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BREAKING THE SILENCE: VOCABULARY AS THE KEY TO CONFIDENCE IN MUET SPEAKING

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Abstract:

This article revisits the critical role of vocabulary proficiency in shaping students' confidence and anxiety during the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) speaking component. Drawing on data from a quantitative study involving 320 pre-university students across six institutions, it focuses on how lexical limitations influence both linguistic performance and psychological readiness. Using a structured Likert-scale questionnaire covering six constructs—vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, confidence, motivation, and anxiety—the study identified vocabulary ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 0.43$) as the most significant area of difficulty, followed by grammar ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 0.40$).

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Confidence ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 0.39$) and anxiety ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 0.41$) showed strong associations with vocabulary proficiency, with Pearson correlation results indicating a negative correlation with confidence ($r = -.61$, $p < .01$) and a positive correlation with anxiety ($r = .59$, $p < .01$). These findings suggest that limited vocabulary not only hinders fluency and expression but also heightens anxiety and reduces self-assurance in oral performance. Anchored in Nation's model of vocabulary acquisition, Bandura's self-efficacy theory, and Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, this study highlights vocabulary as both a linguistic foundation and an affective stabilizer, emphasizing the need for vocabulary-focused pedagogical interventions to enhance fluency, coherence, and confidence among MUET.

Keywords:

Vocabulary Proficiency; MUET Speaking Test; Speaking Confidence; Language Anxiety; Self-Efficacy; Lexical Competence

Introduction

The Malaysian University English Test (MUET) serves as one of the most important English proficiency benchmarks for Malaysian pre-university students. As a high-stakes examination, it determines university admission eligibility and reflects candidates' readiness to use English effectively in academic and professional settings. Among the four components—listening, reading, writing, and speaking—the speaking test consistently emerges as the most challenging and anxiety-provoking. MUET candidates are required to express opinions clearly, elaborate ideas logically, and respond spontaneously under strict time limits. For many, these demands are daunting, particularly when linguistic and psychological readiness are not equally developed. While the test measures communicative competence, it also exposes underlying weaknesses in vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, and the confidence to speak before others.

Over the years, concerns about MUET speaking performance have persisted. Teachers frequently report that students remain hesitant, silent, or overly dependent on memorized phrases when responding to prompts. The recent alignment of MUET with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which emphasizes global standards of fluency, coherence, and vocabulary range, has further heightened the challenge (Zulkflee, Marimuthu, & Tahir, 2023). Students are now expected to demonstrate not just grammatical correctness but also lexical variety and natural communicative flow. However, in classroom and test settings alike, limited vocabulary continues to be one of the most persistent barriers to effective speech. This lexical limitation constrains students' ability to elaborate ideas, use linking expressions, and maintain fluency throughout their turns, leading to frequent pauses and a visible lack of confidence.

Several studies have noted that vocabulary deficiencies not only hinder linguistic expression but also influence students' psychological states, especially confidence and anxiety. Mahmud et al. (2021) and Harun et al. (2021) found that MUET candidates who possess a wider range of vocabulary perform significantly better in speaking, as lexical competence allows for smoother expression and reduces hesitation. Conversely, when students struggle to recall words or substitute

them in real time, they experience frustration, embarrassment, and anxiety that further disrupt performance. Such emotional reactions reflect the interaction between linguistic and affective factors—where limited vocabulary not only affects what students can say but also how they feel while speaking. Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis explains this dynamic: learners with high anxiety or low confidence experience a “mental barrier” that prevents input from becoming usable output, resulting in breakdowns during oral production.

The link between vocabulary and confidence is equally significant. Bandura's (1997) Self-Efficacy Theory posits that individuals' beliefs in their capabilities to perform tasks influence their motivation and persistence. In the MUET context, a student who perceives their vocabulary as insufficient may underestimate their ability to participate successfully, leading to hesitation and reduced effort. On the other hand, those who feel lexically prepared tend to demonstrate greater self-assurance and fluency. Vocabulary, therefore, is not merely a linguistic skill but a psychological enabler—a key that unlocks students' willingness to communicate and sustain interaction. As noted by Nation (2001), mastery of vocabulary breadth and depth underpins fluency, as it allows speakers to select appropriate words automatically and focus on content rather than form.

