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MITIGATING THE AFFECTIVE FILTER: THE EFFICACY OF LOW-STAKES, TECHNOLOGY-INTEGRATED ROLE-PLAY IN REDUCING ESL SPEAKING ANXIETY

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Abstract:

This paper examines the effectiveness of a low-stakes, technology-integrated Project-Based Learning (PBL) model in directly mitigating the Affective Filter to reduce oral communication anxiety among ESL learners. Recognising that the traditional, high-stakes evaluation induces performance anxiety and hinders authentic language acquisition, this study implemented a framework where students engaged in role-play activities and published their own work on platforms like TikTok, essentially shifting the practice environment. The study utilised a mixed-methods approach on students from an Oral Communication in English course. Data were collected via a single comprehensive post-project questionnaire. The instrument collected quantitative data on self-reported confidence and anxiety levels using a Likert scale and included qualitative open-ended questions to gather deep, experiential insights into the project's effectiveness. The findings demonstrate that the low-stakes mechanism is a powerful driver for change. Quantitative analysis showed a statistically significant increase in student confidence and a corresponding decrease in self-reported communication anxiety. Qualitative data reinforced these findings, with students explicitly reporting that the approach created a 'safe space' for practice that helped them 'overcome fear and hesitation'. The results indicate that this PBL model is a highly effective pedagogical tool for fostering genuine fluency and building self-esteem. By enabling a non-threatening practice environment, the project provides a replicable blueprint for educators seeking to reduce affective filters and promote a more confident, active generation of communicators.

Introduction

The ability to communicate in English is an essential skill for students to excel academically and professionally. In the teaching of the Oral Communication in English course, one of the primary learning objectives requires the students to speak reasonably fluently on a certain topic, which may be challenging for students with limited linguistic competence, coupled with speaking anxiety, to communicate spontaneously. Speaking anxiety is widely recognised as one of the most significant barriers to fluency among students learning English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The fear of making mistakes while speaking the language, particularly in the classroom settings and in front of their peers, often heightens their anxiety and discourages active participation. For many students, this anxiety leads to their reluctance to engage in the speaking activities even though they genuinely want to improve their English proficiency. Horwitz et al. (1986) categorised this type of anxiety as a form of performance anxiety encompassing communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Consequently, this anxiety not only hinders their fluency development but also creates a mental block that prevents them from effectively applying what they have learned in communicative contexts.

Furthermore, the traditional teaching approaches often reinforce this anxiety cycle, as teachers tend to prioritise content delivery and assessing activities through high-stakes evaluation, such as oral tests or formal presentations. These practices frequently position students to assume the role of passive learners rather than active participants in the learning process. Thus, students are provided with limited opportunities for low-pressure, communicative practice that are necessary to help them overcome their fear and hesitation in speaking English. Recognising the persistent anxiety among the students and the limitations of the traditional teaching approaches, this study explores an alternative, effective and learner-centred teaching approach to address and reduce the speaking anxiety among ESL learners. This study introduces a low-stakes, technology-integrated Project-Based Learning (PBL) framework, where students engage in role-play activities and publish their work on social media platforms like TikTok. This teaching approach aims to transform the traditional classroom from passive, teacher-centric instruction to active, student-centred and dismantle anxiety by creating a safe, low-stakes practice environment.

Despite the abundance of research on role-play in ESL classrooms enhancing speaking skills (Shamsudin et al., 2023), few studies examine the direct effect of how low-stakes, technology-integrated PBL specifically addresses the Affective Filter on oral communication among ESL learners. Most existing studies focus on high-stakes, in-class performances that often unconsciously trigger communication anxiety. There is a critical gap in understanding how a technology-integrated project-based role-play approach on student-controlled, digital

platforms such as TikTok or any social media platform can systematically lower the Affective Filter. This study addresses this gap by exploring an approach to creating a safe, low-stakes practice environment, providing a much-needed alternative to traditional, high-pressure oral assessments in the ESL classroom.

This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of this low-stakes, technology-integrated PBL approach in reducing oral communication anxiety among undergraduate students. By exploring student perceptions and the underlying mechanisms of anxiety reduction, this research contributes a replicable pedagogical model for educators seeking to foster psychological safety in language learning. Thus, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

i. What are students' perceptions of the low-stakes activities, such as technology-integrated project-based role-play, in reducing their speaking anxiety in the Oral Communication in English classroom?

ii. How do low-stakes activities, such as technology-integrated project-based role-play, reduce students' speaking anxiety in the context of Oral Communication in the English classroom?

