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THE ART OF STRUCTURED MUET SPEAKING: BUILDING STRUCTURED SPEECHES WITH SEQUENTIAL MOVE ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK (SMAF)

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Abstract:

The Sequential Move Analysis Framework (SMAF), derived from sequential move analysis, enhances language learners' speaking skills by providing structured guidance on speech organization and strategy development. This approach helps learners understand the functional roles of different speech acts within a speaking presentation, promoting more effective and coherent communication. By incorporating sequential moves, learners are guided through a structured speaking process that fosters confidence and clarity. The framework is highly adaptable to various presentation themes, offering targeted practice aligned with specific language test objectives, such as the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). SMAF integrates individual presentation practices to serve as an immediate reference template for learners during task performance. The framework was tested in a simulated MUET speaking domain with English as a second language (ESL) learners. Results

Move Analysis Framework (SMAF).
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showed a significant improvement of 55.26% in speaking test scores, with a pre-test mean score of 17.6 and a post-test mean score of 27.325. The strong correlation ($r=0.975$) between pre-test and post-test scores suggests that integrating SMAF leads to enhanced performance in MUET speaking tasks. This framework provides a practical tool for MUET instructors, aiding students in structuring their responses more effectively and achieving better results in their speaking test.

Keywords:

Sequential Move Analysis Framework (SMAF), MUET Speaking Test, Speech Organization, Fluency And Coherence, Language Proficiency, ESL Learners

Introduction

The Malaysian University English Test (MUET) serves as a national benchmark for assessing English proficiency among pre-university students and is a prerequisite for admission into most Malaysian higher-learning institutions. Among its four components—listening, reading, writing, and speaking—the speaking test remains the most anxiety-provoking and challenging (Harun et al., 2021; Zulkflee & Tahir, 2023). Candidates are required to articulate their ideas clearly, coherently, and fluently within a limited time, often under intense examination pressure. For many English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) learners, this task is particularly daunting because it demands simultaneous control of linguistic accuracy, fluency, logical sequencing of ideas, and confident delivery (Zaidon et al., 2022).

Despite years of English instruction, a large proportion of Malaysian students continue to demonstrate limited oral proficiency, especially in spontaneous and structured speaking. This is often attributed to limited vocabulary, inadequate grammatical competence, and low confidence levels that stem from insufficient communicative exposure outside the classroom (Naa'im & Hashim, 2019). Traditional teaching approaches that emphasize grammatical correctness over communicative fluency have further contributed to students' reluctance to speak English, thereby impeding their performance in high-stakes assessments such as MUET. The newly aligned MUET–CEFR framework underscores communicative competence; however, the need for strategic, structured speaking guidance remains pressing for learners who struggle with anxiety and disorganization of ideas during oral tasks.

Within this context, the Sequential Move Analysis Framework (SMAF) was conceptualized as a pedagogical intervention to address these challenges. Grounded in the structural approach to language learning and informed by the principles of sequential move analysis, SMAF provides learners with a systematic template for organizing speech into clear, functional segments such as introduction, main argument, supporting example, and conclusion (Baba & Nitta, 2014; Brigham et al., 1972). This structured process is designed to lower cognitive load, promote fluency, and improve coherence by giving candidates a mental blueprint to follow during performance. The framework thus functions not merely as a test strategy but as a pedagogically sound model for scaffolding spoken discourse in ESL contexts.

Problem Statement

Research on MUET performance has consistently highlighted the gap between students' knowledge of language forms and their ability to produce organized, fluent speech in real-time communication (Harun et al., 2021; Rahman & Stapa, 2022). This gap is often exacerbated by

high levels of speaking anxiety, which have been shown to negatively correlate with overall English proficiency among undergraduates (Nordin, Ahmad, & Rahim, 2022). Structured frameworks such as SMAF can help moderate this anxiety by offering predictable stages that reduce uncertainty and cognitive load. Many candidates can construct grammatically correct sentences in isolation but struggle to deliver cohesive and logically connected utterances when under exam conditions. The lack of structured speaking techniques contributes to disjointed, repetitive, and hesitant responses, reducing task fulfillment scores. Moreover, without an explicit framework to guide idea sequencing, students often lose focus, fail to elaborate key points, or omit transitions, thereby compromising overall communicative effectiveness.