The broader quantitative study from which this article draws examined six constructs—vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, motivation, confidence, and anxiety—that collectively influence MUET speaking performance. The findings showed that vocabulary ($M = 2.87$) and grammar ($M = 2.90$) were the most significant areas of difficulty, while anxiety ($M = 2.74$) and lack of confidence ($M = 2.68$) were identified as key psychological challenges. Correlation analyses revealed that vocabulary proficiency is negatively correlated with anxiety ($r = .59, p < .01$) and positively correlated with confidence ($r = -.61, p < .01$), underscoring the dual linguistic and affective impact of lexical ability. These results suggest that students' struggles in speaking are not only a matter of linguistic limitation but also of emotional regulation, both of which are mediated by vocabulary proficiency.

Given these findings, it becomes crucial to investigate vocabulary not only as a component of linguistic competence but also as a catalyst for confidence and a buffer against anxiety. Understanding this relationship is vital for teachers who seek to design effective MUET preparation lessons. When instruction focuses solely on grammatical accuracy or test format, it overlooks the affective dimensions that determine whether students will speak willingly and confidently. A vocabulary-centered approach—one that simultaneously builds linguistic range and emotional readiness—may therefore offer a more holistic pathway to speaking improvement.

This study thus aims to explore how vocabulary proficiency influences MUET candidates' speaking confidence and anxiety. By focusing on the interplay between lexical competence and affective factors, it offers both empirical insights and pedagogical strategies for teachers and students preparing for MUET speaking assessments. Specifically, this article seeks to:

1. Identify the relative level of difficulty students face with vocabulary compared to other speaking-related constructs.
2. Examine the relationship between vocabulary proficiency, confidence, and anxiety among MUET candidates.
3. Propose vocabulary-focused pedagogical strategies to strengthen students' confidence and reduce anxiety during speaking tasks.

Through this focus, the paper contributes to ongoing discussions on the intersection of language learning and psychology, reaffirming that vocabulary is not only the building block of speech but also the bridge to confidence, fluency, and self-expression.

In order to achieve the objective of this research, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How does vocabulary proficiency influence MUET candidates' speaking confidence and anxiety?
2. What is the relative level of difficulty experienced by MUET candidates in vocabulary compared to confidence and anxiety?

Literature Review / Theoretical Framework

Vocabulary and Speaking Proficiency

Vocabulary knowledge is widely recognized as one of the most powerful indicators of speaking performance in second language learning. It forms the linguistic foundation upon which fluency, coherence, and communicative competence are built. According to Nation (2001), vocabulary breadth (the number of words known) and depth (how well words are understood and used) directly affect learners' ability to express meaning with accuracy and confidence. In speaking tasks such as MUET, this knowledge allows learners to access words rapidly and appropriately, resulting in smoother, more coherent speech. Without sufficient vocabulary, students struggle to elaborate on ideas, rely on repetitive language, and experience frequent pauses that disrupt fluency.

Schmitt (2010) expands on this by emphasizing that vocabulary learning is a developmental process that moves from receptive knowledge (understanding words when heard or read) to productive mastery (using them accurately in speech). The ability to retrieve words quickly in real-time communication is therefore a mark of proficiency, not merely memorization. This perspective aligns with Jongman, Yung, and Hintz (2021), who found that learners with larger vocabularies demonstrate higher speech-silence ratios, meaning they spend more time talking and less time hesitating. Similarly, Oya, Manalo, and Greenwood (2009) revealed that vocabulary size and lexical diversity significantly predict fluency ratings in oral proficiency interviews. These findings suggest that vocabulary is more than a collection of words—it is the scaffolding that supports syntactic construction, idea elaboration, and sustained interaction.