Literature Review

This literature review discusses the speaking anxiety in second language learning, the Affective Filter Hypothesis and Project-Based Learning (PBL), which collectively serve as the theoretical framework for this approach. Additionally, this section reviews past studies on the use of role-play activities in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom.

Speaking Anxiety in Second Language Learning

Speaking anxiety has long been recognised as one of the most prominent barriers to successful second language learning. Gardner and MacIntyre (1993), cited in Rafada and Madini (2017), defined language anxiety as "a feeling of apprehension that can arise from early language practice, leading to negative experiences that cause situation-specific anxiety" (p. 55). This anxiety can be attributed to several factors. Horwitz et al. (1986) identified three components of foreign language classroom anxiety, which are communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Young (1991) expanded these sources to include personal and interpersonal anxieties, learner and teacher beliefs, teacher-learner interaction, classroom procedures, and language testing. Learners who experience high levels of anxiety often report psychological symptoms such as nervousness, self-consciousness and avoidance behaviours that eventually impede their oral performance (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991b). Such anxiety is particularly evident in classroom situations where learners are required to speak spontaneously in front of their peers or instructors, leading to reduced participation and fewer opportunities for language practice (Young, 1991).

The Affective Filter Hypothesis

Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis suggests that emotional factors such as anxiety, motivation and self-confidence play a crucial role in determining the extent to which learners can acquire a second language. When anxiety levels are high, the affective filter rises, preventing input from being processed effectively. Consequently, students' linguistic competence may not translate into communicative performance, resulting in a persistent gap between knowledge and fluency. Therefore, a teaching approach that lowers the affective filter

and promotes a psychologically safe learning environment is essential for addressing speaking anxiety.

Project-Based Learning

Project-Based Learning (PBL) has emerged as an innovative, learner-centred instructional model that promotes authentic learning through collaborative learning and real-world tasks. PBL is greatly influenced by the communication approach (Du & Han, 2016). Influenced by John Dewey's theory of learning by doing, PBL emphasises that learning should be more practical, encouraging students to experience the learning process through active classroom participation that simulates a real-life situation (Sapan et al., 2019). As Thomas (2000) stated, PBL emphasises active inquiry, problem-solving, creativity and allowing students to take ownership of their learning. Research has shown that PBL encourages meaningful communication, enhances learner motivation and self-confidence (Beckett & Slater, 2005; Stoller, 2006, cited in Du & Han, 2016; Putra & Prasetyo, 2025). This shows that PBL is a suitable framework for affective filter mitigation. The practicality and effectiveness of PBL have positively influenced language skills and motivation in which provide ample opportunities for students to use the target language in purposeful and contextually relevant ways, thereby bridging the gap between classroom learning and real-world communication.

Role-Play in English as a Second Language (ESL)

Role-play is a well-established pedagogical approach that aligns closely with the principles of PBL. According to Ladousse (1987), role-play allows learners to simulate real-life communicative scenarios and express themselves through assumed roles, which can mitigate the fear of personal judgment. By shifting focus from oneself to the roles, learners often experience decreased anxiety and increased spontaneity in communication. Budden (2004), cited in Moosa et al. (2025), affirmed that integrating role-play as part of the classroom activities provides experiences and opportunities for meaningful language production in a context where students can identify, respond and learn as they become more active users of the language.

Noting the usefulness of the role-play, many researchers are investigating its benefits and effectiveness in language development. A study by Nihazram and Masnan (2020) found that role-play in the early childhood ESL classroom improves the young learners' English proficiency, specifically in vocabulary, fluency and pronunciation. A similar result was also found in a study by Ahmada and Munawarah (2022), where role-play significantly improved students' fluency and willingness to speak. Moreover, incorporating role-play in the language classroom provides a stimulating and enjoyable classroom environment, which further improves the students' engagement in participating in the activity, thus helping them to build confidence in speaking the target language (Asrifan, 2022; Maldin & Sianipar, 2025; Shamsudin et al., 2023).

To sum up, the literature suggests that speaking anxiety remains a persistent obstacle in ESL learning contexts. However, Project-Based Learning, especially when combined with role-play, offers a promising solution for creating engaging and psychologically safe learning environments. By making language practice in authentic, collaborative and creative contexts, this technology-integrated project-based role-play approach can help learners to overcome fear, increase participation and develop communication fluency and confidence.

