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GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE USE OF SOCIO-AFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS

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Abstract:

Developing English-speaking competence remains a significant challenge for many English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, as emotional and social factors often influence their willingness to communicate. Socio-affective strategies, which involve emotional regulation and social interaction, have been recognised as effective approaches for enhancing speaking motivation. However, limited research has examined gender differences in the use of these strategies among Malaysian university students enrolled in oral communication courses. Therefore, this study investigated gender differences in the use of socio-affective strategies for enhancing English-speaking motivation among ESL learners at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Dungun.

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A quantitative research design was employed involving 65 undergraduate students. Data were collected using a 12-item questionnaire adapted from Oxford's (1990) socio-affective strategy taxonomy and analysed using descriptive statistics and independent samples t-tests. The questionnaire demonstrated high internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .883$). The findings revealed that female learners reported significantly higher use of socio-affective strategies than male learners. Female students demonstrated greater emotional awareness and were more likely to seek clarification, corrective feedback, and assistance from lecturers during speaking activities. Both genders, however, reported relatively low use of reflective strategies such as maintaining an English-speaking diary. The findings highlight the importance of integrating socio-affective strategy instruction into ESL speaking classrooms to foster emotional regulation, feedback-seeking, and collaborative learning, particularly among male learners.

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English-Speaking Motivation; ESL Learners; Gender Differences; Higher Education; Socio-Affective Strategies.



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Introduction

The ability to communicate effectively in English, particularly through speaking, remains one of the key competencies expected of university graduates. Beyond fulfilling academic requirements, proficiency in English speaking skills plays an important role in preparing students for professional environments where communication, collaboration, and critical discussion often take place in English (Gunawan, 2026). Despite years of formal language learning, many learners continue to struggle with oral communication, suggesting that speaking development involves more than grammatical knowledge or vocabulary alone. Studies by Lee and Chiu (2023) and Lau et al. (2026), found that learners avoid speaking in English due to the aforementioned psychological barriers and thereby reducing the chance to develop their communicative competence.

Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are the four basic language skills. Among these, speaking is often seen as the most challenging because learners must think quickly while organizing their ideas, choosing the right words, controlling their pronunciation, and responding appropriately to their listeners. In other words, they need to process language instantaneously while coordinating various aspects of brain function, including linguistic, cognitive, and emotional processes (Bárkányi & Brash, 2025).

Emotional factors have been recognised as an important influence on language learning. The presence of fear, anxiety, low self-efficacy, and a lack of social opportunities for meaningful communication negatively impact many learners' speaking performance and motivation (Horwitz, 2001). He added that when these barriers remain unresolved, students may avoid

speaking altogether, reducing valuable opportunities to develop fluency and communicative confidence. As a result, many learners adopt various learning strategies to overcome the barriers that impede their ability to speak English as their second language (ESL).

Among these approaches, socio-affective strategies may be among the most employed because they addressed both the emotional and interpersonal aspects of language learning. According to Oxford (1990), socio-affective strategies are used by learners to regulate their emotions while encouraging interaction with others during the learning process. Oxford classifies socio-affective strategies into two types which are affective strategies which focus on managing emotions and maintaining motivation, and social strategies which promote learning through cooperation, feedback, and communication with peers or lecturers. Together, these strategies create conditions that encourage learners to participate more confidently in spoken communication.

Studies on gender-based differences when using language learning strategies suggest that female students tended to use social and socio-affective strategies more than male students, while often exhibiting greater interest in asking for help, working with others, and reflecting on what they have learned (Ahmad Razi et al., 2025; Alamri & Qasem, 2024). Nevertheless, findings regarding gender differences varied widely across the many educational and cultural settings studied. To this point, most studies have focused on general language learning strategies versus specifically studying how they relate to the socio-affective aspects of learning to speak.

In Malaysia, students in the ESL setting demonstrate a high prevalence of speaking anxiety that does not appear to improve significantly with increased use of formal English instruction. Many of these learners still have difficulties when attempting to articulate themselves with confidence in spoken English, and this will prevent them from achieving their academic potential and being employable in the future.