In the Malaysian context, Harun et al. (2021) and Mahmud et al. (2021) found that vocabulary deficiency was one of the most reported linguistic barriers among MUET candidates. Even when students had adequate grammar knowledge, many could not generate appropriate words under exam pressure. Their speech often sounded incomplete or overly general, resulting in lower band

scores. Therefore, vocabulary mastery remains an urgent pedagogical priority for MUET instructors who wish to enhance their students' performance in both structure and delivery.

Vocabulary, Anxiety, and the Affective Filter

While vocabulary is essential for linguistic competence, it is also deeply connected to learners' emotional experience. Students who lack sufficient vocabulary often report higher levels of speaking anxiety, as they fear embarrassment, negative evaluation, or the inability to convey ideas (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). This relationship is captured by Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that learners' emotions—particularly anxiety and motivation—can facilitate or hinder language acquisition. When the affective filter is high, due to nervousness or low self-esteem, language input fails to be processed effectively, leading to hesitation and avoidance behaviors. Conversely, a low affective filter allows learners to engage freely, promoting natural fluency.

Recent studies focusing on MUET have echoed this dynamic. Zulkflee, Marimuthu, and Tahir (2023) reported that nearly half of their respondents experienced high anxiety levels during MUET speaking tests, often triggered by fear of judgment and lexical retrieval problems. Similarly, Rahim, Halim, and Ibrahim (2023) found that structured preparatory practices and vocabulary-focused instruction helped reduce test-related anxiety. These findings support the idea that teaching vocabulary is not simply about improving language range; it also reduces emotional barriers by giving learners a sense of preparedness and control. As students gain lexical confidence, they become less anxious about making mistakes and more capable of sustaining communication under exam conditions.

In this regard, the present study's correlation findings—where vocabulary is positively associated with anxiety ($r = .59$, $p < .01$)—suggest that vocabulary weakness directly contributes to elevated stress levels. Students who struggle to find words under pressure often experience performance breakdowns, validating the argument that anxiety and lexical retrieval are interdependent phenomena. This highlights a crucial pedagogical insight: vocabulary instruction can function as both a linguistic and emotional support mechanism for learners.

Vocabulary, Confidence, and Self-Efficacy

Confidence, often referred to as speaking self-efficacy, is another psychological variable closely linked to vocabulary proficiency. Bandura's (1997) Self-Efficacy Theory emphasizes that individuals' beliefs in their own ability to perform specific tasks strongly influence their motivation and perseverance. In the context of MUET, students who perceive themselves as linguistically competent—particularly in vocabulary—are more likely to initiate communication, persist in expressing their ideas, and recover from errors during speech. Conversely, those with low vocabulary knowledge often view speaking as a threatening activity, which leads to avoidance and silence.

Vocabulary, therefore, acts as both a cognitive resource and an emotional anchor. When students possess a wider lexical repertoire, they feel more in control of their speech and are able to communicate with greater clarity and assurance. Studies by Alharthi (2019) and Yu (2021)

demonstrated that learners with higher vocabulary mastery not only achieved greater fluency but also reported stronger speaking confidence. These results are supported by findings from the present research, which identified a significant negative correlation between vocabulary and confidence ($r = -.61, p < .01$), indicating that low vocabulary proficiency is associated with lower self-assurance. The more students struggle with words, the less confident they feel about their ability to perform well in MUET speaking tasks.

This relationship highlights the cyclical nature of language learning: limited vocabulary reduces confidence, which in turn discourages speaking practice, thereby reinforcing the lexical gap. Breaking this cycle requires targeted pedagogical approaches that promote vocabulary-based confidence building, such as structured oral rehearsals and the use of lexical scaffolds. By treating vocabulary as a foundation for confidence rather than as a discrete skill, teachers can help students build resilience and a stronger sense of linguistic identity.