Methodology

Setting and Participants

This study was conducted at Universiti Malaysia Sabah Labuan International Campus (UMSLIC), a branch campus of Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). The participants of the study consisted of 51 first year, first-semester undergraduate students (N = 51), with 13 males and 38 females from two faculties of the Labuan Faculty of International Finance and the Faculty of Informatics and Technology. Their first languages were diverse, comprising Malay, Mandarin and Tamil, and they learned English as a Second Language (ESL).

In terms of language proficiency, participants were categorised as Limited to Modest Users, with Malaysian University English Test (MUET) scores ranging from Band 1 to Band 3.5. According to MUET band descriptors, this range corresponds to CEFR levels A2 (basic User) to B1 (Independent User). MUET is an English test that is a requirement for undergraduate students before enrolling at Universiti Malaysia Sabah, as well as to determine the students' English proficiency level. In the UMS context, students within this range of scores are required to complete proficiency-based English courses to improve their foundational communication skills. All participants in this study were enrolled in the Oral Communication in English class. This subject is one of the proficiency English subjects offered in UMS.
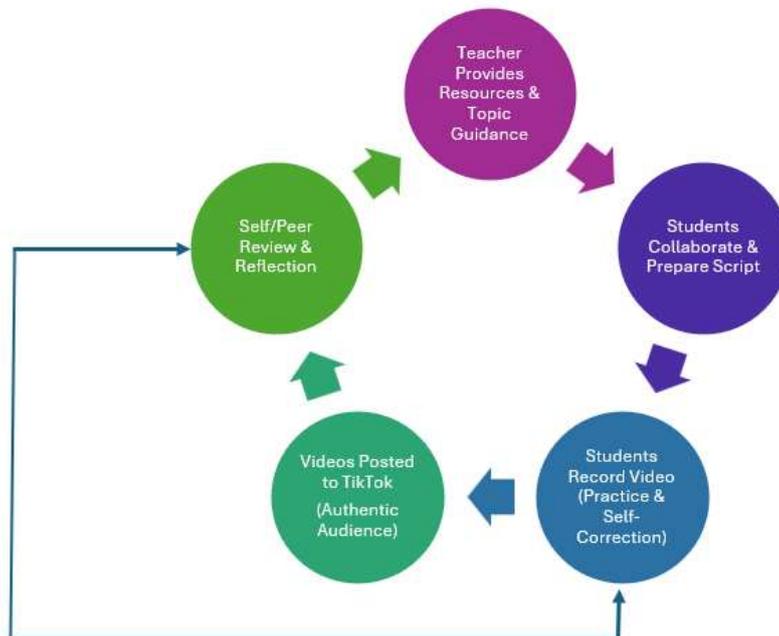
Technology-Integrated Project-Based Role-Play Description

The researcher introduced a project-based learning (PBL) framework as an alternative approach aimed at transforming the students into active users of the target language and placed them at the centre of their learning. The critical element of this approach was the low-stakes rule, where the two PBL role-play activities were only supplementary and not assessed. This approach aimed to reduce students' anxiety and create a safe space for them to practice, experiment and build confidence without assessment pressure. The project was introduced to them as early as Week 3 of the semester. The final product of both role-plays was in the form of a video, utilising students' readily available devices to integrate technology.

Activity Implementation and Process

The instructional process was structured to place students at the centre of their learning:
1. Preparation and Guidance: The researcher, who also served as the instructor, introduced the topics, focusing on critical speaking skills such as asking questions, asking opinions, expressing opinions, and active listening.
2. Collaboration and Scripting: Students worked in groups of five or six to discuss, research, and collaboratively prepare a script. The discussion stage was conducted in the classroom, allowing students direct access to the instructor for task clarification.
3. Recording and Self-Correction: The students conducted the video recording on their own, outside of formal class time. This stage facilitated self-correction during the recording and editing process, allowing students to refine their fluency and delivery privately.
4. Authentic Audience: The final videos were then uploaded to TikTok to reach an authentic audience. Notably, the students retained the autonomy to re-edit and repost the video on TikTok even after the initial submission, encouraging continuous self-improvement.