These weaknesses are compounded by psychological barriers such as speaking anxiety and lack of confidence—factors that research shows significantly impair oral fluency and performance (Zaidon et al., 2022). The combined linguistic and affective challenges highlight the urgent need for an instructional model that simultaneously addresses organization, fluency, and confidence. The SMAF was therefore introduced to provide MUET candidates with an explicit, repeatable structure for constructing and delivering responses, potentially mitigating anxiety while improving overall speaking proficiency.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to evaluate the pedagogical effectiveness of the Sequential Move Analysis Framework (SMAF) in improving the MUET speaking performance of ESL learners. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Determine the extent to which SMAF enhances students' fluency, coherence, and speech organization in the MUET speaking test.
2. Examine the relationship between pre-test and post-test scores to establish the statistical significance of performance improvement following SMAF instruction.
3. Explore the broader pedagogical implications of SMAF as a structured approach for developing speaking competence in high-stakes ESL contexts.

Research Questions

To achieve these objectives, the study addresses the following questions:

1. How does the Sequential Move Analysis Framework (SMAF) influence MUET candidates' speaking performance in terms of fluency, coherence, and speech organization?
2. What is the statistical relationship between pre-test and post-test scores among students exposed to SMAF?
3. What pedagogical implications can be derived from the integration of SMAF in MUET speaking preparation?

Literature Review

The Structural Approach to Language Learning

The structural approach represents one of the earliest systematic models in language pedagogy, emphasizing the mastery of grammatical patterns and syntactic structures as the foundation for

communication (Baba & Nitta, 2014). It views language as a rule-governed system that learners internalize through repetition, pattern drills, and practice. Within this framework, effective communication is achieved when learners acquire automaticity in producing well-formed structures that can later be adapted to different contexts. The approach thus prioritizes accuracy, organization, and clarity—skills that are crucial in formal speaking assessments such as the Malaysian University English Test (MUET).

In the context of speaking instruction, the structural approach provides a scaffolded pathway for learners to construct speech systematically, beginning with basic sentence formation and progressing to more complex discourse units (Brigham, Graubard, & Stans, 1972). For MUET candidates, this approach is especially beneficial because it mirrors the test's scoring criteria, which reward coherence, task fulfillment, and structured delivery. By focusing on the form and sequence of linguistic structures, learners become more capable of managing time, maintaining logical flow, and delivering responses that are grammatically accurate and contextually appropriate. This kind of structured support also aligns with sociocultural and affective perspectives on language learning, where scaffolding enables learners to perform beyond their current competence and manage emotional barriers such as anxiety (Zulkflee, Marimuthu, & Tahir, 2023)

However, critics argue that an overemphasis on form may inhibit communicative spontaneity. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which emerged as a response to structuralism, shifted the focus toward meaningful interaction, functional use of language, and fluency over accuracy. CLT emphasizes learner autonomy, negotiation of meaning, and authentic language use (Hymes, 1972). Yet, for high-stakes testing environments such as MUET—where time constraints and structured formats dominate—the structural approach retains strong pedagogical relevance. SMAF represents a contextual synthesis of both paradigms: it incorporates the structural rigor of form-based instruction while serving the communicative purpose of enabling fluent, coherent, and task-oriented responses.

Sequential Move Analysis and Structured Speaking

Sequential move analysis (SMA) originates from discourse analysis and genre studies, where speech or writing is examined as a series of functionally defined “moves” (Leki, 1995; Chen, 2023). Each move serves a specific communicative purpose—such as introducing a topic, presenting an argument, exemplifying, or concluding—thus contributing to the overall coherence of the discourse. When applied to speaking pedagogy, this analytical approach allows learners to conceptualize oral communication as an ordered progression rather than an unplanned flow of ideas.

In SMAF, these sequential moves are explicitly taught and practiced, enabling students to internalize the structure of an effective speech. By guiding learners through Move 1: Introduction, Move 2: Main Argument, Move 3: Reason, Example, and Effect, and Move 4: Conclusion, the framework provides cognitive scaffolding that reduces hesitation and fosters fluency. Manning (1996) and Babyonyshev (1997) suggest that structured sequencing enhances learners' control over discourse organization, enabling smoother transitions and more confident delivery. The repetitive practice of these structured moves aligns with the concept of syntactic priming, whereby exposure to specific language patterns facilitates their automatic retrieval in future communicative tasks (Gries & Kootstra, 2017; Vandergriff, 2021).