Integrating Linguistic and Psychological Perspectives

The interconnection between vocabulary, confidence, and anxiety underscores the need for a holistic view of speaking performance that bridges linguistic and affective dimensions. Traditional approaches to MUET preparation have often emphasized grammatical accuracy and exam techniques, while overlooking the emotional readiness required for effective communication. However, emerging evidence suggests that vocabulary instruction can serve as a mediating factor that simultaneously enhances language production and reduces emotional barriers. When students feel lexically equipped, they approach speaking tasks with greater enthusiasm and less fear of failure.

In this study, the integration of Nation's (2001) model of vocabulary acquisition, Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis, and Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory provides a strong theoretical foundation. Together, these frameworks explain how vocabulary proficiency can influence not only speech output but also emotional stability. Nation's model explains how extensive exposure and retrieval practice lead to automaticity, enabling fluency. Krashen highlights how affective conditions—particularly anxiety—can block this process, while Bandura explains how mastery experiences (such as successful lexical retrieval) enhance confidence.

Overall, the literature supports the argument that vocabulary proficiency is a central predictor of speaking performance, influencing both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of communication. Limited vocabulary restricts students' ability to elaborate ideas and simultaneously raises anxiety levels, whereas mastery of lexical knowledge promotes confidence and fluency. Within the MUET context, this interplay between linguistic competence and psychological readiness highlights the importance of vocabulary-centered instruction. The following section details the methodology employed to investigate these relationships in the present study.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative descriptive-correlational research design to explore the relationship between vocabulary proficiency and two key psychological factors—confidence and anxiety—in MUET speaking performance. The present article is part of a broader research project that investigated six constructs affecting students' oral proficiency: vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, motivation, confidence, and anxiety. For the purpose of this paper, only the data relating to vocabulary, confidence, and anxiety are presented and discussed. The descriptive-correlational design was selected because it allows the researcher to examine existing conditions among students and to establish the extent to which one variable relates to another without manipulating the research environment. This approach is particularly relevant for educational contexts where natural classroom behaviors and exam-related attitudes are observed.

The focus on vocabulary as both a linguistic and psychological construct aligns with the study's aim to understand how students' lexical proficiency shapes their emotional readiness to speak in English. As highlighted in previous MUET studies (Harun et al., 2021; Zulkflee, Marimuthu, & Tahir, 2023), quantitative approaches provide valuable insights into patterns of performance across large samples and are effective for identifying interrelated factors that contribute to speaking challenges.

Participants

The study involved 320 pre-university students enrolled in MUET preparatory courses across six learning institutions in Kelantan, Malaysia. Participants were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure diverse representation of proficiency levels and institutional backgrounds. The sample included both male and female students, aged between 18 and 20, all of whom had completed secondary-level English education. They were at the early stages of preparing for the MUET speaking test, which made them ideal respondents for identifying real-time linguistic and psychological challenges.

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Institutional approval was also granted by the respective colleges and the Centre for Core Studies, Sultan Ismail Petra International Islamic College University (KIAS). Respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and no identifying information was collected. Ethical considerations followed standard educational research practices to ensure that participants' rights and privacy were respected.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a structured Likert-scale questionnaire developed specifically for this study. The instrument consisted of several sections measuring students' self-perceived challenges in MUET speaking, focusing on six constructs. Each construct included five to seven items measured on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). For the present analysis, only three constructs were examined: vocabulary, confidence, and anxiety.

Sample items for each construct included:

- Vocabulary: “I often struggle to find the right words when speaking English.”
- Confidence: “I feel confident expressing my ideas in English during oral tasks.”
- Anxiety: “I feel nervous when I cannot find the correct words during a speaking test.”

These items were designed based on previous MUET-related instruments and validated through expert review by three English language lecturers. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was tested using Cronbach’s alpha, which indicated high reliability: Vocabulary ($\alpha = .84$), Confidence ($\alpha = .79$), and Anxiety ($\alpha = .81$). Such reliability coefficients suggest that the instrument was internally stable and suitable for measuring the targeted constructs among ESL learners.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected over a period of four weeks during the MUET preparatory semester. The researcher distributed the questionnaires in person, assisted by course instructors to ensure understanding and compliance. Students were briefed on the purpose of the study and informed that their responses would not affect their academic evaluation. The questionnaire took approximately 20 minutes to complete.