Figure 1: Implementation Process of the Low-Stakes, Technology-Integrated Project-Based Role-Play

Project-Based Role-Plays

To ensure manageability, the students were administered two distinct role-play tasks taken from the syllabus:

1. Conversational Role-Play: Students assumed the roles of friends, focusing on spontaneous, two-way dialogue involving social functions like asking for opinions and making suggestions.
2. Architectural Tour-Guide Role-Play: Students researched a Malaysian historical landmark and assumed the roles of tour guides and tourists. This task focused on a more formal, research-driven presentation and was delivered in a dialogue interaction between tourist guides and tourists.

Data Collection

This study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, where both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analysed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the project's effectiveness. This study focused on the implementation of low-stakes, technology-integrated project-based role-play activities and their impact on students' affective filter and speaking confidence.

Data were collected using a single comprehensive post-project questionnaire administered at the end of a 14-week semester. A single-point post-project questionnaire was utilised for several reasons. First, these project-based role-plays were exploratory and supplementary to the core syllabus; the priority was to minimise the assessment burdens on the students who were simultaneously managing high-stakes graded assessments. Furthermore, this approach was

intended to capture holistic, reflective insights from the students after they had completed the 14-week class, providing a foundation for future longitudinal studies. This approach allowed for an authentic assessment of whether a non-threatening environment successfully reduced affective barriers before committing to future longitudinal designs. Before administering the questionnaire, students were informed of the study's purpose, and their responses were kept confidential. Participation was strictly voluntary, ensuring informed consent.

Instrument

The questionnaire was designed using a mixed-methods approach to obtain participants' perceptions of the teaching approach. The questionnaire consisted of three sections, starting with Section A, demographics data. Section B of the questionnaire consisted of 13 Likert scale items to measure the impact of project-based role play. The 13 items were adopted and modified from Shamsudin et al. (2023) to specifically suit the present study. A five-point Likert Scale was used for all items, with 1 representing 'Strongly Disagree' and 5 representing 'Strongly Agree'. Section C contained four open-ended questions aimed at gathering details and perceptions on the teaching approach. The qualitative responses were essential for understanding how the low-stakes activities successfully reduced speaking anxiety.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data collected from the 13 items in Section B of the questionnaire which employed on a five-point Likert Scale. Due to the exploratory nature of this study and its primary focus on students' perceptions, data analysis of the quantitative data was limited to descriptive statistics. This approach was chosen to provide a clear, accessible overview of the participants' self-reported shifts in anxiety and confidence within the specific context of the PBL framework. This analysis was crucial for answering the first research question, which addresses students' perceptions of the low-stakes activities.

The responses obtained from the four open-ended questions in Section C were analysed using Thematic Analysis. Thematic analysis is defined as a systematic process of identifying, analysing, and reporting themes or patterns within the qualitative data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Using thematic analysis allowed the researcher to identify relevant answers, recurring themes that provided answers to the second research question. The analysis began with data familiarisation, during which the researcher repeatedly read the participants' responses to gain an understanding of their perspectives. The next stage involved generating initial codes, systematically identifying meaningful elements within the data. These codes were then grouped into recurring themes based on their relevance to answer the research question. The qualitative findings used to substantiate the quantitative results provide a more comprehensive understanding of the project.

Results and Discussion

Research Question One: What Are Students' Perceptions of The Low-Stakes Activities, Such As Technology-Integrated Project-Based Role-Play, In Reducing Their Speaking Anxiety in the Oral Communication in English Classroom?

To answer Research Question One, quantitative data were collected via the Likert Scale section of the post-questionnaire project. The following items, as shown in Table 1, measured students' self-reported perceptions toward the use of technology-integrated project-based role-play in the classroom. Based on the results, participants had positive perceptions.

Table 1: Students' Perceptions Towards Role-Play

No	Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	I am interested in the role-play activities conducted in the class	0	0	7.8%	39.2%	52.9%
2	I can overcome public speaking anxiety thanks to role play.	0	2%	21.6%	39.2%	37.3%
3	I have a more relaxing atmosphere with role-play activities.	0	0	17.6%	39.2%	43.1%
4	Role play is fun and motivating.	0	0	3.9%	35.3%	60.8%
5	Role play allows students to speak more naturally.	0	0	2%	41.2%	56.9%
6	Through role-play activities, students can be more active and confident in speaking.	0	0	3.9%	37.3%	58.8%
7	I prefer role-play over traditional learning in the classroom.	0	0	13.7%	35.3%	51%

Table 1 showed that participants had highly positive perceptions towards the use of role-play activities. This is evident in the finding of item 1, that 92.1% of students agreed that they were interested in the role-play activities conducted in the classroom. Furthermore, item 7 showed 86.3% of participants preferred role-play over traditional learning, which emphasises a desire for a more active pedagogical approach in the oral communication classroom. These findings indicated that employing role-play activities successfully heightens student interest and participation by simulating real-life situations. The role-play activities also provide an opportunity to apply language knowledge, which aligns with a previous study by Shamsudin et al. (2023) on the effectiveness of role-play in the ESL communication classes.