While earlier studies have explored speaking anxiety, communication strategies, and general language learning strategies, relatively few have focused specifically on socio-affective strategies from a gender perspective among Malaysian university students enrolled in oral communication course. The understanding of these differences can provide educators with more information to use when developing instructional interventions to assist their learners' social and emotional needs. Accordingly, this study investigates whether significant gender difference exist in the use of socio-affective strategies to increase motivation to speak English among ESL learners at UiTM Dungun. The results will contribute to the existing knowledge base regarding language learning strategy use and have important practical application for the improvement of speaking instruction in postsecondary institutions.

Literature Review

The speaking skill development is a major challenge for university students learning ESL. Beyond linguistic competence, effective speaking also requires the skill of managing one's emotions and developing one's confidence, as well as developing social skills in the context of face-to-face communication with others. Success depends on both language ability and learners' capacity to manage emotions and engage confidently.

Socio-affective strategies have become relatively relevant in assisting students in removing barriers to effective communication and maintaining their motivation to engage in speaking activities. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1985) provides the theoretical basis for socio-affective strategies. According to Krashen (1985), the emotional conditions influence how effectively learners acquire a second language. When learners experience high anxiety, low confidence or weak motivation, the affective filter becomes stronger and limits the amount of language input that can be processed. By contrast, learners who feel relaxed, motivated, and emotionally secure are generally more likely to engage in communication and be more successful in developing their target language. From this perspective, strategies such as self-encouragement, anxiety management, and positive self-talk can be utilised to assist students in reducing their affective filter and facilitating their language learning.

The social dimension of language learning is explained through Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), which views learning as a process shaped through interaction with others. Vygotsky (1978) suggests that people acquire their knowledge through their interactions with more knowledgeable individuals and through collaborative engagement with their peers. In terms of learning a language, learners engage in sociocultural-relevant behaviours, such as seeking clarification, requesting feedback, and engaging in practices with classmates. These behaviours provide learners with opportunities to develop their communicative competence through meaningful interactions. The sociocultural theory complements socio-affective strategies by highlighting how emotional support and social interaction often work together in the language development process.

Empirical research generally supports the value of socio-affective strategies in improving speaking performance. For example, Korompot et al. (2022) found that learners who actively managed their emotions and engaged in collaborative learning demonstrated greater confidence and participated more actively in speaking activities. Rather than avoiding communication because of anxiety, these learners showed a stronger willingness to use English to communicate. Such findings indicate that socio-affective strategies assist learners in dealing with speaking anxiety, while providing motivation to speak in English more frequently.

Evidence from Malaysia higher education points in a similar direction. Study by Razawi et al. (2024) shows that Malaysia's ESL university students use social and emotional strategies as a way of supporting their motivation and fluency when having to do something that involves talking. For example, students ask their teachers for feedback on their speaking skills, use peers to practice their speaking skills, and use techniques to manage their emotions at times when they are talking. They found that the use of effective social interaction strategies and emotional management positively supported students' motivation and fluency when speaking. This finding was supported by Khamis et al. (2024) which found that learners frequently employed collaborative learning, peer interaction, and emotional regulation strategies to improve English communication.

Other researchers also investigated the use of socio-affective strategies from the perspective of gender. Razawi and Mohamad (2024) found that females used more help-seeking, collaborative learning and emotional-regulating strategies compared with males. In support of this, Singh (2026) indicated that the selection of oral communication strategies used by learners was influenced by gender in situations where students were interacting, giving and receiving feedback, and managing their conversations. Therefore, there is some evidence that males and

females have different uses of socio-affective strategies for their speaking motivation and fluency.

Although research on language learning strategies continues to expand, relatively few studies (Shah et al., 2012; Razawi & Mohamad, 2024; Ho & Ng 2025) have examined gender difference specifically within socio-affective strategies for speaking motivation in Malaysia universities. While there is current research focused on the overall performance of speaking, communication strategies, or fluency of speech, the use of socio-affective strategies as influenced by gender has not been examined. Therefore, more research is needed to fill this gap and provide valuable information which can lead to the delivery of more inclusive and effective teaching of speaking in ESL.