After collection, responses were screened for completeness, and only valid entries were included in the analysis. The total of 320 responses provided a sufficient sample size for correlation analysis, meeting the general guideline of a minimum of 30 participants per construct as suggested in quantitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were computed to determine the level of difficulty experienced by students in each construct. Pearson’s r correlation was used to examine relationships between vocabulary proficiency, confidence, and anxiety. The significance level was set at $p < .01$ to ensure high statistical precision.

Validity and Reliability Considerations

The validity of the instrument was ensured through content validation by three MUET lecturers who reviewed each item for relevance, clarity, and alignment with MUET speaking constructs. Pilot testing with 30 students confirmed that the items were well-understood and that the scale functioned consistently. The reliability results (α values above .79) indicate that all subscales met the acceptable threshold for internal consistency.

The use of quantitative correlation allows for objective interpretation of relationships among constructs, but it is also recognized that self-reported data may be influenced by students’ perceptions and situational factors. To mitigate this, anonymity was emphasized to reduce social desirability bias.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed ethical standards for research involving human participants. Approval was obtained from the institutional research committee, and all participants were informed of their rights to withdraw at any time. Data were stored securely and used solely for academic purposes. No monetary or academic incentives were provided, ensuring voluntary participation.

In summary, the study employed a robust quantitative design that allowed for an in-depth exploration of how vocabulary proficiency interacts with confidence and anxiety among MUET candidates. The reliable and validated instrument provided measurable insights into the linguistic and psychological dimensions of speaking performance. The following section presents and discusses the findings in relation to existing literature and pedagogical implications.

Findings

Overview of Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate how vocabulary proficiency influences MUET candidates' confidence and anxiety in speaking tasks. As shown in Figure 1, vocabulary recorded the highest level of difficulty among the three constructs studied ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 0.43$), followed by anxiety ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 0.41$) and confidence ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 0.39$). These results suggest that students perceive lexical limitation as the foremost barrier to effective speaking, surpassing even emotional factors such as nervousness or lack of self-belief.

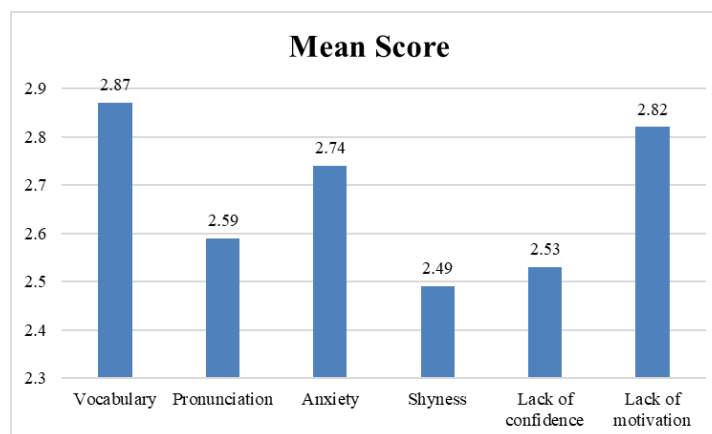


Figure 1: Results of Psychological Challenges Components

The correlation analysis (Table 2) reveals a strong negative relationship between vocabulary and confidence ($r = -.61$, $p < .01$) and a strong positive relationship between vocabulary and anxiety ($r = .59$, $p < .01$). In other words, as students' vocabulary proficiency decreases, their anxiety increases and their confidence declines. The inverse relationship between confidence and anxiety ($r = -.63$, $p < .01$) further reinforces that these psychological variables are interdependent. These patterns mirror findings from the broader MUET research by Harun et al. (2021) and Zulkflee, Marimuthu, and Tahir (2023), confirming that lexical ability is not an isolated linguistic skill but a psychological anchor that shapes emotional readiness to speak.