The quantitative data further validate that this approach provides a low-stakes environment, which was the crucial mechanism in enabling successful practice and attitude change. The technology-integrated project-based role-play activities provide a fun, relaxed atmosphere where the participants feel they can practice English without feeling pressure, which is often associated with formal assessments. Specifically, 82.3% of the participants agreed that role-play activities provided "a more relaxing atmosphere" (Item 3), and a highly significant 96.1% of the participants agreed that the activities were "fun and motivating" (Item 4). The attitude change was evidenced by the 98.1% agreement that engaging in the role-play activities allowed them to practice speaking English "more naturally" (Item 5). These findings echo previous studies supporting the affective benefits of role-play. A study by Liu and Ding (2009) affirms

that role-play is an effective method to animate teaching and learning environments, which subsequently sparks students' interest and contributes to impressive language acquisition. Additionally, the increase in motivation aligns with the findings of Lutfi et al. (2018), where role-play enhances students' motivation to speak English, thus improving their speaking performance.

In addition, the quantitative results also revealed that technology-integrated role-play activities help reduce their anxiety with 76.5% agreement (Item 2), and the activities also improve their active participation and confidence in speaking with 96.1% agreement (Item 6). Previous studies like Silalahi and Naisa (2021) and Neupane (2019) found that role-play activities made the students feel more confident, and Lestari and Sridatun (2020) reported that students get more time through role-play. Henisah et al. (2023) also found that engaging in the role-play activities enabled students to overcome their shyness in speaking as they were allowed to communicate and act like the other students. These quantitative results, with the support from previous studies, confirm that the low-stakes technology-integrated project-based role-play design successfully addressed the affective filter, which is anxiety, where it helps transform the classroom into a motivational and natural environment for oral communication practice.

Table 2: Students' Perceptions of Their Speaking Ability in Using Role-Play

No	Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	My speaking accuracy has improved through role play.	0	0	5.9%	45.1%	49.1%
2	I speak more fluently thanks to role play.	0	0	13.7%	47.1%	39.2%
3	I am able to express my ideas clearly through role play.	0	0	6%	44%	50%
4	I am able to understand and respond to other people appropriately through role play.	0	0	4%	50%	46%

The quantitative data further showed that through technology-integrated project-based role-play activities, students were able to enhance their speaking ability in English. Engaging in these low-stakes activities, where they assume different characters and situations, helped students express themselves clearly while spontaneously learning new expressions. Even while performing in characters, participants could practice and apply the language skills and

knowledge acquired in the classroom. Specifically, participants reported significant improvement in language mechanics and fluency. Item 1 showed that 94.1% of the participants agreed that role-play 'improved their speaking accuracy' and 86.1% of them believed that the activities helped them to 'speak more fluently' (Item 2). This improved fluency was likely supported by the opportunity students had to practice their dialogues several times before the recording session. Previous studies such as Andreas et al. (2023) and Shamsudin et al. (2023) support this finding, noting that through role-play activities, students were able to develop their speaking accuracy and fluency by providing opportunities to practice the language, thus improving their grammar, vocabulary and sentence structure.

Moreover, the quantitative data also found that high agreement regarding communicative competence, where 94% participants agreed that role-play activities made them 'able to express themselves clearly' (Item 3), and 96% agreed that they could 'understand and respond to the people appropriately through role-play' (Item 4). These findings are supported by Togimin and Jaafar (2020), who found that students participating in role-play activities were able to deliver clear content and present their ideas with less struggle, allowing them to respond to different topics appropriately. Similarly, a study conducted by Tandipayuk et al. (2023) also revealed that role-play-based speaking activities enhanced students' fluency, which allowed them to speak relatively easily and without hesitation.

Research Question Two: How Do Low-Stakes Activities, Such As Technology-Integrated Project-Based Role-Play, Reduce Students' Speaking Anxiety in The Context of Oral Communication in The English Classroom?

Beyond the quantitative data, the greater impact of this alternative teaching approach is captured through participants' feedback, which reveals that this approach reduced speaking anxiety.