Research Methodology

This study used a quantitative research design to examine the socio-affective techniques employed by ESL students at UiTM Dungun to improve speaking motivation based on gender. Purposive sampling was used to choose participants, with an emphasis on the particular student groups participating in ESL speaking courses at UiTM Dungun. 65 students who are making presentations in English for Business Communication and English for Informative Speech make up the sample. These students were selected for examining the use of socio-affective techniques in academic speaking contexts since they were chosen based on their enrollment in an oral communication module that emphasizes organized speaking assessments like individual and group presentations.

A set of online questionnaires containing 12 items was distributed to these students. The questionnaire consisted of two parts as follows:

Part A: Demographic information

Part B: Items measuring socio-affective strategies used in enhancing speaking motivation. Part B's questionnaire items were adapted from pre-existing socio-affective strategy inventories-based Oxford's (1990) taxonomy and prior empirical research on ESL learners.

All items in Part B were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The items of the questionnaire in Part A and Part B are shown in Appendix A.

The data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). We examined the difference in the use of socio-affective strategies for English speaking motivation between male and female learners by using Independent Sample t-tests. This statistical method was appropriate for comparing the means of two related groups. Descriptive statistics including mean, percentage and standard deviation were also summarized to give a general overview of the distribution of the data. The following part will address the data findings' outcomes.

Results

Demographic Analysis

A total of 65 students participated in this study. Table 3 shows that female students constituted the majority of the respondents with 75% ($n = 50$), while male students represented 25% ($n = 15$). In terms of faculty distribution, 66% ($n = 43$) of the respondents were from the Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, whereas 34% ($n = 22$) were from the Faculty of Business and Management. Regarding course enrolment, the majority of respondents were enrolled in LCC503 (66%, $n = 43$), while the remaining 34% ($n = 22$) were enrolled in LCC400. These findings indicate that the sample was largely represented by female students from the Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management who were enrolled in the LCC503 course.

Table 3: Demographic Analysis

Items	Mean	Percent
Gender		
Male	15	25%
Female	50	75%
Faculty		
Faculty of Business and Management	22	34%
Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management	43	66%
Code Subject		
LCC400	22	34%
LCC503	43	66%

Reliability Analysis

A reliability test was conducted to examine the internal consistency of the items in Part B. Cronbach's alpha values of 0.883 for speaking motivation strategies indicated strong reliability, exceeding the 0.70 threshold recommended by Tavakol and Dennick (2011). This confirms that the items consistently measured the intended constructs.

Descriptive Items for Each Gender

Table 4 shows the descriptive frequency distribution of different gender in the use of socio-affective strategies for improving English speaking motivation. The finding reveals that among the female students, items 4, "I notice if I am tense or nervous I am speaking English" ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.876$) was the most agreed item, indicating that they were very aware of their emotional state when speaking English. Similarly, they strongly agreed on items 2, "I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake" ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.708$) and item 8, "I ask my lecturer to correct me when I speak English" ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.708$). The result indicate that female students are more likely to be aware of their emotions, to engage in positive self-encouragement and to actively seek corrective feedback.

In contrast, the male students show the highest score of mean for item 2, “I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake” ($M=4.00$, $SD = 1.000$). The mean scores for items 1 ($M = 3.73$), 4, 9, and 12 ($M= SD = 1.10$), items 4 ($M=3.67$, $SD=1.047$), and items 11 ($M = 3.600$) were likewise comparatively high, indicating moderate usage of emotional control, peer practice, culture learning, and speaking during classroom engagement. The lowest mean score for both genders was item 5, “I write down my feelings in an English-speaking diary”, with male scoring $M = 2.33$ ($SD = 1.345$) and women scoring $M = 3.04$ ($SD = 1.195$). This suggests that reflective writing is the least preferred socio-affective strategy among both groups. Overall, the descriptive results indicate that female students employ socio-affective strategies more than male students, especially in emotional awareness, seeking feedback, requesting help, and maintaining positive self-encouragement.