Table 2: Correlation Analysis Between the Three Constructs.

Variable	Vocabulary	Confidence	Anxiety
Vocabulary	1.00	-.61**	.59**
Confidence	-.61**	1.00	-.63**
Anxiety	.59**	-.63**	1.00

$p < .01$ (two-tailed)

Vocabulary as the Linguistic Foundation of Fluency

The descriptive data confirm that vocabulary remains the most challenging linguistic component for MUET candidates. This echoes previous studies (Mahmud et al., 2021; Harun et al., 2021) which identified lexical limitations as a key obstacle to speaking performance. Many students rely on memorized phrases, lack paraphrasing strategies, and struggle to retrieve appropriate words during spontaneous interaction. These difficulties directly affect the fluency and coherence bands in MUET scoring, where candidates are expected to express ideas logically and smoothly.

Nation (2001) and Schmitt (2010) emphasize that productive vocabulary knowledge—knowing how to use words accurately and quickly—is essential for real-time speech. When retrieval processes are slow, learners pause frequently, leading to disjointed communication. This phenomenon was evident among participants who reported difficulty recalling suitable words during oral tasks. From a psycholinguistic standpoint, vocabulary deficiency increases cognitive load: instead of focusing on meaning and organization, students expend mental energy searching for words. Consequently, speech delivery becomes fragmented, and anxiety increases as they perceive themselves as less competent speakers.

The Emotional Dimension: Vocabulary and Anxiety

The strong positive correlation between vocabulary deficiency and speaking anxiety supports Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis. According to Krashen, high anxiety creates a psychological barrier that prevents learners from processing and producing language effectively. In the MUET context, this manifests when students feel tense or self-conscious about their lexical gaps, which in turn heightens their nervousness and reduces spontaneity.

Respondents often reported that their “mind goes blank” during the test—an expression of lexical retrieval failure under stress. This supports findings from Zulkflee et al. (2023), where more than 40% of MUET candidates experienced high speaking anxiety primarily due to fear of making lexical or grammatical mistakes. The correlation found in this study ($r = .59$, $p < .01$) indicates that as students' vocabulary knowledge decreases, their anxiety level proportionally increases. This is significant because it suggests that language anxiety is not merely a product of personality or temperament, but can be linguistically induced by insufficient vocabulary resources.

Teachers can interpret this finding as a reminder that anxiety management should include lexical reinforcement. Providing students with lexical frames, topic-based collocations, and formulaic expressions can reduce uncertainty during oral tasks. As students gain familiarity with word clusters such as “In my opinion...” or “One possible reason is...,” they build a mental safety net that lowers affective barriers. Thus, vocabulary instruction becomes an emotional intervention as much as a linguistic one.

Vocabulary and Confidence: The Self-Efficacy Connection

The negative correlation between vocabulary difficulty and confidence ($r = -.61, p < .01$) aligns with Bandura’s (1997) Self-Efficacy Theory, which states that individuals’ belief in their ability to perform a task influences their actual performance. When students perceive that they have the lexical tools to articulate thoughts clearly, they approach speaking tasks with optimism and persistence. Conversely, limited vocabulary undermines their belief in their competence, leading to hesitation and withdrawal.

Students who participated in this study frequently reported that knowing more words gave them “courage to start talking.” This perception reflects what Bandura calls mastery experiences—small successes that build self-belief. Each successful attempt at using a new word or phrase reinforces the learner’s confidence, creating a positive feedback loop between linguistic competence and psychological assurance. The implication is clear: teaching vocabulary is not just about expanding word lists; it is about constructing opportunities for successful use that foster self-efficacy.

Classroom practices that encourage repeated, low-pressure speaking opportunities—such as mini-discussions, role-plays, and peer interviews—can transform vocabulary learning into confidence training. When learners experience mastery in controlled situations, they carry that confidence into higher-stakes environments such as the MUET speaking test.