Overcoming Fear and Anxiety: The Low-Stakes Mechanism
The primary explanation for the successful reduction of anxiety lies in the project's core intervention, which is to create a low-stakes environment to mitigate the Affective filter. Traditional teaching approaches often generate performance anxiety among students and position them as passive learners through formal evaluations. In contrast to the Project-Based Learning (PBL) framework, it successfully shifts the teaching and learning experience by establishing a critical element, which is that the technology-integrated project-based role-play activities were designed to be supplementary and not formally graded. This design choice was intended to dismantle the anxiety barrier
.
The qualitative feedback confirms that this low-stakes environment successfully created a 'safe space' for students to practice English. The relaxed atmosphere while doing role-play activities digitally eliminated the fear of negative evaluation, which is one of the key reasons students are reluctant to speak, as they are afraid of being judged or evaluated when making mistakes. Participant P14 highlighted this mechanism, reporting that these activities allowed them to "feel comfortable in making mistakes in a safe space". This aligns with a study done by Tandipayuk et al. (2023), who found that by incorporating role-play activities as part of the teaching method in speaking class, and by taking roles, they created a safe and supportive environment which allowed them to practice without fearing making mistakes. Tompkins (1998), cited in Henisah et al. (2023), stated that role-play is a highly effective method for language acquisition, which allows students to practice the target language in a non-threatening environment.

"Role-playing activities help improve me english by building my vocabulary, making me more fluent, and boosting my confidence. I get to practice using new words in different situations, speak more naturally, and feel comfortable making mistakes in a safe space. It also helps with pronunciation and speaking clearly. Overall, it's a fun and effective way to improve my speaking skills." – P14

Furthermore, participants reported that the technology-integrated project-based role play activities helped them to "overcome fear and hesitation", making them more comfortable and spontaneous in speaking English. This continuous, low-pressure practice led to a reduction in anxiety, consistent with the findings of Maldin and Sianipar (2025). Their finding reported that repeated exposure to role-play activities significantly reduced students' anxiety levels. This shows that this alternative approach directly addresses the source of language anxiety, which is the fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension and test anxiety and through supportive and student-centred instruction (Han, 2022, as cited in Maldin & Sianipar, 2025). Consequently, applying technology-integrated project-based role-play activities successfully reduces speaking anxiety among students.

"Repeated speaking practice reduces my anxiety and boosts confidence when communicating in English. and regular speaking activities allowed me to think and express myself in English more quickly and naturally" – P7
"These activities provided a practical way to practice English in real-life scenarios, allowing me to gain confidence, improve my pronunciation, and enhance my ability to think and respond quickly in English." – P24
"It made me to feel more comfortable while speaking and my nervousness or anxiety was able to control as well as helped me to learn new vocabularies". – P41
"These speaking activities improved my english speaking skills in building confidence because speaking activities helps me to overcome fear and hesitation." – P44

Qualitative feedback also revealed that the low-stakes nature of the project, combined with the use of digital recording platforms, provided a safe space for students. Participants indicated that the absence of immediate classroom pressure allowed them to experiment with the language more freely. The shift from a live presentation and audience to a camera helped them manage their initial fear. For instance, P39 admitted that while initially the video assignment caused fear, the repeated process eventually helped "Through those video assignments from Ms, it's really helped me in boosting my confidence so i won't worry about speaking task anymore in future".

Improve Confidence and Fluency

Students' reduced anxiety is also evident through an improvement in their confidence and fluency. Participants mentioned that their confidence level improved by having regular speaking activities, which made them comfortable in speaking English and expressing themselves spontaneously. This growth of confidence is directly linked to the activities simulating real-life situations, which provide them a platform to learn and practice new vocabulary. This practical application ultimately boosted their willingness to speak English in front of both teachers and peers. The findings resonate strongly with previous studies. Similar findings were found in studies by Moosa et al. (2025), where role-play activities not only motivated the students to learn but also significantly improved self-esteem. The continuous and

low-pressure practice provided by the technology-integrated role-play activities stimulated this confidence growth, preparing them for the formal assessment usually conducted at the end of the semester.