Table 4: Students’ Socio-Affective Strategies Used in Enhancing Speaking Motivation

No	Speaking Motivation	Gender	N	Std.	
				Mean	Deviation
1.	I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of speaking English.	Male	15	3.73	1.10
		Female	50	4.16	-0.65
2.	I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.	Male	15	4.00	1.00
		Female	50	4.22	0.708
3.	I give myself a reward or treat when I speak well in English.	Male	15	3.60	1.352
		Female	50	4.02	0.915
4.	I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am speaking English.	Male	15	3.67	1.047
		Female	50	4.26	0.876
5.	I write down my feelings in an English-Speaking diary.	Mal	15	2.33	1.345
		Female	50	3.04	1.195
6.	I talk to my friend about how I feel when I am speaking English.	Male	15	3.20	1.207
		Female	50	3.72	1.051
7.	I ask my lecturer to slow down or say it again if I do not understand when he/she is speaking English.	Male	15	2.87	1.246
		Female	50	4.06	0.843
8.	I ask my lecturer to correct me when I speak English.	Male	15	3.33	1.234
		Female	50	4.22	0.708
9.	I practice speaking English with other students.	Male	15	3.67	1.113

		Female	50	4.04	0.856
10.	I ask for help in speaking English from my lecturer.	Male	15	3.33	0.976
		Female	50	4.16	0.766
11.	I speak English when I ask questions.	Male	15	3.60	1.056
		Female	50	3.84	0.817
12.	I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.	Male	15	3.67	1.175
		Female	50	4.18	0.774

The results gathered from the questionnaire answered the formulated research questions in the study as follows:

Research Question 1: Is there a significant difference between male and female learners in the use of socio-affective strategies for enhancing their speaking motivation in English?

An independent sample t-test was conducted to examine gender differences in socio-affective strategy use. Based on Table 5, there is a significant difference between male and female learners in their use of socio-affective strategies for enhancing speaking motivation ($t(16.496) = -2.411, p = .028 < 0.05$). Female learners ($M = 3.99, SD = 0.48$) reported higher use of socio-affective strategies than males ($M = 3.42, SD = 0.89$), suggesting female learners use socio-affective strategies more frequently than male learners.

Table 5: Independent Sample t-Test on the Students' Use of Socio-Affective Strategies in Enhancing Speaking Motivation Based on Gender

Gender	N	Mean	Std Deviation	Std Error Mean
Male	15	3.4167	.88864	.22945
Female	50	3.9933	.47763	.06755

t-test for Equality of Means								
Significance							95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	t	df	One-Sided p	Two-Sided p	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.	Lower	Upper
Equal variances	-2.411	16.496	.014	.028	-.57667	.23918	-1.08247	-.07086

not
assumed

Research Question 2: Which items show significant differences between male and female learners in the use of socio-affective strategies in enhancing their speaking motivation in English?

Table 6 shows the independent samples t-test on the student's use of socio-affective strategies items in enhancing their speaking motivation in English language based on gender. The independent samples t-test analysis indicated that only a limited number of socio-affective strategy items demonstrated statistically significant differences between male and female learners, while the majority of items showed no significant variation across gender. Specifically, four items were found to be statistically significant ($p < .05$). First, the item "I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am speaking English" ($p = .032$) suggests that female learners are more aware of their emotional states, particularly anxiety, during speaking activities. Second, for the item "I ask my lecturer to correct me when I speak English" ($p = .017$), female learners appear more willing to seek corrective feedback, indicating a stronger tendency toward improvement through external input. Third, the item "I ask for help in speaking English from my lecturer" ($p = .007$) shows that female learners are more proactive in seeking assistance, especially from authority figures such as lecturers. Finally, the item "I ask my lecturer to slow down or say it again if I do not understand" ($p < .001$) reveals the strongest gender difference, suggesting that female learners are significantly more likely to seek clarification and ensure comprehension during communication.

Table 6: Independent Samples t-test Results for Gender Differences in Socio-affective Strategy Items for Enhancing Speaking Motivation

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	t	df	Significance				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						One- Sided p	Two- Sided p	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.	Lower	Upper
I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of speaking English.	Equal variances assumed	3.850	.054	-1.875	63	.033	.065	-.427	.228	-.881	.028
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.429	17.037	.085	.171	-.427	.298	-1.056	.203
I encourage myself to speak	Equal variances assumed	.031	.860	-.955	63	.172	.343	-.220	.230	-.680	.240