Recent studies in ESL pedagogy (Lee & Chen, 2022; Rahman & Stapa, 2022) affirm that frameworks like SMAF improve coherence and fluency by reducing cognitive load during spontaneous speech. Learners who follow clear discourse stages are better equipped to manage performance anxiety, as the framework offers a predictable mental script for speech production. Consequently, SMAF does not merely teach “what to say,” but also “how to say it,” ensuring that ideas progress logically and cohesively from one point to the next.

Cognitive Underpinnings: Reducing Cognitive Load through Structure

Speech production in a second language is cognitively demanding because learners must simultaneously generate ideas, retrieve vocabulary, construct grammatically correct sentences, and monitor pronunciation (Sweller, 2011). In high-stakes contexts like MUET, additional psychological pressures—such as time limits and evaluation anxiety—further increase cognitive load. SMAF serves as a cognitive heuristic that simplifies this process by automating the high-level task of organizing ideas. When structure is predetermined, students can allocate more mental resources to micro-level tasks, such as lexical selection and pronunciation accuracy.

This mechanism aligns with Cognitive Load Theory (CLT), which posits that well-structured learning materials enhance performance by reducing unnecessary mental effort (Paas & van Merriënboer, 1994). By externalizing the organizational component of speech through predefined moves, SMAF effectively frees working memory to focus on linguistic expression. The result is a smoother, more fluent delivery even among less proficient learners—a finding supported by Gries and Kootstra (2017), who demonstrated that repetitive and patterned linguistic structures facilitate speech processing and fluency in bilingual contexts.

Balancing Structural Support and Communicative Authenticity

While structured approaches like SMAF have demonstrated measurable gains in test performance, they also raise pedagogical concerns regarding authenticity and creativity in language use. Overreliance on templates may lead to formulaic and mechanical speech patterns, limiting learners’ ability to engage in authentic, dynamic communication (Rahman & Stapa, 2022). This phenomenon, known as negative washback, occurs when high-stakes assessments encourage rote learning or over-structured preparation (Cheng, 2010).

To mitigate this, SMAF should be implemented as a transitional scaffold—a means to build confidence and awareness of organization before encouraging more spontaneous communication. Empirical studies on MUET preparation (Rahim, Halim, & Ibrahim, 2023) similarly found that students who practiced using structured frameworks and mock oral tasks reported reduced anxiety and improved coherence. This suggests that scaffolding techniques like SMAF can balance test readiness with communicative authenticity. When used flexibly, SMAF can serve as a bridge between controlled language practice and authentic performance, allowing learners to internalize structural competence while gradually developing communicative autonomy. This dual focus on structure and meaning aligns with current trends in integrated-skill instruction and evidence-based language pedagogy, making SMAF a relevant model for the MUET and beyond.

In summary, SMAF synthesizes insights from the structural approach, sequential move analysis, and cognitive load theory to create a systematic model of structured speech instruction. It operationalizes language learning as a process of mastering functional moves

that guide learners from planning to execution, thereby promoting fluency, coherence, and confidence. While its strengths lie in improving test-oriented performance, its broader pedagogical value depends on balanced implementation that preserves communicative authenticity. The following section describes the methodological approach used to evaluate SMAF's effectiveness among MUET candidates.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative, quasi-experimental pre-test and post-test design to investigate the effectiveness of the Sequential Move Analysis Framework (SMAF) in improving the speaking performance of MUET candidates. The design was chosen because it allows for measurable comparison of participants' performance before and after the intervention. Participants underwent a pre-test to determine their baseline proficiency, followed by ten sessions of SMAF-based instruction, and finally a post-test to assess progress.

Although this design provides valuable insights into performance change, it is categorized as quasi-experimental because it lacks a randomly assigned control group. Consequently, while statistical comparisons can establish the presence of improvement, causality cannot be inferred with absolute certainty. Nonetheless, this approach remains appropriate for educational contexts where ethical and logistical constraints prevent randomization and where the goal is to evaluate a pedagogical intervention's practical impact (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Participants and Sampling Procedure

A total of 145 Lower Six students participated in the study, representing six learning institutions located across Kelantan, Malaysia. Participants were selected through stratified random sampling, ensuring a balanced representation of diverse language proficiency levels and institutional backgrounds. This sampling method was intended to enhance generalizability by capturing variation in English language exposure and MUET preparation experiences.