Interplay of Linguistic and Psychological Factors

The intertwined relationships among vocabulary, confidence, and anxiety demonstrate that linguistic and psychological dimensions of speaking are inseparable. While past teaching practices often treated these aspects separately—grammar in one lesson, motivation in another—the present findings suggest that vocabulary serves as a bridge between the two. As students expand their lexical repertoire, they simultaneously enhance their expressive capacity and reduce the uncertainty that fuels anxiety.

This interpretation also explains the inverse pattern between confidence and anxiety ($r = -.63, p < .01$). Confidence acts as a protective factor that lowers anxiety, and vocabulary acquisition contributes directly to that confidence. This confirms earlier insights from the full study (The Road to MUET Speaking Mastery) which showed that linguistic and psychological variables are closely correlated. The current results highlight vocabulary as the variable most capable of influencing both domains, making it a critical target for intervention in MUET preparation programs.

Discussion

In summary, the study provides empirical evidence that vocabulary proficiency significantly influences both confidence and anxiety in MUET speaking performance. Limited vocabulary contributes to hesitation, fragmented speech, and higher anxiety levels, while strong lexical competence enhances fluency and builds confidence. The results support theoretical models by Nation (2001), Krashen (1982), and Bandura (1997), all of which converge on the principle that language proficiency and emotional readiness are mutually reinforcing.

For teachers, the message is straightforward yet profound: to teach vocabulary is to teach confidence. By prioritizing lexical competence in MUET preparation, educators not only improve linguistic performance but also empower students psychologically to speak with greater assurance and less fear.

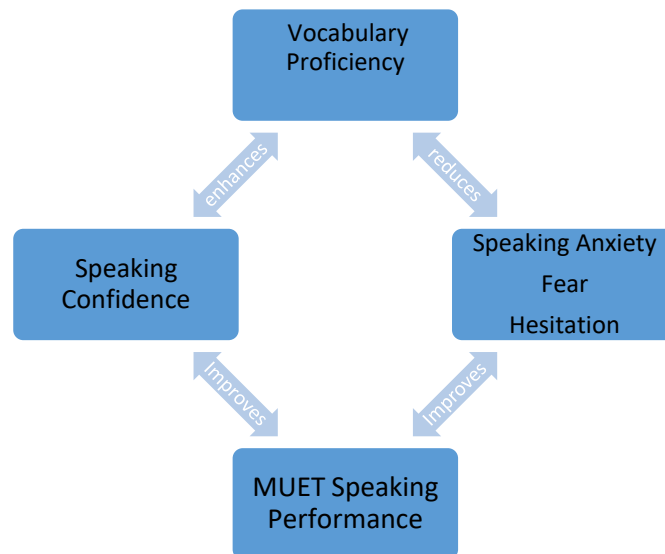


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework Linking Vocabulary, Confidence, and Anxiety in MUET Speaking

Figure 2 illustrates the proposed conceptual framework underpinning this study. Vocabulary proficiency serves as both a linguistic base and a psychological stabilizer. Increased vocabulary enhances speaking confidence (positive pathway) and reduces anxiety (negative pathway), which in turn leads to improved MUET speaking performance. This model integrates Nation's (2001) view of lexical fluency, Krashen's (1982) affective filter theory, and Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy principle, demonstrating how language mastery and emotional readiness reinforce each other.

Conclusion

This study reaffirms that vocabulary proficiency is the foundation upon which successful MUET speaking performance is built. Among the six constructs examined in the broader research—vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, motivation, confidence, and anxiety—vocabulary emerged

as both the most significant linguistic challenge and the strongest psychological predictor of performance. With a mean score of 2.87, it represented the area in which students struggled most, and it showed strong correlations with confidence ($r = -.61$) and anxiety ($r = .59$). These results confirm that limited vocabulary not only restricts students' linguistic expression but also undermines their emotional readiness to speak.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings support Nation's (2001) argument that vocabulary knowledge underpins fluency and coherence, while also validating Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis and Bandura's (1997) Self-Efficacy Theory. Students with a larger and more accessible lexical repertoire are able to process ideas faster and speak with greater ease, thereby reducing anxiety and enhancing confidence. Conversely, those with poor vocabulary often experience hesitation, self-doubt, and fear of negative evaluation, which elevate the affective filter and hinder speech production.