> "Speaking activities help me build confidence in speaking English" – P2
> "Maybe confidence, I think I have become a little more confident now than before" - P3
> "Increased Fluency and Confidence. This is because speaking activities get me talking in English more often. This regular practice helps me become more comfortable forming sentences and expressing yourself spontaneously. As I speak more fluently, my confidence in using English also grows" – P8
> "My confidence and fluency when I speak in front of my coursemates" – P10
> "Helping me practice and use new vocabulary in real-life situations. They also allowed me to become more confident when speaking" – P16
> "These activities provided a practical way to practice English in real-life scenarios, allowing me to gain confidence, improve my pronunciation, and enhance my ability to think and respond quickly in English" – P24
> "Through role-playing activities, I have boosted my confidence by talking in front of the teachers and other students" – P32

The qualitative data further demonstrate that the low-stakes practice environment was the direct incentive for developing confidence and fluency. Since the anxiety level was reduced, students could engage in the regular, repeated practice that is necessary for developing spontaneous speech. This practice led to immediate and perceived improvement in fluency. Participant P8 clearly mentioned this causal chain,

> "Increased Fluency and Confidence. This is because speaking activities get me talking in English more often. This regular practice helps me become more comfortable forming sentences and expressing yourself spontaneously. As I speak more fluently, my confidence in using English also grows" – P8

Meanwhile, participants reported tangible improvements such as being able to "speak more fluently without any um or em" (P31) and improving their ability to "think and respond quickly in English" (P24). These qualitative responses reinforce the quantitative finding from Research Question 1, where participants significantly agreed that role-play activities helped them to speak more fluently. The positive impacts on improving students' fluency in speaking English are also consistently reported across studies by Putri and Zaki (2025), Andre et al. (2023), Silalahi and Naisa (2021) and Togimin and Jaafar (2020). These studies found that role-play provides a structured, yet authentic platform for meaningful repetition and language acquisition, which is crucial for transferring language knowledge from passive comprehension to active and spontaneous production.

In addition, the familiarity with technology and social media platforms transformed the role-play tasks into an engaging project. P13 noted that their skills improved specifically "by making a TikTok as our assessment" while P23 emphasised that the project helped them gain the "confidence to speak in front of the camera". This suggests that the technology-integrated project-based role-play provided a practical and safe space for authentic language use, thus effectively improving both their confidence and fluency.

Conclusion

This study successfully demonstrated the effectiveness of using a low-stakes mechanism within the technology-integrated Project-Based Learning (PBL) framework, specifically through role-play activities for mitigating the Affective Filter among ESL learners. By shifting the formal performance from a high-pressure classroom setting to a student-controlled digital environment, participants were able to bypass the traditional barriers of communication apprehension and the fear of negative evaluation. The transition to a safe space facilitated not only a perceived reduction in speaking anxiety but also fostered genuine fluency, built confidence and created an exciting and engaging learning environment. Crucially, this approach achieves its primary goal. These findings align with Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, illustrating that when language use is perceived as enjoyable, creative, and non-threatening, authentic acquisition is more likely to occur. Ultimately, this framework provides a highly replicable and scalable model for ESL educators worldwide. It proves that by integrating accessible digital platforms like TikTok with low-stakes assessment strategies, instructors can transform high-anxiety learning environments into psychologically safe spaces that foster genuine communicative competence.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

While the findings significantly demonstrate the effectiveness of the low-stakes project-based technology-integrated role-play framework in reducing oral communication anxiety and boosting confidence, the study presents certain limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the data collection was limited to the researcher's sections, which constrains the generalisability of the findings. This restricted the sample size, which may not fully reflect the experiences of the entire student population taking the subject. To validate the findings, future research should implement an experimental study that includes a control group. Secondly, the present study was conducted within a short timeframe and utilised a cross-sectional design. This limits the ability to assess the long-term effect of this approach on students' oral communication anxiety and skills development. Thirdly, the data collection heavily relied on a single, comprehensive post-project questionnaire. Future research should employ a mixed-method design to triangulate the data. This should include supplementing the questionnaire with objective measures such as pre- and post-speaking tests to measure the improvement in fluency and accuracy.

Conflict of Interest Statement:	The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. The main author has contributed to this work and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission to the International Journal of Modern Education (IJMOE).
Ethics Statement:	This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. All procedures involving human participants were reviewed and approved within the pedagogical framework of the Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning, Universiti Malaysia Sabah. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of full confidentiality and anonymity. The data collected were used solely for academic purposes and to improve pedagogical outcomes. The author confirms that the research was conducted in accordance with accepted academic integrity and ethical publishing standards.
Author Contribution Statement:	The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conceptualisation and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, literature review, and manuscript preparation. The author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.

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