All participants were ESL learners who had previously completed secondary-level English education but had not undergone formal speaking training aligned with the MUET-CEFR framework. The inclusion criterion required participants to be enrolled in MUET preparatory courses. To maintain ethical standards, participants were informed of the study's objectives and procedures, and consent was obtained prior to data collection. Institutional approval was granted by Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Sultan Ismail Petra (KIAS).

Intervention Procedure

The SMAF intervention spanned ten instructional sessions conducted over a five-week period. Each session lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and followed a standardized instructional outline designed by the research team. The sessions combined explicit instruction, guided practice, and simulated MUET speaking tasks.

During the initial sessions, instructors introduced the concept of sequential moves and their functional roles in structuring speech covering 4 major moves. The flow and breakdowns of all the major and sub-moves are illustrated in Figure 1 below:

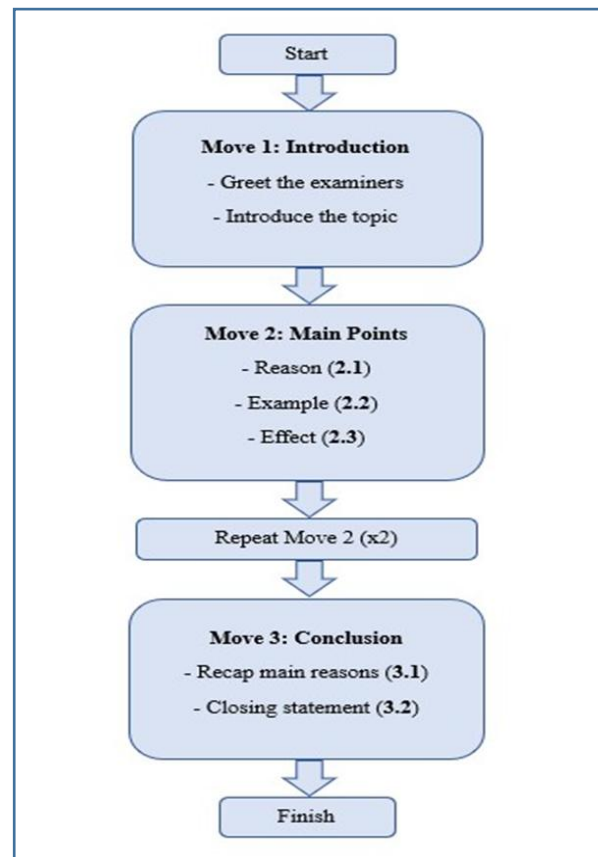


Figure 1: The Sequential Move Analysis Framework (SMAF)

Students practiced these moves through pair and group activities, role-play, and mock speaking tests. Instructors modelled effective responses and provided feedback on fluency, organization, and content development. Subsequent sessions emphasized independent application of the SMAF template under time constraints to simulate authentic MUET test conditions.

To ensure instructional consistency, teachers were briefed using a standardized SMAF module outlining the lesson sequence, rubrics, and scoring guidelines. Nevertheless, as delivery occurred across multiple institutions, variations in teaching style and student engagement were acknowledged as potential influencing factors.

Data Collection Instruments

Two instruments were used for data collection:

1. **Pre-Test and Post-Test Speaking Assessments:** Participants completed an individual presentation task adapted from official MUET past-year papers. Their performances were evaluated using the MUET Speaking Band Descriptors, covering four key criteria: (1) Task Fulfilment, (2) Coherence and Cohesion, (3) Language Accuracy and Range, and (4) Pronunciation.

2. Scoring Rubric and Statistical Measures: Each test was rated by certified MUET assessors trained for inter-rater reliability. Raw scores were compiled and analyzed quantitatively to determine the mean difference between pre-test and post-test results. Statistical analysis was conducted using paired-sample t-tests to identify significant differences, and Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to assess the strength of the relationship between both sets of scores.

Intervention Procedure

Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were carried out using SPSS (Version 26). The pre-test and post-test mean scores were compared to evaluate improvement levels, while correlation analyses examined the consistency and strength of performance change. The significance threshold was set at $p < 0.05$.

Results indicated a mean increase from 17.6 to 27.325, representing a 55.26% improvement in speaking performance. A strong positive correlation was found between pre-test and post-test scores ($r = 0.975$, $p < 0.001$), confirming a statistically significant enhancement following the intervention.

Although the quantitative results demonstrated substantial gains, caution was exercised in interpreting causality, as factors such as teacher influence, test familiarity, and participant motivation could have contributed to performance improvement independent of the SMAF framework.

