean = 3.42). The next factor in the pedagogical management of the English Language lessons concerns summer camping or short courses in the target language (mean = 3.26). This may imply that students truly enjoy the opportunities of exposure to actual situations where they can utilise the target language.

The students' next concern is about the exposure to speak in English. They expressed their intention to practise speaking in English at home with their parents and siblings (mean = 3.22). This may suggest that their intention to use the language at home may be driven by their desire to increase their self-confidence in and familiarity with the target language. The other item which was of importance to the students was the opportunity to practise English with their peers (mean = 2.97). This infers that the students did realise the need for them to have as much contact as possible in the target language as a way to improve their speaking skills.

Students' personality is another factor that determines success in language learning. The respondents expressed worry about making mistakes when speaking in English (mean = 3.13) and being made the laughing stock upon making grammatical mistakes (mean = 2.95).

The findings of the present study support the conclusion made by Tati et al. [37] and Idrus and Salleh [38] which state that self-efficacy is indeed a significant factor in determining the success of language learning endeavour as the lack of learners' own self-confidence may prohibit the learning progress.

Attitude is the fourth factor that affects students' speaking skills in English and it was regarded as low by the respondents. This means that most of the students in the study were positive towards the importance of sound speaking skills in English (mean = 1.76). This finding concurs well with Ahmmed [39] who reveals that Malaysian students generally showed positive attitude in learning English.

The respondents also expressed positive attitudes in terms of putting little effort in self-study during their free personal time (mean = 3.35) [39].

The last factor that was regarded as of having the lowest impact by the respondents was motivation.

Their biggest concern was the slow improvement in their speaking proficiency (mean=2.88) and their lack of self-confidence when speaking to a native speaker or English-speaking foreigners (mean=2.86). Nevertheless, despite the surmountable problems, the respondents strongly felt that learning to communicate in English was a worthy pursuit as they were fully aware of the significance of the English Language for their career opportunities (mean=1.62).

### Discussion of Finding Two

The findings of this study prove that there was no significant difference in the overall factors affecting the English Language speaking skills between male and female maritime students at a confidence level of .05. This present study supports the findings by Jindathai [40] which stated that the difference between male and female students in second and foreign language learning was of no significance.

## V. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY AND CONCLUSION

The present study implies that the students' biggest concern was about engaging in the language outside the classroom. Teachers, therefore, are strongly encouraged to find means and avenues for their students to have out-of-class interactions in the target language. Another interesting activity to be considered is to organise short English courses or summer camps. Exposure to games and fun activities that induce students to use the English Language during the camps would make them feel less tense in making mistakes. In addition, both formal and informal contact with the target language inside and outside the classroom would also provide the much-needed exposure to the varied language learning situations. Students' self-confidence would also be nurtured when there is sufficient contact in the target language.

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### AUTHORS' PROFILES



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