In practical terms, vocabulary functions as both a linguistic resource and a psychological catalyst. It gives students the words they need to express meaning, while simultaneously empowering them to believe that they can speak effectively. By addressing vocabulary weaknesses, teachers are therefore not merely teaching language forms—they are cultivating self-assurance and communicative resilience. This dual impact highlights vocabulary as the “silent variable” behind MUET speaking success, explaining why students who appear shy or anxious often improve dramatically once their lexical range expands.

Pedagogical Implications

This study reaffirms The findings offer several implications for MUET educators and curriculum designers who aim to strengthen students' oral proficiency while supporting their emotional well-being. Teachers can integrate the following vocabulary-centered strategies into their speaking lessons:

Lexical Scaffolding for Structured Speaking

Vocabulary development should be linked to the MUET speaking structure. Teachers can introduce lexical bundles aligned with each stage of the task—for instance, expressions for introducing ideas (“One key aspect to consider is...”), giving reasons (“This is mainly because...”), and concluding (“In short...”). These chunks not only expand vocabulary but also serve as structural signposts that guide students through their responses.

Thematic Vocabulary Clusters

Vocabulary should be taught thematically, following MUET topics such as health, technology, or social issues. Building semantic fields helps learners retrieve related words more efficiently during spontaneous speech. Classroom activities such as “word webs” and “topic trees” encourage students to visualize and connect vocabulary items.

Lexical Rehearsal and Fluency Building

Repeated oral practice using target words enhances both retrieval speed and confidence. Teachers can conduct rapid-fire speaking drills, timed pair exchanges, or sentence-completion challenges

using key vocabulary. These short, low-pressure tasks encourage automaticity and lower anxiety through gradual exposure.

Confidence through Lexical Ownership

Teachers should create opportunities for students to personalize vocabulary use. Allowing learners to keep “My MUET Word Bank” journals, where they record useful words and apply them in short speaking reflections, fosters a sense of ownership. Each successful use of new vocabulary functions as a mastery experience (Bandura, 1997) that strengthens self-efficacy.

Reducing Anxiety through Predictable Lexical Frames

Anxiety often stems from fear of the unknown. By rehearsing predictable language frames and sentence openers, students gain a sense of security that reduces cognitive load during assessments. Teachers can pair this with relaxation techniques or confidence-boosting routines (e.g., “three deep breaths and three strong words” before speaking).

Integrating Vocabulary with Affective Support

Vocabulary instruction should be complemented by a supportive classroom climate. Positive feedback, peer encouragement, and collaborative speaking games can reduce fear of mistakes. The focus should shift from “perfect English” to “effective communication,” helping students internalize the idea that vocabulary use is about clarity, not perfection.

As the final remark, the journey toward MUET speaking mastery begins with breaking the silence that stems from lexical uncertainty. When students are given the words, they find their voices; when they gain confidence, they reclaim their agency as communicators. This study contributes to the growing recognition that vocabulary is more than a technical skill—it is the language of confidence. By empowering learners lexically and emotionally, teachers can transform MUET preparation from a fear-driven experience into an opportunity for growth, expression, and genuine communication.

Implications for Future Research

Although the study establishes clear relationships among vocabulary, confidence, and anxiety, future research could expand its scope in three directions. First, experimental studies could examine the causal effects of vocabulary-focused interventions on students’ confidence and speaking fluency. Second, qualitative studies involving interviews or reflective journals could provide deeper insight into how learners experience the emotional impact of vocabulary growth. Third, longitudinal research could explore whether improvements in vocabulary lead to sustained reductions in anxiety and improvements in real exam performance. Such work would offer valuable evidence for MUET teachers seeking to balance linguistic and affective development.

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