Threats to Internal Validity

Several methodological limitations warrant consideration:

- History and Maturation Effects: External factors (e.g., concurrent English exposure) and natural linguistic development may have influenced outcomes during the five-week intervention.
- Testing Effect: Familiarity with the test format may have contributed to score improvements, independent of SMAF training.
- Teacher Effect: Differences in instructional delivery across institutions may have introduced uncontrolled variability.
- Hawthorne Effect: Participants' awareness of being part of a study could have motivated heightened effort and attention.

Recognizing these potential confounders enhances the transparency of interpretation and underscores the need for further controlled experimentation.

Ethical Considerations and Replicability

Ethical approval was obtained from the KIAS Research Committee, and participation was voluntary. All data were anonymized to protect confidentiality. In line with ethical research practices, no participant's grade or academic standing was affected by involvement in the study.

To promote replicability, detailed instructional notes, SMAF materials, and rubrics were documented and archived. However, the study acknowledges that variations in contextual implementation across institutions may limit full replication. Future research should employ randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and incorporate qualitative feedback to triangulate quantitative outcomes.

Summary of Methodological Design

In summary, the study applied a systematic, data-driven approach to evaluate SMAF's pedagogical effectiveness in MUET speaking instruction. While the quantitative results confirmed substantial performance gains, the quasi-experimental design's inherent limitations call for cautious interpretation. Nevertheless, the design effectively established SMAF's practical viability as an instructional scaffold capable of enhancing fluency, organization, and confidence in test-oriented speaking contexts.

Findings and Discussion

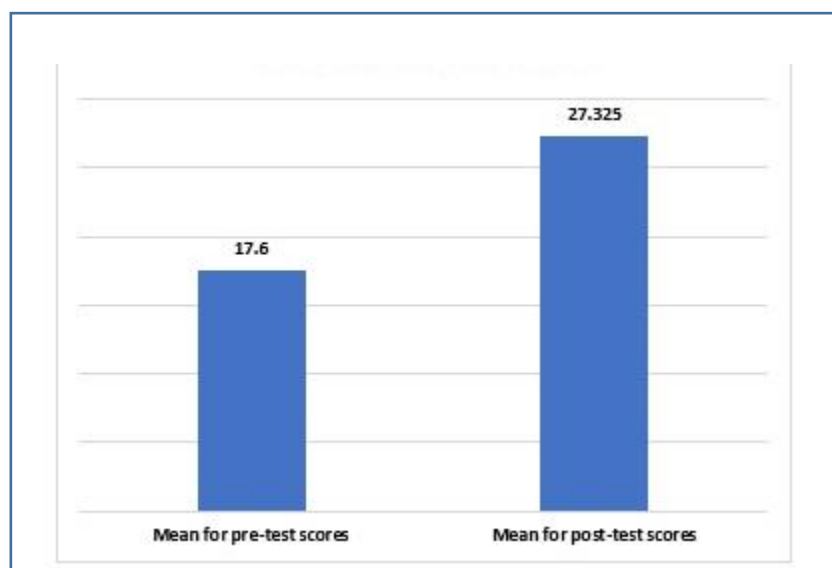


Figure 2: Mean Score for Pre-Test and Post-Test

Overall Improvement in MUET Speaking Performance

The findings indicate a substantial improvement in students' MUET speaking performance after the implementation of SMAF. The mean score increased from 17.6 in the pre-test to 27.325 in the post-test, demonstrating a 55.26% improvement. The paired-sample t-test confirmed the significance of this gain ($p < .001$), while the correlation coefficient ($r = 0.975$) suggests a strong and consistent relationship between pre- and post-test performance across institutions.

These improvements support the claim that structured frameworks contribute meaningfully to learners' fluency and coherence. By providing a predictable discourse pathway, SMAF helped students organize their ideas into clear stages, reducing hesitation and improving the quality of delivery. This outcome aligns with findings by Lee and Chen (2022) as well as Rahman and

Stapa (2022), who reported that structured speaking models improve clarity and coherence in ESL learners' oral production. The rise in performance further reflects the cognitive benefits of structured planning, where learners experience lower processing demands and can focus more effectively on actual speech delivery.

Interpretation of Performance Patterns

Despite the overall improvement, the strong correlation between pre-test and post-test scores suggests that students' relative proficiency rankings remained largely unchanged. High-performing students continued to excel, while lower-performing participants improved but did not surpass their peers. This indicates that SMAF served as a performance-enhancing scaffold rather than a levelling tool.