English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.	Equal variances not assumed			-0.794	18.412	.219	.437	-.220	.277	-.801	.361
I give myself a reward or treat when I speak well in English.	Equal variances assumed	4.265	.043	-1.388	63	.085	.170	-.420	.303	-1.025	.185
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.128	18.009	.137	.274	-.420	.372	-1.202	.362
I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am speaking English.	Equal variances assumed	.164	.687	-2.198	63	.016	.032	-.593	.270	-1.133	-.054
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.996	20.252	.030	.060	-.593	.297	-1.213	.026
I write down my feelings in an English Speaking diary.	Equal variances assumed	.481	.490	-1.952	63	.028	.055	-.707	.362	-1.430	.017
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.830	21.071	.041	.081	-.707	.386	-1.510	.096
I talk to my friend about how I feel when I am speaking English.	Equal variances assumed	.534	.468	-1.625	63	.055	.109	-.520	.320	-1.160	.120
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.506	20.779	.074	.147	-.520	.345	-1.239	.199
I ask my lecturer to slow down or say it again if I do not understand when he/she is speaking English.	Equal variances assumed	3.355	.072	-4.278	63	<.001	<.001	-1.193	.279	-1.751	-.636
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.478	18.012	.001	.003	-1.193	.343	-1.914	-.473
I ask my lecturer to correct me when I speak English.	Equal variances assumed	7.694	.007	-3.528	63	<.001	<.001	-.887	.251	-1.389	-.384
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.654	16.855	.008	.017	-.887	.334	-1.592	-.181

I practice speaking English with other students.	Equal variances assumed	2.431	.124	-1.379	63	.086	.173	-.373	.271	-.914	.168
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.197	19.242	.123	.246	-.373	.312	-1.025	.279
I ask for help in speaking English from my lecturer.	Equal variances assumed	1.087	.301	-3.437	63	<.001	.001	-.827	.241	-1.307	-.346
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.014	19.457	.004	.007	-.827	.274	-1.400	-.254
I speak English when I ask questions.	Equal variances assumed	1.327	.254	-.931	63	.178	.355	-.240	.258	-.755	.275
	Equal variances not assumed			-.811	19.308	.214	.427	-.240	.296	-.859	.379
I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.	Equal variances assumed	4.309	.042	-1.983	63	.026	.052	-.513	.259	-1.031	.004
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.591	17.798	.065	.129	-.513	.323	-1.192	.165

Conclusion

This study examined gender differences in the use of socio-affective strategies for enhancing English-speaking motivation among ESL learners at UiTM Dungun. The findings revealed that female learners use socio-affective strategies more frequently than male learners, emphasizing their stronger tendency toward emotional awareness, self-encouragement, and seeking support from lecturers during speaking tasks.

Although both genders engage in similar strategy types overall, significant differences emerged in emotion-related and help-seeking strategies. Female students were more likely to manage their anxiety, request correction or clarification, and seek assistance when faced with difficulties in communication. These findings align with previous research suggesting that female learners are generally more inclined toward interpersonal and self-reflective strategies in language learning contexts.

The results imply that educators should recognize and address gender-based differences in socio-affective strategy use. English language instructors could integrate strategy-based instruction that fosters self-regulation and emotional coping skills, especially for male learners who may use such strategies less frequently. Incorporating classroom activities that promote collaboration, self-motivation, and feedback-seeking can help balance these differences and enhance overall speaking performance.

For future research, similar studies with larger and more gender-balanced samples across different institutions are recommended to validate these findings. Additionally, integrating qualitative approaches, such as interviews, could provide deeper insights into learners' affective experiences and motivations in speaking English.

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Appendix A Questionnaires

Part A: Items for Demographic Section

Items	
Gender	Male
	Female
Faculty	Faculty of Business and Management
	Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management
Code Subject	LCC400
	LCC503

Part B: Items for Students' Socio-Affective Strategies Used in

Enhancing Speaking Motivation

No	Items	Likert Scale				
		Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
1	I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of speaking English.					
2	I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.					
3	I give myself a reward or treat when I speak well in English.					
4	I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am speaking English.					
5	I write down my feelings in an English Speaking diary.					
6	I talk to my friend about how I feel when I am speaking English.					
7	I ask my lecturer to slow down or say it again if I do not understand when he/she is speaking English.					

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- 8 I ask my lecturer to correct me when I speak English.
 - 9 I practice speaking English with other students.
 - 10 I ask for help in speaking English from my lecturer.
 - 11 I speak English when I ask questions.
 - 12 I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.
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