Affectively, students appeared more confident and willing to speak during post-test sessions, indicating potential reductions in speaking anxiety. This observation is consistent with past research showing that speaking anxiety negatively influences MUET performance (Harun et al., 2021; Zaidon et al., 2022). Similarly, Nordin, Ahmad, and Rahim (2022) found a strong inverse relationship between anxiety and English proficiency among undergraduates, which further supports the interpretation that SMAF's structure may have enhanced learners' psychological readiness for task performance. Observations during classroom activities also resonate with findings by Vandergriff (2021) and O'Neill & Bode (2023), who reported that predictable frameworks increase learners' self-efficacy and support smoother speech production.

Considerations of Internal Validity

Although quantitative data strongly indicate SMAF's effectiveness, the quasi-experimental design requires cautious interpretation. Without a control group, improvements could be partially influenced by repeated test exposure, teacher effects, or participants' increasing familiarity with MUET speaking tasks. Nonetheless, the consistency and scale of improvement across all institutions suggest that SMAF played a significant role in shaping learners' speaking performance. The results offer promising evidence that structured speaking frameworks can bridge the gap between knowledge of linguistic forms and the ability to produce coherent real-time speech—a challenge frequently noted in MUET preparation contexts.

Pedagogical Significance of SMAF

Pedagogically, SMAF demonstrates strong potential as an instructional scaffold for MUET candidates. The structured sequence of moves appears to have reduced learners' cognitive load, enabling them to deliver responses with greater fluency and coherence. The clear stages also helped learners manage time effectively and maintain logical flow—two areas that are often problematic among MUET candidates.

However, reliance on structural templates may also risk producing rehearsed or formulaic responses, echoing concerns about washback effects in high-stakes language testing (Cheng, 2010). SMAF should therefore be implemented as a transitional scaffold that gradually supports learners toward more spontaneous and authentic communication. Integrating SMAF with complementary strategies such as vocabulary enrichment, grammatical flexibility, pronunciation practice, and communicative tasks will allow learners to move beyond reliance on templates while retaining the benefits of structured discourse planning.

Summary

In summary, the findings demonstrate that SMAF significantly enhanced students' MUET speaking performance, particularly in fluency, coherence, and organization. The improvement aligns with previous research highlighting the value of structured speaking support. While internal validity limitations require cautious interpretation, the results point to SMAF's strong potential as a practical teaching tool for preparing candidates for high-stakes speaking assessments. Its effectiveness lies in reducing anxiety, supporting cognitive processing, and providing learners with a reliable framework for structuring their spoken responses.

Recommendations for Future Research

Building upon the present findings, several avenues for future inquiry are proposed:

1. Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs): Future studies should employ experimental designs with control groups to isolate SMAF's causal effects and minimize internal validity threats such as maturation and testing effects. Future investigations may also examine the interaction between structured speaking frameworks and affective variables such as anxiety and self-efficacy (Nordin et al., 2022; Zulkflee et al., 2023), expanding current understanding of how structural guidance influences learners' emotional readiness in high-stakes tests.
2. Mixed-methods investigation: Incorporating qualitative methods—such as classroom observations, student interviews, or reflective journals—would yield richer insights into learners' perceptions, motivation, and anxiety reduction linked to SMAF use.
3. Granular Discourse and Linguistic Analysis: Recording and transcribing students' pre- and post-intervention speeches would allow researchers to identify specific linguistic and discourse-level changes (e.g., syntactic complexity, lexical diversity, and discourse markers).
4. Longitudinal impact and transferability: Tracking students beyond the MUET exam could determine whether skills developed through SMAF are retained and transferable to authentic, non-exam communicative settings such as university seminars or workplace presentations.
5. Cross-cultural and multilingual application: As Malaysia hosts diverse linguistic backgrounds, future research may explore SMAF's adaptability for learners from multilingual or minority language contexts to assess its broader pedagogical relevance.:

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Sequential Move Analysis Framework (SMAF) presents a promising pedagogical innovation that bridges theoretical understanding and practical application in MUET speaking preparation. It offers a clear, structured pathway for developing fluency, coherence, and confidence among ESL learners while aligning with broader communicative objectives. Although further empirical validation is required, the present findings affirm that SMAF can serve as both a teaching strategy and performance scaffold, contributing meaningfully to the enhancement of structured oral communication in Malaysian ESL education and beyond.

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